



## Every Stone in Jerusalem Tells a Story

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**Abstract:** *At the crossroads of history, forged by centuries of conflict, there is a place once believed to be the center of the world: Jerusalem -- a mosaic of culture and faiths formed in this venerable city treasured by billions. Ancient ceremonies and secrets buried deep underground are explored through the story of people who call this city their own. As a site of major significance for the three largest monotheistic religions -- Judaism, Islam, and Christianity -- Jerusalem is considered by many to be one of the holiest places in the world. The Temple Mount in Jerusalem, historically the holiest site for countless billions, has been the scene of much bloodshed. A small hill in Jerusalem, revered for thousands of years, is the tinderbox that has threatened to engulf the world in war throughout history. For Judaism, it is the place of the binding of Isaac and the place where Yahweh resides. In Christian faith, it is the place where Jesus Christ was brought as a child, preached to the poor in his adult life, was crucified at the end of his life, and finally, resurrected by God. To Muslims, it is the place the Islamic prophet Muhammad visited on a nocturnal journey and where he ascended to heaven. Inevitably, the Temple Mount makes Jerusalem a place where Gods collide.*

*The following discussion posits that while three different traditions emerged from this holy city, a close examination of their roots shows that they were all connected in certain ways by the history of the locale. In order to support this argument, the following will explain how Jerusalem became a focal point of ancient aspirations, a living proof of memorable glory and independence, and a center of national renewal for Jews; how it symbolizes the saga of Jesus' pain and triumph for Christians; and how it helps to achieve the objective of the prophet Muhammad's mystical nighttime journey into the one of Islam's holiest shrines for Muslims.*

**Keywords:** *Jerusalem, Religion, Christianity, Muslim, Judaism*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

At the crossroads of history, forged by centuries of conflict, there is a place once believed to be the center of the world: Jerusalem -- a mosaic of culture and faiths formed in this venerable city treasured by billions. Ancient ceremonies and secrets buried deep underground are explored through the story of people who call this city their own. As a site of major significance for the three largest monotheistic religions -- Judaism, Islam, and Christianity -- Jerusalem is considered by many to be one of the holiest places in the world. The Temple Mount in Jerusalem, historically the holiest site for countless billions, has been the scene of much bloodshed. A small hill in Jerusalem, revered for thousands of years, is the tinderbox that has threatened to engulf the world in war throughout history. For Judaism, it is the place of the binding of Isaac and the place where Yahweh resides. In Christian faith, it is the place where Jesus Christ was brought as a child, preached to the poor in his adult life, was crucified at the end of his life, and finally, resurrected by God. To Muslims, it is the place the Islamic prophet Muhammad visited on a nocturnal journey and where he ascended to heaven. Inevitably, the Temple Mount makes Jerusalem a place where Gods collide.

The following discussion posits that while three different traditions emerged from this holy city, a close examination of their roots shows that they were all connected in certain ways by the history of the locale. In order to support this argument, the following will explain how Jerusalem became a focal point of ancient aspirations, a living proof of memorable glory and independence, and a center of national renewal for Jews; how it symbolizes the saga of Jesus' pain and triumph for Christians; and how it helps to achieve the objective of the prophet Muhammad's mystical nighttime journey into the one of Islam's holiest shrines for Muslims.

## 2. THE PHYSICAL CONTEXT OF JERUSALEM

Jerusalem, a place cherished by billions, has been protected by its amazing topographical setting throughout history. The land is guarded by the Kidron Valley, where olive trees grow, to the east. The Valley of Hinnom forms a natural but strong barricade on the western and southern edges of Jerusalem, which rises from the Western Ridge, stretches to Jaffa, goes south around Mount Zion, and finally joins the Kidron Valley to the east. The Central Valley, also known as Tyropoeon Valley, divides the city into Mount Moriah (the Eastern Hill) and Mount Zion (the Western Hill), connecting with the Kidron valley near the Pool of Siloam (Armstrong, 35). In addition to serving as natural walls, these three steep hills also provide a living experience for believers to be close to heaven by feeling contact with the divine at a high altitude (Armstrong, 41). Although Jerusalem enjoys safety and security because of its natural location, the ancient Canaan region suffered a harsh climate, also because of this location. Lying between the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Desert, ancient Israel endured hot summers with drought, and cold winters with large amounts of precipitation, a climate “which constantly threatens to obliterate all human achievement” (Armstrong, 52). The drought and resultant famine not only brought suffering to the people living in arid regions, but also left an impact on their religious beliefs, to a great extent. Baal, one of the most important gods in the pantheon, was worshipped by the people of Ugarit on the Syrian coast, who considered him a deity of fertility. In order to guarantee the fruitfulness of the land, Baal had to battle for his people. His victory was thought to bring fertility to the land (Armstrong, 49). Despite its harsh climate, ancient Israel possessed several resources and took advantage of its central spot, surrounded by other kingdoms. By exporting wine, oil, honey, and grain, ancient Israel flourished and established itself as an important trade center in the Ancient Near East, serving as a bridge between Egypt, Asia Minor, and Mesopotamia (Armstrong, 30).

