



Centro de Estudios de Oriente Medio
Fundación Promoción Social de la Cultura

WORKING PAPER

THE IMPORTANCE OF JERUSALEM FOR THE THREE MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS

Sofía Saíinz de Aja

M.A. in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

INDEX:

- I Introduction: Why Jerusalem?**
- II Main Historical Events**
- III The importance of Jerusalem for Jews**
 - A. In the Bible**
 - B. The Temple of Solomon**
- IV The importance of Jerusalem for Christians**
 - A. In the Gospel**
 - B. The Holy Sepulcher**
- V The importance of Jerusalem for Muslims**
 - A. In the Quran**
 - B. The Dome of the Rock**
- VI Conclusions**
- VII Bibliography**

I. INTRODUCTION

What does Jerusalem have that other cities lack? **Where** is the secret ingredient of this city? **How** come humanity has been fighting for this place for over three thousand years? **When** exactly it all started? And finally, **Why** Jerusalem?

One can only venture and say that the importance of Jerusalem resides in the fact that it is the only city in the history of mankind that has been claimed over and over again by the only three monotheistic religions as their Holy City. In this way, Jerusalem, therefore, represents the presence of God on earth; it is their link to heaven on earth.

For the Jews the land was Holy even before they occupied it, by reason of God's having promised it to them. First with Abraham and then with Moses, the One God made his Covenant and brought his people to the promised land, Canaan, where Jerusalem was later conquered by King David. The fact that the Temple was built in Jerusalem and that the Ark was installed inside it were just the natural consequences of that Covenant with God.

For Christians, Jerusalem is Holy in itself because the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus happened inside the city's current walls. Visiting the Holy Sites in pilgrimage would become, from the IV century onwards, a must in the heads of the European faithful believers. Until such extent that in 1099, after Pope Urban II call for Holy war, the crusaders set out to conquer Jerusalem from the hands of the Muslims.

As much as Jews and Christians have claimed Jerusalem as their Holy City, the fact is that for the past thirteen centuries, Jerusalem was under Muslim rule. Only in 1917 the West, impersonated by the British, took Jerusalem back from the Ottoman Empire. For Muslims, Jerusalem is al-Quds, "the Holy". It constitutes the first *qibla*, direction of the prayer, and the third Holy City for Islam.

Usually, discussions around the importance of this or that city involve terms such as strategic location, trade route, commercial interest, adequate agricultural soil or defensive spot, among others. But in this case, there will not be any of this. Why a city that was built on a dusty hilltop, literally in the middle of nowhere, has become The Holy City, is something that goes far beyond strategy and logic.

In this paper we will be dealing with the fact that Jews, Christians and Muslims consider Jerusalem as their holiest place on earth. Therefore, the sources that I will use in order to explain this phenomenon will be The Bible, The Gospel and The Quran, as well as previous studies on the same subject conducted by *F.E. Peters*, *Guy Le Strange* and *Thomas A. Idinopulos*, among others. It is worth mentioning the existence of the Madaba mosaic map that was discovered in the pavement of a Byzantine church in 1884 in the Trans Jordanian city of Madaba. The map is the oldest known pictorial map of Jerusalem and was elaborated in the VI century C.E. It shows the Holy land with various towns and villages and Jerusalem at its center with more details than the rest.

The city has been the scenario of more wars and conquests than any other city in the world. Canaanites, Israelites, Greeks, Persians, Romans, Christian crusaders and Muslim counter crusaders, Turks...etc. In the XXI century, Jerusalem is in the heart of the Arab Israeli conflict. The Holy City plays a very important role in the resolution of the conflict. It is impossible to

understand the present situation of Jerusalem without knowing its past. There is a great need to understand the reasons behind the actions.

We could ask ourselves questions like why did the entrance of the former Israel Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, in the Temple Mount in 2000 lead to the beginning of the Second Intifada? Or, why an international Jerusalem seems like the only possibility for peace? What Jerusalem represents for the people who claim it, is the key to understand what is going on now.

