

LOUIS MASSIGNON AND JERUSALEM: A PERSONAL POINT OF VIEW

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Of all the Twentieth Century French Orientalists, Louis Massignon (1883-1962) is probably the most difficult to describe and to understand. Neither the value of his works nor the sense of his life may be encapsulated in a single definition. He was the most brilliant of the French scholars of Islam, an extremely accurate archaeologist and a punctilious geographer, a gifted linguist and a meticulous historian of the Islamic religion as well as a dedicated Christian thinker and an abnegated spiritual witness. Quoting Henri Laoust, we can safely affirm that: "Few contributions to our knowledge of Islam have been as rich as those of Louis Massignon" (Laoust, 1962).

At a time when scholars were more highly focused on literature and archaeology than on politics and economics, Massignon brought forward a brand new approach based on the comprehensive study of Islam, directed towards the re-evaluation of Muslim society through its highest mystical approaches. He scientifically renewed the way Christians view Islam and anticipated certain positions assumed by the Second Vatican Council. Throughout his entire life, Massignon concentrated his reflections on and around the character of Abraham and the problem of Abraham's relationship with God. These speculations converged on an "Abrahamitic perspective" that shaped his conception of the relations among the three monotheistic religions, as well as grounding his concept of the peace problem in the Holy Land and in the entire world. Within this initial

"Abrahamitic" framework, Jerusalem gradually entered his thoughts and reflections. He discovered the countries with Arab culture at a very early date. Even before completing his degrees in both literary and dialectal Arabic, he had travelled to Algiers and Morocco (1901 and 1904) (Borrmans, 2009: 15-30). Moreover, his membership in the French Institute of Archaeology had given him the opportunity to discover Egypt and Iraq (1907-1908), where the pivotal event of his life took place: the visitation of a divine "Stranger" who prevented him from committing suicide, and redirected his life into the bosom of a demanding Catholic faith.

At this early stage Ottoman Palestine and Jerusalem were not at the centre of his speculations, which were focused mainly on the Baghdad mystic Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (244-309 AH/857-922 CE) (Massignon, Gardet, 1971: 99) and on "death accepted as substitution" to which he devoted all his attention. Al-Ḥallāj became the object of a fourteen-year-long research in view of his doctoral degree, obtained in Paris in 1922. His Iraqi travels introduced him to the sanctity of Arab hospitality that played a great role in his political conceptions (Massignon D., 2001: 84).

The clouds gathering over Europe and the subsequent explosion of World War One obliged the young Massignon to confront himself with military mobilisation in 1914. Two years later he was already a captain of colonial infantry, engaged in battles in Macedonia. In 1917 he was detached to Egypt as a member of the Franco-British Sykes-Picot mission, entrusted with implementing the 1916 London agreements between France and Great Britain, thus marking the two powers' areas of influence in the Middle East. At that time he became acquainted with Thomas Edward Lawrence (1888-1935), who planned the Arab revolt in al-Hijāz against the Ottoman Empire. In 1960 Massignon contributed to the debate concerning this controversial figure with a valuable detailed fact-finding text, designed to assert his own testimony within the discussions originating in France during those years through the publication of a series of books, some mystifying, others mythicising, the historical figure of Lawrence (Massignon, 2009: 561). Notwithstanding a certain rivalry and a profound

divergence in their political analyses, Massignon and Lawrence shared some points of contact. First of all, they both deplored the behaviour of the allied powers who had infringed their promises to the Sharīf Ḥusayn bin ‘Alī of Makkah (1853-1931) and his son, Fayṣal (1883-1933). Massignon clearly stated his mind against Middle East politics, which was preparing to create French and British Mandates, where the British had promised and the Arabs had dreamt of a Hashemite Arab nation. Secondly, both men had experienced bitterness and feelings of being deceived when the word they had given was betrayed: Lawrence, on the very same day of the triumphal British entrance in Jerusalem, when he was charged with being disloyal by his Arab host, Fayṣal, after the Balfour Declaration and its promise of a Jewish national home; and Massignon two years later when he was involved in the *pourparlers* supposed to lead to the initialling of a Franco-Syrian treaty, which was never formally implemented (actually the content had been betrayed from the very start) (Massignon, 2009: 561-567). Moreover, both Lawrence and Massignon had come to Jerusalem as members of General Allenby's entourage on 11 December 1917. They had been placed in the same car, fourth in the row of the triumphal procession entering the city; Massignon wrote that they touched the ground of Jerusalem at 10.30 in front of the Jaffa Gate, and that he distinctly perceived that, for reasons based upon different perspectives, they both believed this event to be inconsistent with Justice or the Realm of God (Monteil, 1962: 186-291).