## 3. THE HISTORY OF JERUSALEM IN EARLY JUDAISM

The preexistence of this Holy City and Mount Zion can be found in one of the most iconic stories in all of literature: Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Not limited to revealing Abraham’s deep faith in God, the account in Genesis 22 of the Bible also explores the granting of holiness to Jerusalem, building a sacred historical and religious background for the future First Temple. After Isaac was born, God talked with Abraham in Beersheba. It was time for God to test Abraham’s faithfulness and obedience with an unexpected command. Abraham was summoned by God to bring Isaac to Mount Moriah, where he would sacrifice his only precious son as a burnt offering (Genesis 22:1-2). Because of Abraham’s love for Isaac, God made this command especially sharp on purpose. Nonetheless, Abraham did not hesitate and prepared to sacrifice his son on the altar. Before Abraham tried to kill Isaac, the Angel of the Lord came down to Moriah and his voice rang out: “...now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Genesis 22:12). In response to passing the test, God offered Abraham blessings by declaring, “I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” (Genesis 22:17). This chapter marks the end of the story of Abraham, but the beginning of the legends of Isaac and his offspring in this blessed land.

One of the most important descendants of Abraham in the Bible was King David. King David, described as “a man after God’s own heart,” was the second king of the United Kingdom of Israel. Famous for his enthusiasm for God, touching poetry, artistic potential, motivational experiences, and strategies of war, King David was able to replace Saul, who was rejected by God, and became the king of a continuous expanded land (Armstrong, 87). The reason King David was able to bring prosperity to the kingdom still lies in a gilded case known as the Ark of the Covenant. A symbol of Yahweh’s presence, this legendary artifact “seems to have been a chest which contained the tablets of the Law and was surmounted by two golden cherubim,” whose “outstretched wings formed the back of a throne for Yahweh” (Armstrong, 77).

After he established his dynasty and a new capital, King David made his first inspiring decision for his people, which was to carry the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. This event is described in the biblical text of 2 Samuel Chapter 6. In this chapter of the book of Samuel, King David takes the Ark of the Covenant from the foothills of Judah to the city of Jerusalem. Although his first attempt failed,

emphasizing the strong yet lethal power of the divine, King David safely transported the Ark a month later. The Ark would not only ensure the safety of the people and the land, but also legalized King David's rule and transformed Jerusalem into a holy place (Armstrong, 91). David was truly chosen by God to be the king of Israel at that moment, when the Ark of the Covenant decided to settle in its eternal home. As 2 Samuel 6:17 describes, "They brought the ark of the LORD and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the LORD."

The First Temple was then constructed under the reign of David's prodigious son, Solomon, at Mount Zion. Mount Zion is the biblical name for the eastern ridge of ancient Jerusalem. According to Genesis 22, Mount Zion of the period of David and Solomon was known as Mount Moriah, where Abraham was commanded to sacrifice Isaac. In this way, Solomon was building his temple at a location that had important connections to the ancestors of Israel. As described earlier in this study, Genesis 22 was the biblical chapter that recounted God's commandment to Solomon's ancestor to offer a sacrifice on Mount Moriah.

