

The Shrine of Zul Kifl And the Vanishing Minaret

> Text and photographs by
Walid Abdul Amir Alwan

When the American column, called the "Southern Column", was advancing from the holy city of Najaf towards Baghdad, a distance of 170km, it only stopped in Kifl. The soldiers went straight to the shrine of Prophet Zul Kifl, who is buried there, and took a walk in the area surrounding the mausoleum. They also took photographs while the terrified residents hid in the nearby orchards. It appears that these strange visitors knew exactly who was buried in the town.

The site and its history

Kifl is located 30km north-east of Najaf. It is an agricultural area, famous for its palms and sheep farms surrounded by orchards and fields. The town takes its name from the man buried there: Judas Ben Jacob Ben Yitzhak Ben Abraham called Al Kifl. The name "Al Kifl", refers to the saviour of the Jewish people from the Babylonians who also reportedly saved the

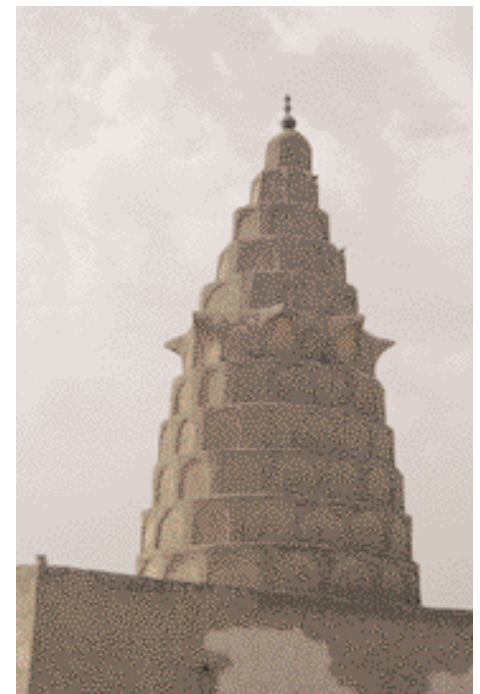
70th prophet. He is one of the Prophets of Benou Israel mentioned in the Koran: "And Ismail and Idris and Zul Kifl all of constancy and patience" (Al-Anbiyaa, The Prophets, 85). It was also said that he is the Prophet Daniel. He could also be the eldest son of Prophet Jacob, who advised his brothers to throw their brother Youssef in the well instead of killing him. The name of the city, according to Al Hamoui,

was Bar Milaha. The Jews have resided there since ancient times and remained until the Islamic conquest, and the establishment of Al Kufa. They had relations with the Jews of Hira (near Kufa). The Kifl area is old, and was sanctified by the presence of the shrine of Prophet Zul Kifl, with many other Jewish saints. The shrine was there in the days of the Mongols, where the Muslims built and established it. ▶



The shrine from outside

الفناء الخارجي لمقعد ذي الكفل.



The dome of the shrine

قبة المرقد

The city and the shrine

The main street runs through the city from south to north, surrounded by shops, sidewalks, cafes and street vendors' carts. It is a small town where there are no manifestations of civilization and modernity. Before reaching the shrine of Zul Kifl you pass the old market, which is on the main road to the Tomb of Zul Kifl. The market has an Islamic architectural style and two khans (hotels), namely Quraish Khan and Sword Khan built at the beginning of the twentieth century, by a wealthy Jew, Menahem Daniel, who had some influence on the Ottoman Sultan. The importance of the market, known as Daniel's market, is evident from its archways, domes, and halls.

At the end of the market, on the left side, is a wide entrance, leading to a large dome, and a corridor opening to the shrine which forms the eastern side of the building. The other sides are made up of rooms with low entrances. In the centre of the shrine is a simple square and corridors. Some of the locals come here to pray.

The entrance to the shrine is through a door decorated with colored flower designs. The tomb chamber is rectangular, and the grave is located in the middle of the room and covered by a wooden box with a piece of cloth on top. The walls of the chamber have a layer of plaster. The ceiling contains inscriptions and Islamic ornaments, but the shrine and the mausoleum don't come up to the level of any mausoleum of a prophet, imam or saint buried in the land of the two rivers.