Massignon discovered the Holy City for the first time. There, he spent five months also performing his Christian pilgrimage. From then on Jerusalem would be vigorously present in his thoughts, meditations and works. During the 1920s he visited the city several times: in November 1920, at the end of 1927, and again in 1928 and in 1930. The pressing rhythm of his journeys is an indication of his growing interest in the city and, at the same time, of an increasing sadness for its fate. The first decades of the twentieth century witnessed upheavals both on the ground as well as in international politics: the riots of April 1920, the San Remo Conference with the sliding of Palestine under British control, the

creation of the Irgun, the nomination of Sir Herbert Louis Samuel (1870-1963) as High Commissioner for Palestine, al-Hājj Muhammad Amīn al-Ḥusaynī (1895-1974) appointed *Grand-Mufti* of Jerusalem, further riots in 1921 with the death of forty Jews, and the subsequent curtailing of Jewish immigration by the British. All these developments brought Massignon to reflect on the major problems devastating the region. In 1921, urged by the Society of Sociology in Paris, he wrote two masterpieces of political sociology founded on a historically and geographically accurate point of view. The first concerned *L'Arabie et le Problème arabe* (Arabia and the Arab problem). In these pages Massignon developed his initial approach to the worldwide reorganisation of Islam: Massignon gave full priority to this problem superseding all forms of Arab nationalism (Massignon, 2009: 541-561). The second *Sionisme et Islam*, committed to the relations between Zionism and Islam, is a milestone in Massignon's reflections on the Jewish-Palestinian question. At this stage he maintained that Zionism had assumed a nationalistic form because of Israel's difficulty in establishing itself by other means. The common Abrahamic roots shared by Zionists and by Muslims settled in Palestine, who all yearned for Jerusalem inasmuch as it was perceived as the scene of the promise received from God by Abraham, rendered it possible to explain the content of Zionism to them and make them understand it as a "fraternal faith" on equal, non competitive grounds with their own faith. In Massignon's words, it was not possible to tear Jerusalem away from Muslims because they deeply believed the Prophet was "made to journey" there (*al-Isrā'*, Night Journey) and that the Final Judgement (*al-Ḥashr*, the rally of all creatures for *Yawm al-Dīn*, the Day of Judgement) would take place in Jerusalem. But he was also aware that it would be equally impossible to tear Jerusalem from the heart of Israel because of the undefined Jewish hope, renewed every Passover, to be "next year in Jerusalem" (Massignon, 2009: 698-717).

During the following decades Massignon made fewer visits to Jerusalem: once in the 1930s, three times in the 1940s, in 1940, 1946 and 1948, and three times in the 1950s, in 1951 and 1953. His non-continuous and ever more sporadic presence should not be

taken as a sign of a lessening of his interest. On the contrary, in these years Jerusalem was a constant presence in Massignon's works as a subject that could never be confined or limited in space or time: the chosen city of the jealous God of Israel was an ever-present source of reflection throughout all his life.

The partition of Palestine, decreed by the United Nations General Assembly on 27 November 1947 in resolution 181, aroused Massignon's immediate contempt, persuaded, as he was, that Israel's vocation transcended the nationalistic choices of Zionism to merge into a vocation that was not merely international, but super-national as well. In his view the partition of Palestine was not only *impolitique* but also impious, a decision assumed under the ostensible reason of pacification. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War ended with the Israeli annexation of some territories outside the United Nations partition agreement. Confident of reaching an easy victory, the Arab countries had taken to arms but were defeated and found themselves facing a second partition, a partition imposed by force. According to Massignon any attempt at dividing or delivering Palestine, this unique symbol of future human unity, into the exclusive hands of Israel was unacceptable. In the texts he elaborated in the aftermath of the partition, he worked out his own ideas about Palestine and how peace could be achieved within a framework of justice. In the text entitled *La Palestine et la Paix dans la Justice* (Palestine and peace in justice), he considered Palestine (as Holy Land), with Jerusalem, to be the only place in which the temporal had to give way to the spiritual in order to realise the need for world unity, because geographically Palestine was the only point where the spiritual encountered the temporal, the unique site that was historically pre-destined from the time of Abraham. Massignon himself explained the profound significance of this conception. He was not suggesting a mere potential federal administrative district linked to the United Nations or an international UNESCO centre. He envisioned instead an "emanation" growing from the desire for peace and the prayers for "*la justice envers le haut lieu de Jérusalem*". His deliberations did not prevent him from remembering the everlasting Jewish spiritual yearning for the Holy Land, as a material token of a promise that

