

Holy of Holies

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A model of the Tabernacle showing the holy place, and behind it the Holy of Holies

The **Holy of Holies** (**Tiberian Hebrew**: קֹדֶשׁ הַקֳדָשִׁים *Qōḏeš HaQōḏāšîm*) is a term in the [Hebrew Bible](#) which refers to the inner sanctuary of the [Tabernacle](#) where God dwelt. The Ark is said to have contained the [Ten Commandments](#), which were given by God to [Moses](#) on [Mount Sinai](#). It is thought to be located under the [Dome of the Rock](#).

The area was defined by four pillars which held up the veil of the covering under which the [Ark of the Covenant](#) was held off the floor by two [staves](#). Three hundred years later, it was the [Temple in Jerusalem](#), where the [Ark of the Covenant](#) was kept during the [First Temple](#).

Hebrew terminology and translation^{[[edit](#)]}

The construction "Holy of Holies" is a literal translation of a Hebrew idiom which is intended to express a [superlative](#). Examples of similar constructions are "servant of servants" (Gen 9:25), "Sabbath of sabbaths" (Ex 31:15), "God of gods" (Deut 10:17), "Vanity of vanities" (Eccl 1:2), "Song of songs" (Song of Songs 1:1), "king of kings" (Ezra 7:12), etc.

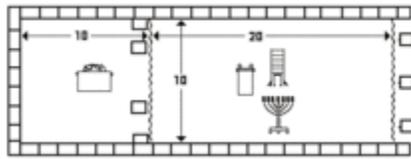
In the [Authorized King James Version](#), "Holy of Holies" is always translated as "Most Holy Place". This is in keeping with the intention of the Hebrew idiom to express the utmost degree of holiness. The King James Version of the Bible has been in existence for over four hundred years. For most of that time, it was a primary reference in much of the English speaking world for information about Judaism. Thus, the name "Most Holy Place" was used to refer to the "Holy of Holies" in many English documents.



Depiction of a Jewish [High Priest](#) wearing [Hoshen](#) and [Ephod](#) included as an illustration in a Christian Bible; the Holy of Holies is in the background (1890, Holman Bible)

A related term is the [debir](#) (דְּבִיר) transliterated in the [Septuagint](#) as *dabir* (δαβιρ),^[1] which either means the back (i.e. western) part of the Sanctuary,^[2] or derives from the verb stem D-V-R, "to speak", justifying the translation in the Latin Vulgate as *oraculum*, from which the traditional English translation "oracle" (KJV, 1611) derives.^[3]

Ancient Israel^[edit]



layout of the tabernacle with the holy and holy of holies

Tabernacle^[edit]

The Holy of Holies was covered by a [veil](#), and no one was allowed to enter except the [High Priest](#), and even he could only enter once a year on [Yom Kippur](#) (the day of atonement), to offer the blood of sacrifice and [incense](#) before the [mercy seat](#). The Bible reports that in the wilderness, on the day that the [tabernacle](#) was first raised up, the cloud of the Lord covered the tabernacle ([Exodus 40:33-40:34](#)). There are other times that this was recorded, and instructions were given that the Lord would appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat (*kapporet*), and at that time the priests should not enter into the tabernacle (Leviticus 16:2). According to the [Hebrew Bible](#), the Holy of Holies contained the [Ark of the Covenant](#) with representation of [Cherubim](#). Upon completion of the dedication of the Tabernacle, the Voice of God spoke to Moses "from between the Cherubim" ([Numbers 7:89](#)).

The area could be entered only by the [High Priest](#) on [Yom Kippur](#) after sanctifying himself

Solomon's Temple^[edit]

The Holy of Holies, the [most sacred site](#) in [Judaism](#), is the inner sanctuary within the [Tabernacle](#) and [Temple in Jerusalem](#) when [Solomon's Temple](#) and the [Second Temple](#) were standing. The Holy of Holies was located in the westernmost end of the Temple building, being a perfect cube: 20 [cubits](#) by 20 cubits by 20 cubits. The inside was in total darkness and contained the [Ark of the Covenant](#), gilded inside and out, in which was placed the [Tablets of the Covenant](#). According to [Hebrews](#) 9:4 in the [New Testament](#), [Aaron's rod](#) and a pot of [manna](#) were also in the ark. The Ark was covered with a lid made of pure gold, known as the "[mercy seat](#)" ([Exodus 37:6](#)) which was covered by the beaten gold cherubim wings. Creating the space for the [Divine Presence](#).^[citation needed]

Second Temple^[edit]

When the Temple was rebuilt after the [Babylonian captivity](#), the Ark was no longer present in the Holy of Holies; instead, a portion of the floor was raised slightly to indicate the place where it had stood. [Josephus](#) records that [Pompey](#) profaned the Temple by insisting on entering the Holy of Holies in 63 BCE.