As a wise, ambitious, and gifted man, King Solomon built himself a royal palace, combining it with the Temple to Yahweh, a place for assembly, and an abode for the Ark (Armstrong, 102). The Bible's description of Solomon's Temple suggests that the inside ceiling was 180 feet long, 90 feet wide, and 50 feet high. It appears that the highest point on the temple that King Solomon built was actually 120 cubits tall (1 Kings 6:2-6). When installing the Ark of the Covenant, King Solomon began the event with sincere prayers and countless sacrifices, and then placed the Ark into the most important room in the Temple: the Holy of Holies (1 Kings 8). Once the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the Temple, these two most sacred symbols rendered this site holy by transforming it as the center of heaven and earth, and a place to sustain the reality and divinity (Armstrong, 106). According to the Hebrew Bible, the Ark of the Covenant symbolized the Israelite God's presence on earth (Exodus 25-31). After the symbolic settlement of God, King Solomon urged God to pay special attention to the Israelites' prayers: "Thus all the peoples of the earth will know Your name and revere You, as does Your people Israel; and they will recognize that Your name is attached to this House that I have built" (1 Kings 8:43).

Although the time of Solomon's reign was a golden era, he committed indiscretions at the end of his life. For punishment, Yahweh (God) abandoned Jerusalem and tore the kingdom apart, dividing it into the Kingdom of Israel in the north and the Kingdom of Judah in the south. In addition to general disobedience and corruption by the Israelites, some also killed the prophet who warned about God's prediction of destruction. As a result, Yahweh no longer offered peace and security for his city (Armstrong, 153). It was, however, only the beginning of their end. After the Fall of Samaria, the puppet king then on the throne of the Kingdom of Israel succumbed to the Assyrians, his palace and temple destroyed, and a part of Jerusalem was lost (Armstrong, 136). Miraculously surviving under the threat of the Assyrians for 150 years, the Kingdom of Judah inevitably fell victim to the Babylonians in 586 BCE. During the month of Tammuz, after a long siege during which starvation and plague ravaged the city, the walls were breached by Nebuchadnezzar's army. One of the most historically important sources that we have for this event is the biblical book of 2 Kings. Scholars argue that this chapter of 2 Kings likely preserves a close recollection of the events of the Babylonian exile. 2 Kings Chapter 25 contains a gruesome description of the siege of Jerusalem in the following words: "By the ninth day of the fourth month the famine in the city had become so severe that there was no food for the people to eat. Then the city wall was broken through..." (2 Kings 25:3-4). On the seventh day of Av (the eleventh month of the Jewish calendar), Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, began the massive destruction of Jerusalem not only by destroying the Temple of the Lord, but also the Israelites' spirit. According to this same account, "The Babylonians broke up the bronze pillars, the movable stands and the bronze Sea that were at the temple of the Lord and they carried the bronze to Babylon. They also took away the pots, shovels, wick trimmers, dishes and all the bronze articles used in the temple service. The commander of the imperial guard took away the censers and sprinkling bowls—all that were made of pure gold or silver." (2 Kings 25:13-15). On the ninth day of Av, toward evening, the Holy Temple was set on fire and destroyed. The fire burned for 24 hours. Burning down all the important buildings, and breaking all the walls, Nebuchadnezzar left this former glorious city only with empty squares, crumbling walls, and ruined gates haunted by jackals (Armstrong, 154).

The poignant downfall of Jerusalem sadly conformed to Jeremiah's melancholic prophecy recorded in his reflections, known as the Book of Lamentations. Compared to the more historical account in the biblical book of 2 Kings, Lamentations offers more of a poetic glimpse into the emotions associated with the Babylonian siege. According to the first chapter of the book,

How deserted lies the city,  
once so full of people!  
How like a widow is she,  
who once was great among the nations!  
She who was queen among the provinces  
has now become a slave.

----The Book of Lamentations 1:1-6

Similar to writings in the Book of Job, Jeremiah depicted the suffering brought about by evil and sin in Jerusalem. The stories in Job revealed inexplicable evil, while Jeremiah lamented the onset of tragedy in Jerusalem, a once flourishing holy city punished by the devastating judgement of the divinity.

However, Jeremiah also made a promise that God's people would one day return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple:

For this our heart has become faint, for these things our eyes have grown dim.  
For Mount Zion, which has become desolate; foxes prowl over it.  
But You, O God, remain forever; Your throne endures throughout the generations.  
Why do You forget us forever, forsake us so long?

Restore us to You, O God, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old.

