

SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLE:

THE HOLINESS OF JERUSALEM IN ISLAM

by

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One of the most controversial problems facing Israel and the Muslim world concerns Jerusalem. The Arab countries insist that it is holy to Muslims, and millions of non-Arab Muslims support this view.

The source of Jerusalem's holiness to Islam lies in both Judaism and Christianity. Muhammad derived Islam's basic ideas from these two religions, e.g. the unity of God, the covenant between God and Adam, moral responsibility etc., and one can conclude that he took the concept of Jerusalem's holiness from the same sources.

Jerusalem is not mentioned in the Koran, although interpreters assume that the first sentence of Sura 17 refers to Jerusalem, and the story of the spies in Sura 5, sentence 21, clearly mentions Eretz Israel, and God's promise regarding it. Other passages confirm, if indirectly, that Muhammad and his followers originally faced Jerusalem when they prayed, and this too was undoubtedly influenced by Jewish and Christian customs. With the Arab conquest of Jerusalem in 638, the city's holiness was given practical significance. At the time of the conquest, the Temple Mount was covered with rubble, and Khalif Omar ordered it cleared and had a house of prayer built there, where the worshippers prayed facing Mecca. Sixty years later, at the end of the seventh century, the Dome of the Rock, which is the oldest Islamic building, was built there by Khalif Omayya Abd El Malk.

There is controversy regarding the circumstances in which the Dome of the Rock was built. One school held that it was meant to rival the Great Mosque of Mecca, which was then in the hands of the rebel Abdallah Ben Alzubir, since Abd El Malk did not want pilgrims to go to an area of rebellion; or it may be possible that Ben Alzubir did not want Omayya's people to come to Mecca. In any case, it is said that Abd El Malk mobilized people who would hand down traditions in the name of Muhammad in favour of praying in Jerusalem, and tried to cultivate rituals similar to the ones practised in Mecca. This theory is refuted by several historians, and according to Goitein the reasons for building the Mosque were purely religious ones: e.g. to satisfy the growing number of pilgrims to Jerusalem, and to compete with the beautiful churches.

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It is not known whether Abd El Malk or his son built the El Aksa Mosque, constructed over the ruins of an earlier church. The building of these two mosques demonstrates that a new tradition had developed in Islam concerning Jerusalem's sacredness, which was to be the most famous tradition of all in Islam. This tradition is connected with the 'Alassra' passage in Sura 17 of the Koran. This passage could refer to an apocalyptic experience of Muhammad's, and the name of El Aksa, the furthest mosque, could refer to a celestial house of worship, while some researchers say it refers to Jerusalem and that there are other passages in the Koran that make similar references to Jerusalem and Eretz Israel. Joseph Horowitz says in the Islamic Encyclopedia s. v. that its reference is both to a celestial Jerusalem and to Jerusalem on earth. With time, the 'furthest mosque' was taken to mean El Aksa, in Jerusalem on earth. This interpretation is connected with Muhammad's flight to Jerusalem and ascent to heaven from the Temple Mount, where he is believed to have received the principles of Islam from God. This is the historical and theological root of Jerusalem's holiness for Islam. From then on, there began new ways of revering Jerusalem. The altar stone took on a central place in assessing Jerusalem's holiness, and the Dome of the Rock was connected with Muhammad's ascent to heaven. Folk legends about the rock grew, which had as their sources Jewish and Christian tradition, since Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac is supposed to have taken place there, etc. etc.

Islam had given primary significance to Mecca similar to Jerusalem's significance for Judaism and had placed many stories taken from the Torah and Jewish Aggada, such as that of Abraham and Isaac, in Mecca. Now this process was reversed.

There has always been some Muslim opposition to regarding Jerusalem as holy, but this opposition has never been a strong one. Those opposing argue that Jerusalem's sacredness is artificial and an imitation of Judaism. In religious sources and in the oral law, Jerusalem takes third place after Mecca and Medina.

Islam has never differentiated between religion and state, and political events have always had religious significance. Jerusalem was neglected by Muslims in the nineteenth century, and began to interest religious scholars and Arab politicians again from the beginning of the twentieth century, in the face of the special status given to it by the Jews. Special committees were formed to protect the city, since the Arabs feared the Jews were changing the status quo, and in the years before the 1967 war there were opinions in Arab countries which held that Israel's proximity to the Old City constituted a threat to the Temple Mount.

Jerusalem is in fact sacred to Muslims for the same reasons as it is sacred to Jews, as neither differentiates between the political and the religious realm. Even today Muslims concede in principle, though not in practice,

that Jerusalem is not only sacred to them but to the adherents of all three monotheistic religions. A member of the religiously extremist Muslim Brotherhood, Said Kutab, argued that Muhammad's miraculous journey from Mecca to Jerusalem linked the three monotheistic religions together and had a meaning transcending the limits of time and place.

Summary by Ruth Reich