exceeds the substance. Massignon was well aware that among all those Christians, Jews and Muslims who found their home in Palestine, "a peace in justice" required the Jews to suffer the more arduous sacrifice. Equally, he could not avoid mentioning the Arabs' longing for this *al-ma'mūra* land (the populated, the flourishing land) from where the nomads had been exiled, or Islam's longing for it, represented by *al-Isrā'* and *al-Mi'rāj*, by directing the first *Qiblah* (prayer direction) towards Jerusalem, and by having welcomed since 637, the year of the caliph 'Umar's entrance into Jerusalem, Muslims of every origin who came and prayed there. Massignon's hope was to see the Christians reconcile the previous two, although he sadly considered this to be historically impossible. At the end of his sociologically-structured essay on Palestine, he envisaged a future world role for the Holy Land, and for this reason the commitment to attain peace there was of essential importance (Massignon, 2009: 737).

His 1948 visit to the city was undoubtedly a turning point, as Massignon found himself confronted with a dramatic situation. Not only did he directly experience the bloody conflicts between Jews and Arabs in Jerusalem, he was also profoundly disturbed by the expulsion of Christian Arab families from Haifa to Lebanon which inspired his considerations on the problem of "displaced persons". In a paper entitled *Jérusalem, Ville de Paix* (Jerusalem, city of peace), written in April 1948, he firmly stated that the return of Israel to its origins should not be founded on the exile of a Christian minority and *a fortiori* of an Arab majority (Massignon, 2009: 743-745). He was always close to every displaced person, Christian or Muslim, as asserted in an article written in July 1948, *Ce qu'est la Terre Sainte pour les Communautés Humaines qui demandent Justice* (What the Holy Land means to the human communities seeking justice) (Massignon, 1948a: 33-35).

His reflections on this burning issue were deeply influenced by the theoretical speculations of his close friend Judah Leib Magnes (d. 1948), founder in 1925 of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, an institution strongly supported by Massignon and which was charged with reviving national consciousness. In 1922 he

contributed to having the Goldziher Arabic library bequeathed to the University. He strongly felt that this institute could help Israel re-establish its place in Palestine by adopting Arabic as a second language and *langue de civilisation*. In his opinion this would be a valuable mean of re-orientalising Israel and would pave the way for inter-Semitic solidarity. In Massignon's views, the only independence Israel should conserve was the originality of Semitic thought and traditions. He and Magnes shared a common *Weltanschauung* on several subjects. First of all, they refused the unfair partition of a land equally sacred to all three of the monotheistic religions; secondly, they condemned the materialistic idolatry of colonialist Zionism. Magnes held that the duty of Israel, whose role had been directly designated by God, was to destroy every idol made by the hands of man. God himself had forbidden Israel to adore them, and each time Israel denied its vocation, God punished it with the catastrophes - *kharab* - announced by the Prophets. Moreover, both Massignon and Magnes claimed an international status for the Holy Places and equality for Islam and Arabs. Magnes believed that it was unthinkable that the Holy Land should bear the horrors of displaced persons' camps, re-creating the conditions suffered by Jews in Europe. He was horrified by the idea of refugees being treated like hostages and demanded that Arab refugees should have the right to an immediate return to Palestine. Massignon greatly appreciated Magnes's political perspective; he praised and shared both his ideas of ending Jewish immigration, when numerical equality with the Arab counterpart was reached, and the proposal of a confederated bi-national State. Magnes never ceased to remind Israel that lacking an organism that could safeguard the equality of the three Palestinian religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), the two entities, the State of Israel and the Arab State of Palestine, simultaneously recognised by the United Nations, would have to be supervised by an "umbrella" confederation with a supreme court (Massignon, 2009: 744-754; 768; 771). Massignon also elaborated the bi-national proposal from a different viewpoint. In a text devoted to the refugee problem of Palestine, entitled *Le Problème des Réfugiés arabes de Palestine* (The problem of Arab refugees in Palestine) he seemed to speculate on the idea of a federation with Jordan, only to