Day of Atonement^[edit]

Main article: [Yom Kippur](#)

The Holy of Holies was entered once a year by the High Priest on the [Day of Atonement](#), to sprinkle the blood of sacrificial animals (a bull offered as atonement for the Priest and his household, and a goat offered as atonement for the people) and offer incense upon the [Ark of the Covenant](#) and the [mercy seat](#) which sat on top of the ark in the [First Temple](#) (the [Second Temple](#) had no ark and the blood was sprinkled where the Ark would have been and the incense was left on the [Foundation Stone](#)). The animal was sacrificed on the [Brazen Altar](#) and the blood was carried into the most holy place. The golden [censers](#) were also found in the Most Holy Place.

Instructions for the Tabernacle^[edit]

According to the [Hebrew Bible](#), in order that [God](#) may dwell among the Israelites, [God](#) gave Moses instructions for erecting a [sanctuary](#). The directions provide for:

1. A [wooden ark](#), [gilded](#) inside and outside, for the [Tablets of the Covenant](#), with a pure gold cover as the "[mercy seat](#)" for the [Divine Presence](#);
2. A gilt table for the "[Table of Showbread](#)", on which loaves of bread were arranged;
3. A golden [menorah](#), lampstand of 7 oil lamps for a [light](#) never to be extinguished;
4. The dwelling, including the curtains for the roof, the walls made of boards resting on [silver](#) feet and held together by [wooden bolts](#), the [purple curtain](#) veiling the Holy of Holies, the table and [candlestick](#), and the outer curtain;
5. A [sacrificial altar](#) made of [bronzed](#) boards for its *korban*/sacrifice;
6. The outer court formed by [pillars](#) resting on bronze [pedestals](#) and connected by hooks and crossbars of silver, with embroidered curtains;
7. Recipe and preparation of the [oil](#) for the Lampstand.

In ancient Judaism^[edit]

The [Magdala stone](#) is thought to be a representation of the Holy of Holies carved before the destruction of the Temple in the year 70.^[4]

In Rabbinical Judaism^[edit]



Women praying in the tunnel at the closest physical point not under Islamic [Waqf](#) jurisdiction to the Holy of Holies

Traditional [Judaism](#) regards the location where the inner sanctuary was originally located, on the [Temple Mount](#) in [Mount Moriah](#), as retaining some or all of its original sanctity for use in a future [Third Temple](#). The exact location of the Kodesh Hakodashim^{*[under discussion]*} is a subject of dispute.

Traditional Judaism regards the Holy of Holies as the place where the presence of [God](#) dwells. The [Talmud](#) gives detailed descriptions of Temple architecture and layout. According to the [Babylonian Talmud](#) Tractate [Yoma](#), the Kodesh Hakodashim is located in the center North-South but significantly to the West from an East–West perspective, with all the major courtyards and functional areas lying to its east.

The [Talmud](#) supplies additional details, and describes the ritual performed by the High Priest. During the ritual, the High Priest would pronounce the [Tetragrammaton](#), the only point according to traditional [Judaism](#) that it was pronounced out loud. According to Jewish tradition, the people prostrated themselves fully on the ground when it was said. According to the Talmud, the High Priest's face upon exit from the Holy of Holies was radiant.^{*[citation needed]*}

While under normal circumstances, access to the Holy of Holies was restricted to the High Priest and only on [Yom Kippur](#), the Talmud suggests that repair crews were allowed inside as needed but were lowered from the upper portion of the room via enclosures so that they only saw the area they were to work on.^{*[5][6]*}

Synagogue architecture^{*[edit]*}

[Judaism](#) regards the [Torah ark](#), a place in a [synagogue](#) where the [Torah scrolls](#) are kept, as a miniature Holy of Holies.

Modern location^{*[edit]*}



The [Foundation Stone](#) under the Dome of the Rock, a possible historical location for the Kodesh Hakodashim.

At present it is conjectured that it is located under the [Dome of the Rock](#) which stands on the [Temple Mount](#) in [Jerusalem](#), though the exact location of the Most Holy Place is not known with absolute certainty. Most [Orthodox Jews](#) today completely avoid climbing up to Temple Mount, to prevent them

from accidentally stepping on the *Most Holy Place* or any sanctified areas. A few Orthodox Jewish authorities, following the opinion of the medieval scholar [Maimonides](#), permit Jews to visit parts of the Temple Mount known not to be anywhere near any of the sanctified areas. Orthodox Jewish visitors to the Temple Mount, who come especially from those groups associated with the [Temple Institute](#) and its efforts to rebuild a [Temple](#), seek to conform to the minimal requirements for coming near the Temple, such as immersing in a [mikvah](#) ("collection of water"), not coming during or following [menstruation](#) or immediately following a [seminal emission](#), not showing their back towards its presumed location, and other strictures.