----The Book of Lamentations 5:17-21

Those who were exiled finally saw hope in 538 BCE, when the Babylonian empire fell, and the Middle East was controlled by another young king, Cyrus. Different from the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, the Persian empires showed tolerance to all the communities of Mesopotamia. In order to earn appreciation from his people and win God's favor, Cyrus issued a famous edict, allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the "House for the God of Heaven" (Armstrong, 174). Nonetheless, the reconstruction of the Temple came to stagnation. Responsibility for this fell on the shoulders of Zerubbabel, a descendant of King David; and Joshua, a high priest and son of Jozadak. Another return, led by Ezra, a scribe from a priestly family, was considered a turning point for the Israelites. Although Ezra arrived in victory, he was extremely shocked when he learned that "the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the land...they have taken from their daughters for themselves and for their sons, and mixed the holy seed with the peoples of the land" (Ezra 9:1-2). As a sign of mourning, he tore his clothes, and fasted and prayed for repentance. By summoning all the members of Golah, Ezra made the laws of the Torah the blueprint for the new society (Armstrong, 189).

Despite the prosperity and safety of the community of Judea under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the destruction of the First Temple had already acted as a turning point of the history of Israel, marking the end of self-government in the Judean state. Lacking the presence of a monarchy, the Israelites were badly in need of a shrine for their wandering spirit. Inspired by an ambition to restore the glory of the golden period of David and Solomon, the returnees sought to rebuild the Temple and govern the community in a way that would be acceptable to God. Unfortunately, the reality of returning to Zion did not live up to the expectations of those returnees. Elderly people, who still remembered the magnificent temple back in Solomon's reign, burst into tears when they saw this modest version of the Temple of Solomon (Armstrong 176). The Second Temple was much smaller and far less glorious than the First Temple. The Hebrew Bible does not describe the rebuilt temple, although Ezra 6:3 says, "its height shall be sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits." Ezra 3 contrasts this new edifice, a product of the limited resources of the exiles, to its predecessor: "many of the

priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house..." (Magness 53). Whether or not it was impressive compared to the First Temple, the restored temple symbolized a new era, and represented the revival of Israelites' life after the ravages of exile. In addition, the Second Temple assigned a new role for the people themselves.

The Second Temple era, a radiant period of peace and tranquility, spanned 420 years. However, the harmony did not last into future generations. The Roman Empire embarked on its massive expansion throughout the world, and eventually arrived in the Old City, Jerusalem. Although the Israelite defenders revolted against the Romans, the determined resistance still failed to stop the breakdown of the Hasmonean Kingdom by Pompey's army (Magness 96). As the Romans invaded the city house by house, a terrible slaughter followed, which cleared the way for Titus to the Temple Mount. After five months of deadly fighting, the Romans committed their most devastating and barbaric act. On the 9th of Av, the same day when the First Temple was destroyed, Titus ordered the Second Temple to be burned to the ground. Panic and sadness erupted when the Israelites saw the Temple catch on fire (Armstrong, 272). Josephus describes the destruction of the Temple: "While the holy house (The Temple) was on fire, everything was plundered that came to hand, and ten thousand of those that were caught were slain; nor was there a commiseration of any age...but children and old men...and priests, were all slain in the same manner... The flame was also carried a long way, and made an echo, together with the groans of those who were slain... one would have thought the whole city would have been on fire. Nor can one imagine anything greater and more terrible than this noise" (*The Jewish War* 6.5.1). Once again, Israel was in great despair.

Thanks to God, the Israelites were never doomed to end their existence, in accordance with the promise in Genesis 22 that there will be an "eternal nation." Because of the loss of the heart of the Jewish world, Jerusalem was broken again until 37 BCE, when Herod the Great was appointed King of Judea. Beginning as a governor of Galilee a position granted to him by his father Antipater, Herod gradually gained power during the Roman civil war. By carefully watching the developments in Rome, Herod, who first sided with Roman politician and general Mark Antony, reversed his position and allied with Octavian at the final showdown of the Battle of Actium (Armstrong, 228-229). During the transition from Roman Republic to the Roman Empire, Herod's last-minute support for Octavian led to his confirmation as King of Israel. Although Herod's reign brought social stability to Israel, he apparently suffered from paranoia and ruled the kingdom with ruthless brutality. His persecutions were so notorious that death even came to his own family. He beheaded 46 leading members of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish legislative body) and killed all the remaining members of the ruling Hasmonean family (Magness 133-136). Stuck in jealousy, Herod eventually murdered his own sons and wife. As Josephus relates, "his passion also made him stark mad and leaping out of his bed he ran around the palace in a wild manner. His sister Salome took the opportunity also to slander Miriam and to confirm his suspicions about Joseph. Then out of his ungovernable jealousy and rage he commanded both of them to be killed immediately. But as soon as his passion was over he repented of what he had done and as soon as his anger was worn off his affections were kindled again... Indeed, the flame of his desires for her was so hard that he could not think she was dead but he would appear under his disorders to speak to her as if she were still alive..." (*Antiquities* 15.7.4,5).