In this paper I will analyze the importance of Jerusalem in the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In order to do so we will focus on the expressions of this holiness for each of the religions, that is to say, the architectural statements made in the city. Starting with the Jewish Temple, continuing with the Holy Sepulcher and finishing with the Dome of the Rock, we will analyze the impact of the current situation of the city, in which the near future will be shaped.

II. MAIN HISTORICAL EVENTS

Jerusalem: A Time Line

B.C.

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| 1000 | David conquers Jerusalem |
| 967 | Solomon's reign begins |
| 963 | Solomon builds The Temple |
| 927 | The Kingdom splits. Secession of northern tribes |
| 586 | The Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and The Temple.
Judeans exiled to Mesopotamia |
| 536 | Return of the exiles to Judea |
| 515 | The Temple is completed. Start of the Second Temple Period |
| 332 | Alexander the Great conquers Jerusalem. Spread of Greek language and culture in the Middle East. |
| 320 | The Ptolomies of Egypt conquer Jerusalem |
| 200 | The Seleucids of Syria conquer Jerusalem |
| 168 | Jerusalem's Temple is desecrated by Greek King Antiochus IV Epiphanos, causing armed Jewish rebellion |
| 164 | Judah Maccabee retakes Jerusalem and cleanses The Temple |
| 63 | The Romans gain control of Jerusalem under General Pompey |
| 20 | The Temple of Jerusalem is reconstructed and enlarged under the patronage of King Herod |

C.E.

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| 33 | Jesus arrives in Jerusalem and is crucified |
| 70 | The Romans capture Jerusalem and destroy the Second Temple |
| 132–135 | The Bar Kochba revolt against the Romans |
| 135 | Aelia Capitolina, a Roman designed city is built in Jerusalem |

- 335** Constantine builds the Church of Anastasis (Resurrection) over the Golgotha.
- 614** The Persians conquer Jerusalem and destroy the Holy Sepulcher
- 638** The Muslims conquer Jerusalem
- 661–750** Jerusalem under the influence of the Umayyad Caliphate of Damascus
- 683–692** Caliph Abd al–Malik builds the Dome of the Rock
- 705–715** The Caliphate of al Walid builds al–Aqsa Mosque
- 750** Start of Abbasid rule over Jerusalem
- 1037** The Holy Sepulcher is rebuilt under the Fatimid Egyptian Caliph al–Hakim
- 1099** Jerusalem is conquered by Franks in the First Crusade
- 1099–1187** Jerusalem becomes the capital of the Latin Kingdom in the Holy land
- 1187** Muslim invasion under Saladin takes over Jerusalem
- 1260** Mamluks conquer Jerusalem
- 1517** The Ottomans conquer Jerusalem
- 1852** Status Quo between the Christians at the Holy Sepulcher
- 1917** British take over of Jerusalem
- 1948** Israel declares its independence followed by the first Arab–Israeli war
- 1948–1967** West Jerusalem is Israel’s capital. East Jerusalem and the Old City is under control of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan
- 1967** Six Day war leads to the reunification of Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty.
- 1987** The First Intifada
- 2002** The Second Intifada

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF JERUSALEM FOR JEWS

*It shall come to pass in the later days that the mountain
Of the house of the Lord
Shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
And shall be raised about the hills; all the nations shall flow to it...*

*For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples;
And they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks, neither shall they learn war anymore.*

Isaiah 2:2, 4

A. IN THE BIBLE

Researching about Jerusalem means going back to the archeological sources that are available to this day and, of course, it also means using the Bible. In the Bible's historical books we will find the narrative of the story of Jerusalem and how it became so important to Judaism.

The studies conducted by Nahman Avigad¹ will help summarize the pre-Israelite period of Jerusalem. What we know, thanks to some group of pottery vessels from the early Bronze Age (3000 B.C.) that were found on the slopes of the hill in which the earliest Jerusalem rose, is that the history of the city goes back some five thousand years ago. The first mention of Jerusalem may be found in the documents discovered at Tell Mardikh, in northern Syria. Nahman Avigad states that according to initial reports, the name *Salim*, probably Jerusalem, is found alongside other city names like Megiddo, Jaffa and Ashdod, all very well known in the Bible. According to the Egyptian "Execration Texts", the name of *Rushalimum*, Jerusalem, also appears in the written pottery bowls.

