

Notes for discussion:

The Significance of Jerusalem to Muslims

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The Islamic spiritual importance of *Bayt al-Maqdis*¹ and Al-Aqsa Mosque derives from the fact that for 16 months² *al-Masjid al-Aqsa* had been the first *Qibla* direction of prayer for Muslims before Makkah. It is also one of the three most Holy Mosques in Islam with Makkah and Madinah. Furthermore, Jerusalem is commonly associated with the *Isra'*, known as the Night Journey of the Prophet Muhammad from Makkah to al-Aqsa Mosque, as recorded in the Quran:

"Glory to Allah who did take his servant for a journey by night from the sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose percents we did bless, in order that we might show him some of our signs, for he is the one who hearth and Seth (all things)".³

As well as his ascension *Mi'raj* to Heaven to receive from Allah the principles of Islam. This event happened two years before the Hijra, Muhammad's move from Makkah to Madinah in 622 A.D.⁴ Accounts of these famous events record that on his way to *Bayt al-Maqdis*, the Prophet Muhammad visited the Tomb of the Prophet Abraham in Hebron where he performed two prostrations *Rak'a*,⁵ He also visited the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem, where the Prophet Jesus was born and performed two Prostrations as well. Thus the Islamic holiness of Jerusalem has very strong roots, since Islam respects all the prophets before Muhammad and granted him the first place.

Therefore the reason why Allah made Muslims pray towards Jerusalem (al-Aqsa Mosque) for 16 months, and then ordered them to pray towards the Ka'ba, and why the event of the night Journey occurred between the two mosques: al-Haram

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Mosque in Makkah and al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem is in fact to confirm the link between Islam and pre-Islamic religious.

The significance of Jerusalem for Muslims comes from the Qurānic verses that mention it under the name of al-Aqsa Mosque, and from the Prophetic Traditions (Hadith) of Muhammad, who told several accounts related to the importance of Jerusalem. Among them is the Tradition, "Whoever wants to see a part of Paradise, let him look to *Bayt al-Maqdis*"⁶. Another Tradition told by the fourth Caliph Ali Ibn Abi Talib, says "The most exalted spot is *Bayt al-Maqdis* the most exalted rock is the Rock of *Bayt al-Maqdis*"⁷.

In order to understand further the Islamic importance of Jerusalem, we have to turn to the *Fada'il* Literature, the books about religious merits of Jerusalem. The *Fada'il* Literature may have existed from the time of the Prophet and continued to be transmitted in the Umayyad and later Islamic periods. The earliest *Fada'il* books were written by Abu Baker al-Wasiti⁸ and Ibn al-Murajja towards Jerusalem and to preach Jihad to free Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Crusaders. The *Fada'il* Literature is a late source for this discussion, but is vital for understanding the Islamic meaning of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa Mosque.

This significance led to the Umayyads to strengthen their political and religious relationship with *Bayt al-Maqdis*. This appears clearly first with the Umayyad Caliph Mu'awiya, who had his oath of allegiance *Bay'a* taken in Jerusalem, and who was known as the "Prince of the Holy Land" *Amir al-Ard al-Muqaddasa*. There can be no doubt that Abd al-Malik regarded Jerusalem as the holy and important place, especially the site of Mount Moriah, where he laid out the plan of al-Haram al-Sharif that exists today. This connection was developed strongly by Abd al-Malik, who was no stranger to such ideas, since he had resided for a long time in Syria-Palestine, and had been the governor of the province of *Filastin* during the Caliphate of Mu'awiya.⁹

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The question is to what extent Jerusalem had been changed in the Islamic period still stand. The most important evidence which tells us about Jerusalem before the Islamic period is Madaba Map, which was found in Madaba in Jordan, decorating the floor of a church. It was discovered in 1896 and it is dated to the 6th century during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian. It indicates the shape of the city with its main gates and monuments.¹⁰

The Islamization of Jerusalem occurred when Allah ordered Muslims to face it as their first Qibla. Jerusalem became an Islamic City in the first half of the seventh century A.D. when Muslims entered the Holy city in 15 A.H/ 638 A.D, during the reign of the second Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab. According to the historical sources, Umar came personally and specifically to receive the surrender City from its Patriarch Sophronius, who refused to surrender the city to anyone else. The sources also record that the Caliph granted a special covenant Sulh, Ahd to the Christians living in the City. Its texts developed over time into the form known as the Islamic Assurance of Safety to the People of Aelia, al- al-Umariyya. In this Assurance the Caliph guaranteed religious freedom, safety of the churches, and secured the lives, fortunes and properties of the people living in the city¹¹.