Herod the Great, a madman who murdered members of his own family and many rabbis, was also the greatest builder in the history of Israel. Herod's ambitious building projects are notable for their vast scope, monumental character, and unique style, and were found throughout his kingdom and far beyond it. In order to gain popularity among the Israelites and atone for his cruelty, Herod decided to rebuild the Temple in about 19 BCE. During Herod's reign, the city underwent extensive and luxurious renovations, presenting an imposing appearance. Both the temple and the Temple Mount have been expanded and rebuilt to form a particularly spectacular public domain. The priest historian Josephus managed to describe how magnificent it looked by saying, "Viewed from without, the Sanctuary had everything that could amaze either mind or eyes. Overlaid all round with stout plates of gold, the first rays of the sun it reflected so fierce a blaze of fire that those who endeavored to look at it were forced to turn away as if they had looked straight at the sun. To strangers as they approached it seemed in the distance like a mountain covered with snow; for any part not covered with gold was dazzling white..." (*The Jewish War*, p. 304). The fame of Jerusalem spread throughout the Roman Empire as more and more civilians came to visit the city.

#### 4. THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 of the Common Era (CE) left a void in the city and raised the question of whether the city would continue to serve as a beacon of religion. As a result, Judaism would undergo a process of decentralization whereby religious practices other than sacrifices at the Temple would become normative in local communities. The city would lie barren after 70 CE, until the Roman emperor Hadrian made a decision to rebuild the destroyed city and rename it as the Roman city of Aelia Capitolina. It would not be until the transition of the Roman Empire to Christianity in the fourth century, however, that the city would become a Christian city. The process by which this took place involves both the central figure in Christianity—Jesus of Nazareth—in the Christian Scriptures and the Christian emperor Constantine.

Christian tradition sets the origins of its attachment to Jerusalem in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' interaction with the city before it was destroyed by the Romans. According to these Gospel accounts, a young man riding on a donkey appeared and was identified as a potential threat to Rome. The people called him a prophet. Although he never attempted to raise an army to fight against Romans, he, Jesus, became a risk that the empire could not afford (Armstrong, 256-257). Thus, Jesus was regarded as an enemy of the state. Mocking Jesus as "the King of Jews," the Romans "began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a King.'" (Luke 23:2).

One of the earliest accounts about the figure of Jesus is the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament. According to scholars, the Gospel of Luke was written before 70 AD. The Gospel has been called the most beautiful book ever written. At its core is a notion of the perfect life, through the teachings of Christ and his salvation, and the lives of those gathered around him. St. Luke sees the life and mission of Jesus Christ as a visitation from God. According to Luke 18, Jesus anticipated that his death would occur as a way to achieve God's salvation. Luke wrote: "Then he took unto him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished. For he shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully entreated, and spitted on: And they shall scourge him, and put him to death: and the third day he shall rise again." (Luke 18:31-33). Jesus was first tried by a Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, then crucified alongside two other criminals: "And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left." (Luke 23:33).

The rise of Christianity began on the eve of the important battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 AD. The Roman emperor Constantine dreamed about an angel who showed him a red cross and told him in Greek, "By this sign thou shalt conquer." As predicted, Constantine defeated his imperial rival Maxentius at the battle and attributed his victory to the God of Christians (Armstrong 305). In the hope of legalizing Christianity as a major religion in the Roman Empire in 313 AD, Constantine began to build numerous shrines to Christian martyrs in Rome. In Jerusalem, meanwhile a revolution was in the air. Constantine's religious zeal paved the way for the transformation of Jerusalem into a holy city for Christianity. Up until that point, the majority of Christians in the Roman world did not necessarily accept that the divine could be found in a physical space. Christians in the first few centuries of the Common Era looked more for a metaphysical and spiritual pathway for their faith. In addition, many of the leaders in the church despised Jerusalem as the city of sin, the city of the murder of Christ. Theological conflicts and a powerful emperor would soon change the fate of Jerusalem forever (Armstrong, 306-307).