The first time that Jerusalem is mentioned in the Bible is in the story of Abraham's meeting with Melchizedek, king of Salem, (that would be Jerusalem). The story is told in the book of Genesis 14: 18-20. But the moment in history in which we could situate the beginning of the connection between Jerusalem and the Jews is the moment in which Jerusalem was established as such by King David in the year 1000 B.C.

Before David arrived, Jerusalem was in the hands of a group of Canaanite people called Jebusites. And with this victory, King David inaugurated the city that was going to witness three thousand years of warfare and conquests. The story of the conquest of Jerusalem by David is told in the second book of Samuel².

¹Taken from Nahman Avigad. Discovering Jerusalem. The period of the first Temple.

²Taken from the Second book of Samuel 5: 6-10. The King and his men set out for Jerusalem against the Jebusites who inhabited the region. David was told, "You will never get in here! Even the blind and the lame will turn you back". But David captured the stronghold of Zion; it is now the City of David. On that occasion David said, "Those men who attack the Jebusites shall reach the water channel and (strike

Apparently, the city was well fortified, centrally located and had its own water source. As *Ami Bouganim* states in *Sources of Jerusalem*: “In short, Jerusalem would prove a perfect center for the new kind of national state that David envisaged”. Since then, Jerusalem became the symbol of the Israelites who would later be conquered and exiled in consecutive times through history, only to regard Jerusalem as the place on earth in which God was with them.

In the early history of Jerusalem as the Israelite capital, two events will shape the future of the city and its eternal connection to God. And here is where the importance of Jerusalem for the Jews resides, in the fact that it was the place in which the “House of the Lord”³ stood.

The most important decision that King David took during his rule was to transfer the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The Ark bore the Tablets of the Law, the pieces of the very same Tablets that Moses received from God in the Mount Sinai and broke into pieces when he saw that his people had started to worship idols during his absence. The Tablets that bore the Ten Commandments. In short, they were the physical proof of the Covenant between Yahve and the people of Israel. Transferring the Ark to Jerusalem meant that the City had just become the religious center of the kingdom, as well as the political center.

After forty years of sovereignty David was succeeded on the throne by his son Solomon, who undertook the task of building The Temple, the “House of the Lord”. The story can be found in the First book of Kings, where it is described with detail how the Temple looked like at the time. After it was finished, the Ark of the Covenant was installed in the Holy of Holies, inside The Temple.

It is worth mentioning here that Mount Moriah, the foundation stone of Solomon’s Temple is in fact, according to Jewish tradition, the very same place in which Abraham, on his way of fulfilling the will of God, was going to sacrifice his own son Isaac but was stopped by God. It is the same rock on top of which the Muslims, showing a profound respect for the Abrahamic stone and connecting it to Islam, will build The Dome of the Rock.

The Canaanites had first worshiped this stone, which can be seen in the Hebrew Scriptures by the story of Melchizedek. He was the priest-king of Jerusalem who first anticipated monotheism, and standing on Jerusalem’s sacred stone consecrated an altar to El Elyon, the “god most high”, whom the Israelites will name “Elohim”, Lord⁴.

B. THE TEMPLE

First Temple Period: 1000 B.C. – 586 B.C.

As I explained before, the resolution of building a Temple in which the Ark of the Covenant was installed made Jerusalem the center of worship of the God of Israel. Monotheism had arrived

down) the lame and the blind, who are hateful to David”. That is why they say: “No one who is blind or lame may enter the House”.

David occupied the stronghold and renamed it the City of David; David also fortified the surrounding area, from the Milo inward. David kept growing stronger, for the Lord God of Hosts, was with him.

³ Taken from the First book of Kings 6:1–27. In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites left the land of Egypt, in the month of Ziv– that is, the second month– in the fourth year of his reign over Israel, Solomon began to build the House of the Lord.

⁴ Taken from the prologue of Thomas A. Idinupolus, *Jerusalem Blessed, Jerusalem Cursed*.

on earth and was ever present on the physical expression of the Temple of Solomon. Jerusalem became, then, a Holy City. The Temple was the presence of their One God. As a result, three times during the year pilgrims would come from all over the kingdom to the Temple to offer sacrifices and pray. Shavuot, Succoth and Pesach.