According to scholars, the City underwent gradual change in its characters but remained basically Byzantine adding to it the eastern part the area of al-Haram al-Sharif, which was not included in the Byzantine City. However, the extent remains and the new discoveries around the Haram enclosure especially "Dar al-Imara"¹² gives indication that there was a very significant change in the layout of the Christian city concentrated mainly in the eastern part of the City. It also believed that Jerusalem was influenced by Islamic systems as soon as Muslims settled in the City. There is no doubt that life was built on religious and political factors can be indicated in the Holy City during the Islamic period. Physical evidence of the religious factors is of two types: Architectural and Ritual. The

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architectural evidence consists of religious buildings constructed in Jerusalem including: Mosques, Madrases, Khanqas, Domes, Sabils, Ribats, Mausoleums etc. The ritual religious factors on the other hand are mainly related to Muslims ceremonies and practices. These include the prayer *Salah* the pilgrimage *Hajj*, feasts, etc.¹³

The political factors can be seen from the attention which the Caliphs paid to Jerusalem, starting from the time of the second Caliph Umar who came personally to Jerusalem not as a religious leader but as *Amir al-Mu'mineen* the Leader of the believers, title which carries very clear political meaning. Umar's connections with Jerusalem continued after his first visit to the Holy City. According to the Greek historian living in the Byzantine period Theophans, Umar came back again to Jerusalem in the year 644/643 A.D. where he ordered a mosque to be built, probably al-Aqsa Mosque.¹⁴

The other political meanings which showed the significance and the centrality of Jerusalem are:

1. Mu'awiyya had this oath of allegiance *Bay'a* taken in Jerusalem; and also Abd al-Malik.
2. The Building of dar al-Imara, at the southern side of al-Aqsa Mosque.
3. The Building of al-Aqsa Mosque area including al-Aqsa Mosque itself and the Dome of the Rock.
4. The Patronage of Suleiman Ibn Abd al-Malik to the city by moving the official documents *Dawawin* and the income tax documents *Diwan al-Khiraj* during his reign to Jerusalem.

These aspects together with other indicated in fact the political importance of the Holy City during the early Islamic period. According to the well known historian Yakut al-Hamawi in his book *Mu'jam al-Buldan* indicates that "al-Quds is *Qasabat Falastin*" which means that "Jerusalem was the administrative centre of Palestine". On another word, Jerusalem was the Capital of Palestine in the modern sense.

Despite of our common understanding, that Damascus was the Muslim's Capital after Madina, it appears from what

Notes for discussion: The Significance of Jerusalem to Muslims indicated above, the discovering of Dar al-Imara at the south west corner of al-Haram al-Sharif, and other research¹⁵ that Jerusalem was the capital of the Islamic state at least during the Umayyad period.

(This paper was delivered at the 1998 International Academic Conference on Islamic Jerusalem "The Centrality of Jerusalem in Islam" organised by the Academy at the School of Oriental and African Studies on 22 August 1998).

- 1 *Encyclopedia of Islam* (1971, S. V. Bayt al- Maqdis)
- 2 Al-Suyuti in Ramdan, (ed.) *Ithaf al-Akhissa fi Fada'il al-Masjid al-Aqsa* (Cairo, 1984) pp. 183-184.
- 3 Yusif Ali, *The meaning of te Holy Qur'an* (Surah 17, verse 1)
- 4 Al- Suyuti, *Ithaf al- Khissa*, p. 363.
- 5 Mujir al- Din al-Hanbali, *al Uns al- Jalil fi Tarikh al-Quds wa al-khalil*, vol.1. (Amman, 1973), PP. 238-239.
- 6 Al- Hanbali, *al-Uns al-jalil*, vol.1. pp. 238-239.
- 7 M. Dabbagh, *Biladuna Filatin*, vol.3 (Beriut, 1988) pp. 82-83
- 8 Abu Baker al-Wasiti, *Fada'il Bayt al-Maqdis*.
- 9 Y. al-Hamawi, *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, vol.5, (Beriut, 1919), pp. 464-465.
- 10 M. Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan*, (Amman, 1993), p. 83, 163.
- 11 Marwan Abu Khalaf, "The Religious Factors in the settlement pattern in Jeruslaewm in the early Islamic period", in *studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan*, (Department of Antiquities, Amman, 1992), P. 347.
- 12 M. Ber-Dov, *The Shadow of the Temple: the discovery of Ancient Jerusalem*, (Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 314-315.
- 13 Marwan Abu Khalaf, "The religious factors", p. 348-349.
- 14 Khalil Athamna, "al-Wajh al-Siyasi li Madinat al-Quds Fi al-Uhud al-Islamiyya al-Mubakkira", in Kamel al-Asali (ed.), (PASSIA, Jerusalem 1996), pp. 381-425.
- 15 Ibid.