With the advent of Constantine's rule in the Roman Empire, however, Jerusalem would become part of the emperor's plan to give the empire more of a Christian character. Constantine sent his mother Helena to identify places in Jerusalem and the Holy Land that were associated with Jesus and other biblical figures. Helena arrived in Jerusalem and looked to the Gospel to help her decide where the holy places connected with Jesus would be found. According to the Gospel of John, "At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden, a new tomb... and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there." (19:41-42).

Following the order from the Emperor Constantine, the Construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre began. The Emperor decided to build a suitable shrine at this location, which was once a second century Roman holy place. The excavation of the larger site revealed the importance of two

holy sites within: the hill on which Jesus had been crucified and the nearby tomb in which he had been buried (Armstrong 318). Desiring to make this church the finest in the world, Constantine constructed a basilica of splendid beauty. Constantine's edifice of the Holy Sepulchre was completed in 336 AD. The Holy Sepulchre features at its center a 65-foot diameter rotunda, with a gilded dome above the excavated hole separated from the bulk of the rock. The Basilica extends from here to about 250 feet eastward, and around Calvary (the Crucifixion site) at its southern corridor. The length of the atrium and an adjacent corridor is 475 feet. For Eusebius, the only contemporary writer to record his impressions, the basilica was a place of wondrous beauty. It was lined inside and out with slabs of variegated marble and polished stone; the interior "was finished with carvings of panel work, and, like a great sea, covered the whole basilica with its endless swell, while the brilliant gold with which it was covered made the whole temple sparkle with rays of light." As the 12th century map shows, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is the spiritual center of Christendom and the most important center of a pilgrimage to the area. The layout of the church was designed to allow pilgrims to move from one church to another, their tour eventually leading to the Holy Sepulchre. Constantine transformed Jerusalem into a holy site for Christians (Armstrong, 319).

However, Christianity, the new Roman religion, was overthrown temporarily during the rise of Julian the Great in 361 AD. The following year, Julian, a sincere pagan who hoped to restore the worship of the Roman Pantheon, stopped in Jerusalem on his way to the invasion of Persia. In order to destroy the Christianization of the empire, he decreed that the Jews would be allowed to rebuild their temple. The Jews apparently accepted the task with enthusiasm, but their hopes were dashed less than a year later when Julian was killed in battle. With Julian's death, his protection disappeared (Armstrong, 341). As the centuries passed, the pagan temples on the Temple Mount gradually collapsed. The abandoned compound became overgrown with weeds, a constant reminder that -- according to Christian theology -- the old covenant between God and the Jews was void and the new covenant symbolized the emerging Christianity in Jerusalem (Armstrong 342).

In the sixth century, a new religious movement arose that would challenge the power of the Christian Byzantine empire in the Holy Land. This new religion emerged in the Arabian desert under the teachings of a merchant named Muhammad. Famous in Mecca for his integrity, he had long been concerned about the spiritual malaise he could discern in the city. Although Mecca had enjoyed unprecedented material prosperity, as a direct result, some old tribal values had been destroyed (Armstrong, 375).

During the reign of Muhammad, neither Jerusalem nor the Temple Mount was under Muslim control. The Qur'an, the central religious text of Islam, also makes no explicit mention of the city or its geographic location.

In 637 AD, however, five years after Muhammad's death, Caliph Umar, the leader of Islam, visited the city and the Temple Mount after Jerusalem and much of the Middle East had been conquered by Muslim armies. It was the beginning of an important era in the city's long history. He ordered the construction of a wooden mosque at a Byzantine structure at the southern end of the Temple Mount. Caliph Umar's aim was to change the character of the city -- from a Byzantine Christian city with many churches to a Muslim religious center and administrative center of his empire. He repaired the damaged walls of the Temple Mount and built two impressive sanctuaries on them: the mosque at the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque (Armstrong, 406) Now, he had a shrine built over a rock in the middle of the Temple Mount. The location is believed to be the central stone of the temple and the place where Muhammad led prayer at night.

Over the course of the early Islamic period, the buildings that Umar and the Umayyad Dynasty constructed on the Temple came to be associated with two specific chapters in the Qur'an: Surah 17 and Surah 53. A series of interpretations developed between the 7th and 11th centuries that connected these chapters of the Qur'an to the specific holy sites built by the early caliphs. The surah that was connected to the Al-Aqsa Mosque was Surah 17, which describes the Night Journey undertaken by Muhammad. According to this surah, one night, Muhammad flew to "the farthest mosque," or "masjid" in Arabic, on a mythical beast called Barak. The Al-Aqsa Mosque that was constructed in 705 AD thus came to be referred to as the Farthest Masjid, or Mosque, in this surah of the Qur'an. The of the Al-Aqsa Mosque shaped an important way for early Muslim rulers to connect the importance of Mecca to the historical significance of Jerusalem.