To avoid religious conflict, Jewish visitors caught praying or bringing ritual objects are usually expelled from the area by police.^[7]

Christianity^[edit]

New Testament^[edit]

The Greek New Testament retains the pre-Christian Septuagint phrase "Holy of the Holies" *hágion* ([sg n](#)) *tōn hagiōn* (ἅγιον τῶν ἁγίων)^[8] without the definite article as "Holies of Holies" *hágia* ([pl n](#)) *hagiōn* (ἅγια ἁγίων)^[9] in Hebrews 9:3. In the [Vulgate](#), these are rendered as *sanctum sanctorum* and *sancta sanctorum*, respectively.

Christian traditions^[edit]

Certain branches of [Christianity](#), including the [Eastern Orthodox Church](#),^[citation needed] and the [Ethiopian Orthodox Church](#) continue to have a tradition of a Holy of Holies which they regard as a [most sacred site](#). The [ciborium](#), a permanent canopy over the altar in some churches, once surrounded by curtains at points in the [liturgy](#), symbolizes the Holy of Holies. Some Christian churches, particularly the [Catholic Church](#), consider the [Church tabernacle](#), or it's location (often at the rear of the sanctuary), as their symbolic equivalent of the Holy of Holies, due to the storage of consecrated host in that vessel.

Eastern Orthodox Church^[edit]

Main article: [iconostasis](#)

The Greek phrase refers to the Tabernacle or Temple. The name in [Greek](#) for the Sanctuary of a Church is ἱερόν βῆμα (*Hieron Vema*, see [Bema#Christianity](#)), in [Russian](#) it is called Свѣтой Алтарь (*Svyatoy Altar*), and in Romanian it is called *Sfântul Altar*.

Ethiopian Orthodox Church^[edit]

A [cognate](#) term in [Ge'ez](#) is found in the [Ethiopian Orthodox Church](#): *Qidduse Qiddusan*, referring to the innermost sanctuary of an Orthodox Christian church, where the [tabot](#) is kept and only clergy may enter. This is also called the "Bete Mekdes. Every Ethiopian Orthodox Church has one, and it is covered with a Curtain. There are Three ways to enter (most of the time) and those three doors are also a way to reveal the Holy Trinity. In the middle there is always an Altar where the Church's [Tabot](#) is kept. There can be as many altars as the number of Tabots."^[10]

Malabar Nasrani tradition^[edit]



A church of the [Syro-Malabar Catholic Church](#) in [Kerala, South India](#) still following the [Jewish Christian](#) tradition of keeping the Holy of Holies veiled by a red curtain in the tradition of the [Ancient Temple of Jerusalem](#), much like their [Orthodox](#) counterparts viz. the [Jacobite Syrian Church](#) and the [Indian Orthodox Church](#).

The [Saint Thomas Christians](#) (also known as Nasrani or Syrian Christians) from [Kerala, South India](#) still follow much [Jewish Christian](#) tradition.^[11] In Nasrani tradition the Holy of Holies is kept veiled for much of the time. The red veil covers the inner altar or the main altar. It is unveiled only during the central part of the main Nasrani ritual. The main ritual of the Saint Thomas Christians is the [Qurbana](#) (derived from the Syriac word "Qurobo" meaning "sacrifice").^[11]

Roman Catholic Church[\[edit\]](#)

The Latin [Vulgate](#) Bible translates *Qóðeš HaqQóðāšim* as [Sanctum sanctorum](#) (Ex 26:34). Reproducing in Latin the Hebrew construction, the expression is used as a superlative of the neuter adjective *sanctum*, to mean "a thing most holy". It is used by Roman Catholics to refer to holy objects beyond the Holy of Holies, and is specifically often used as an alternative name for a [tabernacle](#), due to the object being a storage chamber for [consecrated host](#) and thus where the presence of God is most represented.

The [Vulgate](#) also refers to the Holy of Holies with the plural form *Sancta sanctorum* (2 Chr 5:7), arguably a [synecdoche](#) referring to the holy objects hosted there. This form is also used more broadly in Catholic tradition with reference to sanctuaries other than the [Temple in Jerusalem](#). A notable example is for the [Chiesa di San Lorenzo in Palatio ad Sancta Sanctorum](#), a chapel in the complex of [St John Lateran](#) in Rome.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints[\[edit\]](#)

Main article: [Holy of Holies \(LDS Church\)](#)

The [Salt Lake Temple](#) of [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#) (LDS Church) contains a Holy of Holies wherein the church's [president](#)—acting as the Presiding High Priest—enters to fulfill the relationship between the High Priest of Israel and God in accordance with the LDS interpretation of the [Book of Exodus](#) ([Exodus 25:22](#)) and Mormon religious texts.

See also[\[edit\]](#)

- [Foundation Stone](#), the rock at the centre of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem
- [Honden](#), the most sacred building at a Shinto shrine
- [Most Holy Place](#), in various religions
- [Sanctum sanctorum](#), a Latin translation of the biblical term *Holy of Holies*
- [Solomon's Temple](#), in ancient Jerusalem

- [Warren's Gate](#), an ancient entrance into the Temple platform in Jerusalem

References^[edit]

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