After Solomon's death, the united monarchy split into the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah. Jerusalem was the capital of the latest. During this period of decline, some Prophets denounced the people's moral decadence. We refer to Isaiah⁵ and Jeremiah who announced the ruins that were to come as a consequence of the Israelites behavior.

But in 586 B.C. the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. The city was destroyed along with the Temple and the Israelites sent into exile in Babylonia. Nothing could have been worse for the Israelites than having their "House of the Lord" destroyed. Nevertheless, being in exile added even more value to the destroyed Temple and their beloved city. Jerusalem became a symbol for the people of Israel collective narrative. Having lost everything they rediscovered their national collective purpose and were convinced that their One God would save them from exile.

Quoting Thomas A. Idinopulos: "Rather than weaken the national religion, the experience of defeat seemed to strengthen it. For now the obligations of the Covenant law were seen within the wider framework of the messianic hope. [...] Always faithful to the belief that everything on earth happens because of God, they attributed the disaster to the punishing hand of the Almighty [...]"

During exile, Prophets like Ezekiel and the psalmist⁶, would announce the return of God's people to their promised land.

The Second Temple Period: 586 B.C. – 135 C.E.

And so it happened that under the Persians the Israelites were permitted to go back to Judah and rebuild their Temple. A new period in the history of the Israelites was starting and their link to the One God was re-established. Jerusalem was once again the religious center of the Jewish people. As well as the symbol of Israel's national glory.

During this time, Jerusalem passed from foreign hands to foreign hands and was conquered by the Greeks, the Ptolomies, the Seleucids and finally by the Romans. The Temple as it was before its destruction in the year 70 C.E.; we owe it to Herod the Great, the Roman Administrator of Judea. Herod undertook many reforms in the city. As a declared roman sympathizer, he built cities in Greco-Roman style, pagan temples, amphitheatres, hippodromes and baths. In the reconstruction and enlargement of the Temple, Herod left his

⁵ Taken from Isaiah 1: 15–17. Your hands are stained with crime—Wash yourselves clean; Put your evil doings away from my sight. Cease to do evil; learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.

⁶ Taken from **Psalm 137: 1–6**. By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion. There on the poplars we hung up our lyres, for our captors asked us there for songs, our tormentors for amusement, sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing a song of the Lord on alien soil? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, If I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour.

personal imprint: roman style. The building was supported by Corinthian columns of white marble.

In the year 70 C.E., after several Jewish revolts, the Romans took over Jerusalem destroying the Second Temple and later expelling the Jews from their Holy City, starting the Diaspora that would last almost two millennia. For many years, up until the arrival of the Muslims to Jerusalem in the VII Century, Mount Moriah, where the remnants of the Second Temple stood, was used as the trash can of the city, mountains of garbage were accumulated. This was interpreted as a punishment to the Jews for killing the Messiah, Jesus, in the year 33 C.E.

The Muslims, in the VII Century, built the Dome of the Rock in the place where once the First and Second Temple had stood. Since then, the only remnant of the “House of the Lord” for the Jews was and is the wall that surrounded the last version of the Second Temple that Herod made reconstruct and enlarge. A piece of that wall that is not even part of the Temple itself but only the wall that surrounded it, is what we currently know as the Western Wall or Wailing Wall. It constitutes the last physical piece of hope and memory that truly proves that the Covenant between the One God and His people ever happened.

And as such the Jews of today regard their Wailing Wall, always guarding it and praying without pause. And waiting. Waiting for the coming of the Messiah that will “put everyone in its place”. And some dreaming, as well, of the day when the construction of the Third Temple will become a reality.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF JERUSALEM FOR CHRISTIANS

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and
Stoning those who are sent to you! How often would
I have gathered your children together as a hen
Gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!
Behold your house is forsaken and desolate!*

Gospel of Luke, 13:34

A. IN THE GOSPEL

The importance of Jerusalem for Christians resides in the fact that the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah, took place in Jerusalem.