conclude on its impossibility, due to the strong social and cultural cleavages existing between the two entities. In the same text Massignon extrapolated a new concept of bi-nationalism which exceeded the limited boundaries of nationalism itself. A project presented in those days at the Knesset proposed offering Israeli citizenship to every Jew visiting the Holy Land from abroad. Massignon re-interpreted this privilege eschatologically and messianically, extending it to all pilgrims to the Holy Places: Jews, Muslims and Christians as well. Massignon's political action was always guided by the belief in a peaceful coexistence of different peoples and faiths, derived from his religious concept of sacred hospitality, and by the Gandhian principles of non-violent action. Massignon echoed his friend Magnes's idea of a bi-national confederation but he went further to plead for putting an end to the progress of *fait accompli* of Zionist arms by opposing the establishment of an international organisation to control the Holy Places as the only means of assuring "peace in justice" in the world. He never ceased to stress the force of the spiritual elements that converge on Palestine, forces that all lead to "peace in justice" (Massignon, 2009: 765).

Massignon reflected several times on the role played by the United Nations in Palestine, or better yet, the role the United Nations did *not* play. He reproached the United Nations for not implementing the International Commission for the Holy Places, so cunningly promised by the British at the San Remo Conference, but which was never realised. His attitude towards the United Nations' mediation in Palestine was equally severe: according to his point of view, bridled as it was by the bit of colonialist financiers, the Organisation had badly mediated and had never shown the necessary courage to prevent the battle from exploding in the Old City. Massignon's speculations reached a utopian level vis-à-vis the role of the United Nations: he regretted, or perhaps simply hoped, that their "president's" headquarters would be moved to Jerusalem from the very beginning of the conflict, in order to obtain, by a direct presence, the end of the fratricidal war on a ground that was sacred to all and sundry. Massignon also reprimanded the United Nations' mediator, Folke Greve Bernadotte af Wisborg (1895-

1948), for his prompt acceptance of the partitioning of Palestine. He also observed that Bernadotte's blood, surrounded by an atmosphere of "petroleum" compromise, had been shed in vain (Massignon, 1948b; Massignon, 2009: 736; 749; 764).

Inspired by the Israeli capture of Beersheba, 21st October 1948, Massignon denounced the Zionist plan to capture all of Palestine beyond the Jewish zone, and remarked that the southern road to Jerusalem had already been opened. As a consequence of the Beersheba capitulation, many Palestinians rushed towards the Gaza Strip in dramatic conditions. The developing situation was illustrated in an article dated 25th October 1948 and entitled *L'Avenir des Lieux Saints en Terre Sainte* (The future of the Holy Places in the Holy Land) in which Massignon deplored that the principle of Jerusalem as international city had been boycotted by Zionist diplomacy and ineffectively supported by many countries. He considered that the principle of Jerusalem, qua international city, was linked to the freedom and to the international honour of the Holy Places, since they belonged not only to the Jews but also to the Christians and Muslims. These Places represented the orientation for praying men and women and the destinations for pilgrimages for all the people of good faith. Massignon wanted Jerusalem to be the metropolis of the United Nations in the world and Palestine the kindergarten of a reconciled and rising humanity.