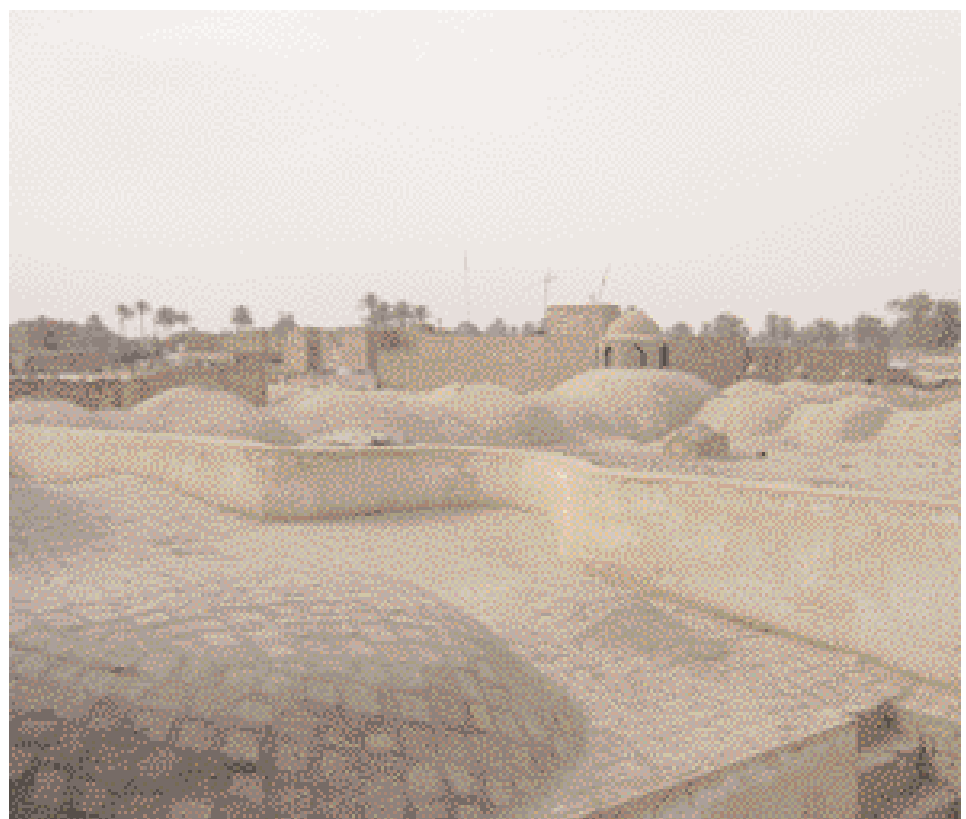
In the room adjacent to the mausoleum, separated only by a simple wall, are the graves of five followers of Zul Kifl, namely: Baruch, Youssef the Captain, Joshua, Khun coppier of the Tourat and John Alrimlji. The graves are similar and a meter from each other. The grave of Baruch is four meters away, inside a small hall. All the graves are covered with a green cloth.

The Khider site is in a separate room but we found such sites all over the country. Above this site is a high dome, with beautiful inscriptions, but the thick covering of dust makes it difficult to distinguish the colours. ▶



The minaret of Al Nekheila mosque

منارة مسجد النخيلة



A view from the top

سطح المرقد

“The entrance to the shrine is through a door decorated with colored flower designs. The tomb chamber is rectangular, and the grave is located in the middle of the room and covered by a wooden box with a piece of cloth on top.”



Daniel's market

سوق دانيال

The remains of Al Nekheila mosque

Al Nekheila mosque is the mosque where Imam Ali bin Abi Talib prayed on his way to the battles of Sifien, and Nahrawan, hence the sanctity of the mosque, which was once a focal point for prayers. Today only ruins and a very high minaret are left. The mosque is adjacent to the shrine of Prophet Zul Kifl. The Jews allegedly contributed to the destruction of the mosque. They buried the large high pulpit made of stones which may still be under the ground.

It appears from historical sources that the Jews acquired the mosque and built rooms, homes, and houses used by guests during religious feasts. They invested huge amounts of money in the buildings, including a bribe for the Ottoman governors in Baghdad. They were able to buy property and real estate in the area surrounding the shrine, including Daniel's market.

Muslims of the region tried to prevent the Jews from overtaking the Islamic Waqf. The fact that this is an Islamic town is evident by the presence of a mosque, a pulpit and minaret for the call of prayers. The Jews denied the existence of the mosque, and took the matter to the Ottoman Sultan, who sent a commission to resolve the dispute. But the Jews bribed the commission members when they came to Baghdad and they stated there was no minaret even though they had not visited the site.

The story of the denial of the minaret of Kifl (Nekheila Mosque) became a prime example of denials as illustrated by the proverb "Minaret Al Kifl." ■



The town's market near the shrine

سوق المدينة القريب من مرقد ذي الكفل.



The town's market

سوق المدينة