Before we go further in the subject of the importance of the city for Christians, it is important to explain the concept of “Heavenly Jerusalem”. We will use the studies elaborated by Thomas A. Idinopulos. In his dissertation he talks about two Jerusalems in the collective narrative of Christians. On one hand, Earthly Jerusalem, in which the Passion and Resurrection took place and where the Holy Sepulcher stands as the physical expression of those events. On the other hand, Heavenly Jerusalem, where the risen Christ dwells and from which he will return to judge all the cities of sin⁷.

We can appreciate this new meaning in the letters of Saint Paul, where he argues that the faith which he personally experienced in Jesus Christ was not restricted to his own nation of Israel; rather, faith in Christ was open to gentile as well as Jew: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him, For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are”⁸ Here in Paul’s mind, the authentic temple is not the one in Jerusalem but the spiritual one that God himself has created in the heart of every believer in Christ⁹.

The fact is that the Roman administrative area called Palestine (it comes from the word Philistines, who had inhabited that area before) was the physical birthplace of Christianity. According to the Gospels, Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, he preached in Galilee and his Passion and Resurrection happened in Jerusalem in the year 33 C.E. The accounts of these events can be found in the Four Gospels written by Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. Via Dolorosa, Golgotha and Gethsemane are the names of the places that appear in the Gospels and so, they have become Holy Places for Christianity. In the Gospels, a new message is proclaimed: salvation and redemption for those who believe in Christ.

According to the Gospels, the most important features of Christianity have their origins in Jerusalem. The institution of the Eucharist took place while Jesus was celebrating Passover with his disciples in Jerusalem. Also, his crucifixion took place at the Golgotha and his Resurrection happened three days later. The coming of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles also

⁷ Taken from Thomas A. Idinopulos, Jerusalem Blessed, Jerusalem Cursed. In the footsteps of Jesus.

⁸ Taken from the First letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians 3:16–17.

⁹ Taken from Thomas A. Idinopulos, Jerusalem Blessed, Jerusalem Cursed. In the footsteps of Jesus.

happened in Jerusalem, according to the book of Acts. In this way, Jerusalem constitutes a unique and Holy City for Christianity. But always keeping in mind the fact that even though the Holy Places in Jerusalem are regarded as a connection and proximity with God because it is the city where it all happened; the Christian can pray and be close to God in Jerusalem as well as in any other corner of the world. And here is where the previous concept of Heavenly Jerusalem comes around.

In the same line, the Christian Church was also born in this city. For the first three centuries, the Christian community grew also outside Jerusalem, in cities like Alexandria, Ephesus, Antioch and Rome. The first Christian communities (Messianic Jews) had survived in Jerusalem but it was not until the Roman Emperor Constantine decided to enshrine the Christian sites in Palestine that we can start talking about the Christian worship at the Holy Places of Jerusalem.

B. THE HOLY SEPULCHER

What happened to the places where the Passion and Resurrection of Christ took place? According to the Gospels and the book of Acts, the disciples started their preaching task after the Holy Spirit was sent upon them in Jerusalem, short after the Resurrection. Moreover, after the Bar Kochba revolt in 135 C.E., the Romans, under the Emperor Hadrian, destroyed the city of Jerusalem and over its ruins they built a new city which Hadrian named "Aelia Capitolina". So, the Christian Holy Places were buried for almost two centuries under the new pagan city of Hadrian, who also expelled the Jews from the city.

We will have to wait until the Emperor of the West, Constantine, came to the scene in 325 C.E. and conquered the eastern half of the Roman Empire. Afterwards he moved his court to Byzantium, which was known as Constantinople. At that time, Christianity was a persecuted religion, but the role of Constantine was going to change the course of history.

Thanks to Eusebius, the Church historian and bishop of Palestinian Caesarea, we can learn about the wish of the Emperor Constantine to find and enshrine the Holy Places in the city of Jerusalem after the year 325 C.E. Eusebius wrote the biography of the Emperor *Life of Constantine*, where we can learn about what the Emperor Hadrian had built over the Golgotha, a pagan temple dedicated to Jupiter and Aphrodite¹⁰. Eusebius and Constantine met in Nicea, where Constantine presided the first universal council of bishops of the Christian Church. After this, the Emperor undertook the task of purifying the Holy Places, starting with the Golgotha, where Jesus had died and resurrected.