Massignon thought it would be impossible to separate the protection of the Holy Places from the problem of the Palestinian refugees. Facing an indifferent world public opinion, accustomed to many thousands of displaced persons around the globe, Massignon raised his voice to state that it was inconceivable that this should be happening in the Holy Land. Tracing his views on the reason why the Holy Places should be left to the believers, his thesis converging in a prophetic article published by *Le Monde* in November 1949, *Pourquoi les Lieux Saints doivent rester aux Croyants?* (Why ought the Holy Places to remain with the believers?), Massignon outlined a bi-univocal relation between the internationalisation of the Holy Places and the refugee problem: if the United Nations had implemented their resolutions, there

would never have been the problem of displaced persons in the first instance. Massignon also postulated four basic and ineluctable principles for the resolution of the question of the Holy Places: the Holy Land is in the Orient; the Holy Land is in Asia, the Holy Land is at the heart of the Muslim world, the Holy Land is as far from the United States as it is near to Russia. Firstly, Israel cannot be the winner until it re-orientalises itself: the intransigent mentality of Tel Aviv is unacceptable for both the refugees and the entire Arab world. Secondly, Israel should return to Asia: Gandhi had begged Israel not to make the Palestinians new displaced people; Pakistani volunteers had been charged with the defence of Nazareth in order to hold the Jordan front line. Furthermore, it should also be considered that Jerusalem and Hebron are respectively the third and fourth Holy Places in Islam; every day Muslim liturgy invokes Abraham. The whole Arab world would revolt if Islam were evicted from Hebron. Moreover, he was persuaded that the future of Palestine lay in Russia, not in the sense of Soviet intervention, but in the hope for an awakening of Russian faith that would never forget Jerusalem, like Israel and Islam. "The future, he stated, is in the hands of the believers" (Massignon, 1949, *passim*).

Massignon felt that at the end of 1949 the United Nations seemed to have finally understood the wisdom of Solomon's judgement, but he had sadly to realise that the two "mothers" were bad mothers about to cleave the baby in two. On 9 December the United Nations wanted to save the Holy City through their mediation. Thirty-eight countries voted "yea" with France, while others accused the United Nations of losing its way to the Holy City in the meanders of idealism (Massignon, 2009: 768-770). France was warned that neither she nor the other thirty seven nations about to vote "yea" with her would ever be able to implement the tenets of their vote. Massignon added some considerations on the "two interests" that had just appeared on the international scene and owed everything to the United Nations: both decided to disobey and fend for themselves. Massignon perceived the "division" of Jerusalem as an aberration. He was convinced that it was dishonourable for both Israel and Islam and

he refused to remain a silent witness to the vivisection of the Holy City; he also appealed to Christians not to refrain from expressing their concern as the Land was sacred for them as well.

In the same year, 1949, Massignon expressed his view in a *communiqué* addressed to the Christian Committee for Understanding France-Islam with the meaningful title *Israël et Ismaël* (Israel and Ishmael) (Massignon, 2009: 717-733). In his opinion it was impossible to solve the ongoing conflict in Palestine by political means and he invited the parts to transcend the plan for an unfeasible political resolution of the hostilities by implementing the internationalisation of the Holy Places, a symbol of divine hospitality. In the text he affirmed that through all her various political regimes, France had always been the guarantor of the freedom of the Holy Places and had promised her six million French citizens of Algeria, in the person of the *Grand-Muftī*, that France would defend the rights of free Islamic conscience, as well as that of Christian conscience. In front of the fifty members of the United Nations, France should have kept the Holy Places of Palestine free, starting with Jerusalem.

The preface to a book written by one of his closest assistants, François Nourissier (b. 1927), *L'Homme humilié* (The humiliated man) published in 1950, gave Massignon the opportunity to state that Judah L. Magnes had led him to understand the sacred value of the problem of displaced persons in front of the Holy Places, its worldwide importance for the future of humanity, and its implications for the consciences of all (Nourissier, 1950: 1-15). One year later, in January 1951, he deepened and expanded his speculations by analysing Aubrey Eban's report on the Arab refugee problem in Palestine. He branded as tactical and colonialist-oriented the arguments produced by Eban to support Israel's positions. The Eban report had the presumption to consider the refugee problem a "closed issue"; on the contrary, Massignon insisted that the Israeli politics of progressively expelling populations had not yet come to an end. In his view it was of utmost importance that the displaced persons problem be fixed within an international framework. He thought that the

world expected a liturgical legitimisation from Israel to justify its return to the Promised Land by a truly messianic policy towards the Arab refugees, Ishmael's sons. Every right of Israel to return to the Holy Land derives from the promise made to Abraham, and every privilege of Abraham derives from the fact that he was a guest, a foreigner in the Holy Land, founding a *foyer* on the more heroic experience of hospitality. It is up to Israel to give the world an example of justice that is higher than that of the Gentiles. While strongly condemning the formation of Israeli racism, Massignon's opinion was sufficiently unbiased to sorrowfully acknowledge the insurgence of an Arab racism whose aim was to prolong the Arab refugees' desperation indefinitely in order to consent Israel's own "sin" of racism to subsist (Massignon, 2009: 776-779).

