

Holy City of Islam

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ISLAM CONSIDERS itself to be rooted in Judaism and Christianity. "We believe in God and in what has been revealed to us," the Koran says. "We believe in what has been revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes; we believe in what has been delivered unto Moses and Jesus, and in what has been delivered unto the prophets from their God." To be a Moslem is not to believe simply that Mohammed is God's prophet. Rather, it is to believe in the revelations of God to all his prophets, of whom Mohammed is the last. Islam venerates Isaac as it venerates Ishmael, and Jesus as it venerates Mohammed.

It is in this sense that the Koran speaks of "the sanctified land," referring to the arrival of Moses and his people to the borders of the Land of Canaan. It is probably this, too, that explains why Jerusalem, before Mecca,

was chosen by Mohammed as the *qiblah*, or the place to which Moslems turn in order to pray. The Jewish and Christian love for Jerusalem runs in the religious blood of Islam. From its very roots, Islam venerates Jerusalem for the same reasons it is venerated in Judaism and Christianity. The pilgrim who wishes to visit Moslem holy places will pause in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as well as wonder at such specifically Moslem shrines as the Dome of the Rock, a masterpiece of early Islamic architecture, and the Al Aksa Mosque.

Just as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, reflecting the classical Christian medieval tradition, portrays Jerusalem as the mystical meeting place of the earthly and the divine, so, too, did the earlier Moslem mystics and philosophers view it. This probably explains why Islam never accorded Jerusalem a political status or made it a political capital. This abstraction of Jerusalem from worldly affairs by Islam, and its veneration as a divine city, is reflected in the Islamic tradition that relates how Moslems first came to Jerusalem: Rather than overpowering the city by military might, Islam's second caliph, Omar, traveled by camel with his servant until they reached Jerusalem and entered it peacefully, receiving it into the custody of Islam. On the journey, the tradition relates, Omar and his servant took turns riding the caliph's camel, thus symbolizing Omar's human humility before the city. The story symbolizes Islam's veneration of Jerusalem as a city above men, rather than an earthly city that can be conquered by man.

The Islamic view of Jerusalem as a mystic city is not simply a view inherited from Jews and Christians, since Islam itself sanctifies Jerusalem. The major Islamic event with which the city is associated is the miraculous ascension of the prophet Mohammed to the heavens. The

miracle is memorialized in two magnificent mosques on the Temple Mount.

The Dome of the Rock, built about 690 and the oldest existing Moslem monument, dominates the area. It stands on a plateau within an enclosed rectangular holy space, called the Haram esh-Sharif—the “Noble Sanctuary”—that, flanked by slender minarets, covers about a sixth of the Old City. The Dome of the Rock is octagonal in shape, covered with marble and glass mosaics in interlocking floral patterns on the inside and with blue and green ceramic tiles on the outside. The tiles, which range in color from turquoise to indigo, bear exquisite examples of the calligraphic art at which the Moslems excelled. Various verses of the Koran are set out; just beneath the dome is a verse specifically celebrating Mohammed’s miraculous ascension. The dome itself, set on a high drum, gleams above the horizon; it is covered with a gilded copper sheath that reflects the rays of the rising and setting sun.

Farther to the south stands the second of the mosques, Al Aksa, which commemorates Mohammed’s journey from Mecca to Jerusalem in preparation for his ascent to the heavens. Here the prophet is said to have left his legendary winged horse. The mosque is surmounted by a silver dome; in front of the main door is the fountain for ritual ablutions before prayers.

The Haram esh-Sharif and its holy places are no strangers to the violence that has marked Jerusalem. In 1982, an Israeli soldier was arrested after a shooting spree that left two dead and at least eleven wounded. In 1969, an arsonist set fire to Al Aksa, destroying a wooden pulpit placed there by Saladin after he recaptured Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187. (Saladin also restored and embellished other parts of the Haram

esh-Sharif; during Crusader times, Al Aksa Mosque had been the headquarters and stables of the Knights Templars.)

The importance to Islam of the miracle the mosques commemorate cannot be overstated; it is, in fact, the only miracle associated with Mohammed. In Mecca and its environs, Mohammed was the recipient of revelation, when divine knowledge was indirectly transmitted to him through the Angel Gabriel. The Jerusalem miracle turns the tables, however, by providing Mohammed with a direct vision of the divine foundations of the universe. In Mecca, Gabriel descended to Mohammed, but from Jerusalem Mohammed himself ascended to the heavens. Jerusalem is thus the gateway to the heavens and to divine knowledge, the medium through which to reach the divine—in short, the spiritual threshold of the divine paradise.

The Jerusalem miracle has broad implications. Mohammed, according to his own words, was only a human being like other human beings, and his ascension reflects the ability of all men to attain transcendental and divine knowledge. The miraculous achievement of Mohammed could be regarded as an achievement attainable by the rest of mankind: If men apply themselves to a devout life and to religious learning, they, too, may be able to achieve knowledge of the divine mysteries of the universe.

Jerusalem thus developed into Islam's center of sacred learning. The area around the mosques, from which Mohammed ascended to heaven, became the focal point of contemplative and religious education. Other schools and study centers proliferated around this central area.

Today, the whole area is filled with domes and pulpits, ornamental fountains and arcades, pilgrims' sta-

tions and square minarets celebrating various Islamic holy events. If a visitor stands in the center of the Haram esh-Sharif and looks west and north, most of the buildings he sees rising above the arcades will be those of religious schools, some of which are now private houses sheltering very old Moslem families. Due north, two still functioning schools occupy the greater length of the area; due west are vaults housing the tombs of Moslem religious teachers. One of these buildings contains the Aksa Library, with some very old and rare Moslem manuscripts; to the south is the Moslem Museum, with a collection of Islamic relics. The gate of the Haram esh-Sharif, with its archstones of alternate light- and dark-colored stones and its half dome set above a stalactite-decorated niche, is a good example of the eclectic Islamic architecture of the fourteenth century. (The entryway is often the most important element in buildings of this period.)

Outside the precincts of the mosques, throughout the Old City, lie no fewer than forty-nine religious schools and nineteen other establishments that doubled as schools and shrines or mosques. Most are now private homes, and visitors can glimpse only their embellished entrances as they stroll around the city.

Other evidences of Islamic Jerusalem are visible wherever one looks: The present city walls are Ottoman, built by Suleiman the Magnificent in the sixteenth century. Six of the present city gates, among them the Damascus Gate, the principal entrance to the Old City, were also built during this period. Throughout the city there are pilgrim caravansaries and schools, minarets and fountains dating from the Islamic Middle Ages. In Jerusalem, the paths of pilgrims, Christian, Jewish or Moslem, often cross.