It is worth the while mentioning that Constantine's mother, Helena, played a crucial role in the identification and discovery of the Holy Places. She herself came to Jerusalem and started locating and purifying the sites connected with the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus.

And so it happened that the pagan temple built on top of the Golgotha was destroyed and purified under the orders of Constantine. And under it, the places where Jesus had been crucified and buried were uncovered and cleared. In the place where the Aphrodite temple had stood, a new building was raised. A large rotunda with an opened top was constructed in the classic style of imperial funerary architecture, the same monumental style that had been granted to the resting places of the Roman emperors.

¹⁰ Taken from F.E. Peters, *The Distant Shrine. Redefining the Holy Land: Christian Jerusalem*.

According to Eusebius, the emperor built a shrine over the site of the crucifixion as well and enclosed the two sites, the monumental rotunda called the Anastasis and the smaller shrine over Golgotha, within an opened porticoed courtyard. East from the courtyard he built a Christian Basilica, with a large apsed and triple-naved hall. Quoting F.E. Peters, “The Resurrection was, as Paul remarked, the cornerstone miracle of Christianity”. Constantine’s architectural statement was the physical expression of the Christian message to the world, Salvation. In this fact resides the importance of Jerusalem for Christianity. Jerusalem is a Holy City for Christians because it is the place where the message of salvation was preached and where the Son of God fulfilled the promise of redemption to humanity. And the message was fulfilled at the place where the Church of the Resurrection stands, that is to say, the place where Jesus had triumphed over death.

At the same time that Constantine was busy bringing back the Christian Holy Sites in Jerusalem, a new kind of visitor started to arrive to the Holy City. I am referring, of course, to the Christian pilgrims. The new trend coming from Europe was to visit the Holy Sites where the Gospels had taken place. The first pilgrim of which we have documented material was a certain person coming from Bordeaux, who arrived to Jerusalem around 333 C.E. Apart from describing in detail what he saw, and in this way becoming a historical source, this person was one of the first to do a Christian Pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the way that Christians will continue doing it for almost two millennia, up until now. Another pilgrim that we cannot fail to mention is Jerome, the Roman biblical scholar who in 385 occupied a cave in Bethlehem next to the place where tradition places the birth of Jesus. As Thomas A. Idianopulos¹¹ explains, Jerome thought that the key to faith was not place but right conduct. A pilgrim should not merely visit Jerusalem but live a holy life there. In this sense he states, like Saint Paul, that as much as the Holy Sites are important to Christians because Christian faith is based upon the Resurrection of Christ and this event happened in Jerusalem, the Christian Holy Sites are not a physical expression of the presence of God on earth.

¹¹ Taken from Thomas A. Idianopulos, *Jerusalem Blessed, Jerusalem Cursed. In the footsteps of Jesus*

V. THE IMPORTANCE OF JERUSALEM FOR MUSLIMS

*Glory be to Him who carried His servant by night
from the holy shrine to the distant shrine,
the precincts of which We have blessed,
that We might show him some of our (miraculous) signs.
He is the One who hears, the One who sees.*

QURAN, SURA 17

A. IN THE QURAN

Know in Arabic as Al-Quds, “the Holy”, the importance of Jerusalem for Muslims resides in two main facts. Jerusalem is the first *qibla*, or direction of prayer and the third Holy City, after Mecca and Medina. But how come Islam, which was born in what we call today the Arabian Peninsula, could have Jerusalem as well as its Holy City?

Concerning the *qibla*, the direction of the Muslim prayer, we know that in the period of Mecca, before the *hijra* or emigration to Medina in 622 C.E., the Prophet Muhammad used to pray toward Jerusalem. One of the possible explanations for this fact is that Muhammad was following the Jewish custom of praying toward Jerusalem. The presence of Jews and Christians in the area and consequently their influence in Muhammad’s life can be seen in the similarities between Islam and the other two monotheistic religions. So it is not at all shocking that the Prophet was following the Jewish custom in what concerns the prayer-direction. But at the same time, the motivation of adopting the Jewish custom could have been the will of Muhammad to conciliate the People of the Book, that is to say, Jews and Christians.