Massignon's last visits to Jerusalem are dated 1953, respectively in January and December. Physically detached from the city, he continued reflecting on it in the many meetings of his "*Badaliya*" association (substitution), whose members regularly travelled to Jerusalem in order to assure continuity of one of the Badaliya's main aims: the protection of the Abū Madyan *waqf*. He strongly defended this historical *waqf* property, founded in the fourteenth century by Andalusian refugees from Tlemcen and named after the prominent Andalusian mystic Abū Madyan Shu'ayb (d. 594 AH/1197 CE) who died in Tlemcen (Algeria), and part of *Ḥārāt al-Maghārība*, the Maghribi quarter. Massignon could not forget the Muslims' consideration of the al-Aqṣā Mosque as a symbol of the authenticity of the Prophet's vocation, but he filtered the Night Journey meaning through his "Abrahamitic" perspective: the Prophet of Islam was "made to journey" by his desire to obtain the extension of Abraham's sacrifice to benefit the Arabs, sons of Ishmael, son of Hagar. Moreover, the identification of the *Miḥrāb Zakariyā* (al-Qur'ān, 3: 37), that is to say the place where al-Aqṣā stands, with the place where the Virgin Mary was presented to the Temple, aroused in Massignon a feeling of obligation to defend the Abū Madyan *waqf*. This *waqf* was set just in front of al-Aqṣā, heading to the *Zakariyā oratory* where the Muslim women continue to invoke the intercession of the Virgin Mary, contemplating the mystery of Her Presentation at the Temple as well as Her vocation.

France had granted the administration of this *waqf* through the action of her Consul General in the City, faithful to the historical role she was playing in Jerusalem. After the Israeli seizure of 'Ayn Kārim, whose agricultural revenues sustained this *waqf*, Massignon devoted himself to the building of an Algerian Supporting Committee in Tlemcen. In his action he could count on the mediation of personalities like the Consul General of France, the Catholic grand-vicar of Algiers and others concerned with the ongoing situation. The Supporting Committee had obtained two annual grants (2 million francs) from the Bey of Tunis and the Sultan of Morocco, who was upset because the Holy Places of Islam were being threatened by armies as well as by totalitarian *incroyant* colonialism. Massignon was also comforted by a solemn and unanimous vote in the Algerian Assembly on a proposal of its Vice-President asking the French government to enforce respect for this *waqf* (Massignon, 2010: 82-83; 188). This protection was intended as the keeping of the word given by France to Algerian Islam, and it was understood as a "concession" to Christian France's spiritual force. Once again the strength of the "given word" and the frustration for its betrayal marked Massignon's perception of reality (Massignon, 2010: 189). Massignon's death in 1962 prevented him from witnessing the Israeli occupation of the Eastern part of the city in 1967 and the destruction of the *waqf* operated by Israel in order to create the *esplanade* now opening in front of the Wailing Wall.

To sum up Massignon's views about Jerusalem, he had dreamt of a special status for Jerusalem, on the footprints of a United Nations motion that had gathered two thirds of the General Assembly's votes, but was never implemented. Quoting his own words, from his reflections on Zionism and Islam: "I am convinced that only a profound affection for Jerusalem can bring about the reconciliation of the three antagonistic elements that are essentially religious" (Massignon, 2009: 715). In Massignon's reflections, Jerusalem was the only place where this "reconciliation" of the three monotheistic branches of the *ikhlās* belief in worshipping (the pure belief as told in al-Qur'ān) could occur: should it fail to occur there, then it would occur nowhere.

This article was presented in the 12th international academic conference on Islamicjerusalem studies (Orientalist approaches to Islamicjerusalem) that was held at SOAS, University of London on 6 November 2010.

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