In the first few centuries of Islamic history, Surah 53 would be connected to Surah 17 in order to associate the Night Journey with a legend of ascent about the Prophet Muhammad: “Glory to Him who journeyed His servant by night, from the Sacred Mosque, to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts We have blessed, in order to show him of Our wonders. He is the Listener, the Beholder (Surah 17:1).” This meant that the Isra and the Miraj became two parts of the legend of the Night Journey. Surah 53, which calls for obligatory kneeling, has 62 verses associated with Mecca. The title of the chapter comes from the first verse of an oath by the stars. Chapter 53 refers to the position and manner of revelation to the heart of the noble prophet, just as Chapter 17 refers to the ascension of the noble prophet. According to Surah 53, Muhammad is said to have led other prophets in prayer in Jerusalem. He was accompanied by Jibr to heaven, ascending by a ladder or staircase (mi’raj). The importance of the ascent tradition, then, lies in the way that it connected Muhammad to the previous prophets of Judaism and Christianity and the way that it places Muhammad at the top of the concept of prophecy in the Holy City: “And your Lord best knows *those who are in the Heavens and the Earth*; and certainly we have made some of the prophets to excel others, and to Dawood we gave a Zabur (Suran 17:55).”

The Dome of the Rock was architecturally constructed to reflect the legend of Muhammad’s ascent.: “We might indeed have provided for those who [now] deny the Most Gracious roofs of silver for their houses, and [silver] stairways whereon to ascend. (Surah 44:33).” The building signifies the emergence of Islam as a new faith of the highest order, which was associated with the biblical traditions of Judaism and Christianity, but distinct from these earlier religions, especially Christianity. The dome’s immense size and lavish decoration may have been intended to rival Jerusalem’s Christian holy buildings, especially the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The idea of the supremacy of Islam was also conveyed through the Arabic inscriptions on the dome, which denounced the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. At the same time, these inscriptions also emphasized the unity of God and affirmed Jesus’ status as a prophet. These depictions of Muhammad’s ascent meant that the date of his journey came to be marked as one of the most significant occasions in the Islamic calendar.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, Jerusalem’s status as a religious center has contributed to its political importance, as well as its symbolic influence, but its religious status has also caused considerable controversy. The debate is always about who is more attached to the city and to whom Jerusalem is most important religiously, culturally, historically and politically. In all probability one would never be able to gauge the degree of attachment that an individual community feels toward the city, for attachment is psychological and thus highly subjective. Muslims, particularly Palestinian and Arab Islamists, recognize the religious significance of Jerusalem for Christians and Jews, but they emphasize Jerusalem’s Muslim characteristics and the rights of Muslims in this city, and their attachment to Jerusalem forms part of their doctrinal view of the city.

When we examine the role of politics in Jerusalem in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the importance of the religious traditions described herein continues to play an active part. Every stone in Jerusalem itself is a political weapon in the ancient struggle for possession of the Holy Land. No place is more sensitive than the large platform built by King Herod, known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif, the sacred sanctuary.

On June 7, 1967, Israeli Defense Forces paratroopers marched through the Old City toward the Temple Mount and the Western Wall, bringing Jerusalem’s holiest sites under Jewish control for the first time in 2000 years (Armstrong, 882). This was a joyous and momentous occasion for the people of Israel and the Jews of the world. Many people consider it a gift from God. In a statement at the Western Wall, Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan proclaimed Israel’s peaceful intent and pledged to preserve religious freedom for all faiths in Jerusalem: “To our Arab neighbors we extend, especially at this hour, the hand of peace. To members of the other religions, Christians and Muslims, I hereby promise faithfully that their full freedom and all their religious rights will be preserved. We did not come to Jerusalem to conquer the Holy Places of others” (Armstrong, 867). Within weeks, free



passage to Jerusalem became possible. Hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews flocked to the Old City to get a glimpse of one side of the Western Wall and touch its stones. For the first time since 1948, Muslims were allowed to pray at the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Christians came to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In a reunified Jerusalem, Jews, Christians and Muslims enjoyed religious freedom unheard of during the Jordanian occupation.

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