The Quran in itself does not talk about this dilemma, but it shows an important change in the *qibla*, the direction of prayer.

The foolish among the people will say: What has turned them from the qibla which they formerly observed? Say: to God belong the East and the West. He guides whom He will in a straight path

Quran 2: 142

Short after arriving to Medina, the Prophet changed the direction of the prayer toward Mecca. Therefore, Jerusalem stayed as the first *qibla* for all Islam.

Concerning the importance of Jerusalem as the third Holy City in Islam, we have to talk about the Temple Mount of Jerusalem and The Aksa Mosque. It is the Mosque built by al-Walid in 715 C.E. that we can still see today in the Temple Mount. Later, we will focus as well on the significance of the Dome of the Rock. But for now, let’s analyze why Jerusalem ended up being a Holy City for Islam.

The Aksa Mosque, which means “the Further Mosque”, derives its name from the traditional Night Journey of Muhammad, to which allusion is made in the words of the Quran, Sura 17. “I declare the glory of Him who transported His servant by night from the Masjid al Haram (the Mosque in Mecca) to the Masjid al Aksa (The Further Mosque)”– the term “Mosque” being

here taken to denote the whole area of the Noble Sanctuary, and not the Main–building of the Aksa only, which, in the Prophet’s days did not exist¹².

In the Night Journey of Muhammad, the Prophet traveled on his winged horse Buraq from Mecca to Jerusalem, with the angel Gabriel for escort. He went up to the Sacred Rock, which had stood in the center of Solomon’s Temple; and in its neighborhood meeting the company of the prophets, Muhammad proceeded to perform his prayer prostrations in the assembly of his predecessors in the prophetic office—Abraham, Moses, Jesus and others of God’s ancient apostles. From the Sacred Rock Muhammad, accompanied by Gabriel, next ascended, by a ladder of light, up into heaven; and in anticipation, was vouchsafed the sight of the delights of paradise. After beholding the presence of Allah, the Prophet came back to earth at this spot, the Sacred Rock¹³.

Apart from the Night Journey of Muhammad, Jerusalem holds a significant importance for Islam because of the Sacred Rock that had been part of Solomon’s Temple and that was the Rock upon which Muhammad ascended to heaven. The same rock upon which Abraham was going to offer Isaac as a sacrifice to God. For Islam, Abraham is considered as the first Muslim.

B. THE DOME OF THE ROCK

History tells us that in the year 635 C.E. the Muslims finally conquered Jerusalem. The way in which the Caliph Umar ibn al–Khattab took the city is told in different ways according to the sources. But what they have in common is the fact that the Muslim forces sent a message to the inhabitants of Jerusalem who had no choice but to agree to the conditions of the Caliph. The following is a translation of what the message said:

“In the name of God, the Compassionate. the Merciful. This is a writing of Umar ibn al–Khattab to the inhabitants of the Holy House. You are guaranteed your life, your goods and your churches, which will be neither occupied nor destroyed, as long as you do not initiate anything blameworthy”

This surrender agreement was concluded the next day with Sophronius, the bishop of Jerusalem at that time. The gates of Jerusalem were opened, a pledge of security was given by the Muslims and the Christians agreed to pay the poll–tax in return. Later, the Caliph demanded to be taken to what had been the sanctuary of David. He was then, lead to the place where once the Temple of Solomon had stood and that at the time had become a “dung–heap”¹⁴.

The Dome of the Rock was built under the Caliphate of Abd al–Malik in the years 683 C.E. to 692 C.E. It is true that the rock upon which the Dome was built is a sacred rock to all Muslims. The rock in which Abraham was going to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, where the Ark of the Covenant was placed in Solomon’s Temple, and the rock upon which Muhammad ascended to heaven on His Night Journey.

¹² Taken from Guy Le Strange, History of Jerusalem under the Moslems. The Aksa Mosque.

¹³ Taken from Guy Le Strange, History of Jerusalem under the Moslems. The Aksa Mosque.

¹⁴ Taken from F.E. Peters, The Distant Shrine. The noble sanctuary: Muslims in the Temple Mount.

Nevertheless, the Caliph's motivations to start the construction of the Dome of the Rock are probably mainly political. He wanted to divert people's minds from the pilgrimage to Mecca at that time and also, he wanted to weaken his rival Ibn Zubair. These reasons were enough for Abd al-Malik to build the Dome of the Rock and try to make people come in pilgrimage to Jerusalem instead. He didn't succeed in his political motivation but he did build the Dome of the Rock.

The fact is that the Dome of the Rock, with its golden Cupola, can be considered one of the most beautiful buildings in the world and definitely, the symbol of Islam in Jerusalem. It is not a Mosque, as many may think. It is a shrine, a monument to commemorate the Sacred Rock. As for the significance to Islam, by building the Dome of the Rock, Muslims were materializing their reverence to Jerusalem, city of prophets from Abraham and Moses to Jesus, culminating with Muhammad, the "seal of the prophets". Thus, the Dome symbolizes both Islam's inheritance from and triumph over Judaism and Christianity¹⁵.

¹⁵ Taken from Thomas A. Idinopulos. Jerusalem Blessed, Jerusalem Cursed. Islam's Triumph in Jerusalem.

VI. CONCLUSIONS: THE CURRENT SITUATION

Days in Jerusalem start with the Muezzin's call to prayer, followed by the bells of the many churches that fill the city and the never ending procession of devoted Jews that walk the city towards the Western Wall. This unique city prays day and night, it is the Holy City.

Jerusalem can be seen as both the unifying element of the three Monotheistic religions or as the perfect excuse to destroy the opponent and claim the Holy City above the rest. Scanning through Jerusalem's history one can only observe a chain of wars, conquests, crusades and counter crusades. And, surprisingly enough, after three thousand years since David took it as his capital, Jerusalem could not be more claimed in the present day.

It is not only claimed by the three religions as their Holy City but also, due to the current circumstances, it is politically claimed by both Israel and Palestine as their indisputable capital. The motivations for this fact have its roots in the significance of the city for Judaism and Islam. If the reality is not analyzed from a perspective that includes the deep understanding of what this city means for the people who claim it, it will not be possible to reach any kind of solution.

On the other hand, Jerusalem can be seen through the eyes of continuity. It was Holy for the Jews even before they occupied it just because of God's promise to them. They conquered it, built the Temple and turn it into the religious center of Judaism as well as the national glory of the people of Israel. The Messiah came, as it had been prophesized, to Jerusalem in order to redeem the world, and the Temple was destroyed, once again, as it had also been prophesized by Jesus. The rock, upon which Abraham offered his only son Isaac in sacrifice to God, had also been the rock upon which the Temple of Solomon had stood, and became later the sacred rock that the Prophet Muhammad touched before ascending into heaven on His Night Journey in Jerusalem. The physical expressions of all these events that made Jerusalem the holiest city in the world can be seen in the architectural statements that were built inside its walls. The Temple, the Holy Sepulcher and the Dome of the Rock.

We should not forget mentioning one event that Judaism, Islam and Christianity have in common regarding the Holy City: The Last Judgment will happen in Jerusalem. Each religion has its own eschatological approaches in what the details are concerned but the three of them agree that Jerusalem will be the scenario. Until then, Jerusalem will still represent the presence of God on earth.

VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Nahman Avigad: *Discovering Jerusalem*. Jerusalem, 1980.

F.E. Peters: *The Distant Shrine. The Islamic Centuries in Jerusalem*. New York, 1993.

Thomas A. Idinopulos: *Jerusalem Blessed, Jerusalem Cursed. Jews, Christians and Muslims in the Holy City from David's time to our own*. Chicago, 1991.

Ami Bouganim: *The Sources of Jerusalem*. Adapted from "Sites et Sources" by Ami Bouganim. Jerusalem, 1995.

Guy Le Strange: *History of Jerusalem under the Moslems*.

Biblia de Jerusalén

Holy Quran