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## THE HOLINESS OF JERUSALEM: ASSET OR BURDEN?

KAREN ARMSTRONG

*Since the 1967 war, Jerusalem and the Jewish holy places have acquired a new centrality even in the traditionally secular Labor Zionist vision. After noting a parallel shift toward religiosity among the early Christians following the excavation of the Holy Sepulchre, the author discusses the connection between sacred relics and identity as well as the impulse to demolish rival artifacts and claims. Drawing numerous examples from history and scripture to illustrate her points, the author traces the city's changing importance to the three faiths over the centuries, correlating the intensity of feeling with perceptions of threat or loss. Finally, she examines the differing concepts of holiness, contrasting the traditionally pluralist Muslim vision of holiness with Judaism's and Christianity's more exclusivist cult of the city's sanctity. The article ends with a discussion of David's conquest of Jerusalem, which leaves scope for greater inclusiveness than is generally assumed.*

IT IS AN ABIDING TRAGEDY THAT JERUSALEM, revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims as the "City of Peace," should so often in its long and complex history have been a city of war—and never more so than today, when it resembles a violent border town rather than a place of pilgrimage. Major feast days in all three faiths are marked by reinforcements of riot police while military helicopters hover noisily overhead. Jewish settlers, sporting the knitted *kippa* as a sign of their radical commitment, patrol the narrow streets of the Old City, openly displaying guns and pistols.

Since the signing of the Oslo accords, the holy city has witnessed intensified and horrific suicide bombing attacks, further land expropriations, and the bulldozing of Palestinian homes. The Likud government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has also authorized the Interior Ministry to tighten regulations relating to residency permits for the Palestinian inhabitants of Jerusalem, with such draconian effect that Israeli and Palestinian human rights groups have described the new measures as amounting to a "deportation" policy to limit the number of Palestinian residents in the city. As the political future of Jerusalem is bitterly contested (with Israelis chanting, like a mantra, that Jerusalem is the eternal and indivisible capital of their Jewish

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state, and the Palestinians equally insistent that *al-Quds* be the capital of their future state), it is surely ironic that the one fact on which all the contestants can agree, be they Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, is that the city is “holy” to them. How can a city that inspires such cruelty and injustice be holy? Given that all three monotheistic religions are committed to the ideals of benevolence and compassion, how can a city teeming with unholy activities be sacred?

### THE RISE OF A RADICAL RELIGIOSITY

Since the infusion of religion into politics is so often disastrous, it is understandable that many call for its exclusion from the debate about the future of the city. Once religion rears its ugly head, people seem to lose their wits, asserting that the city is so “sacred” that its future is nonnegotiable. It would indeed be desirable to lay aside the vexed question of Jerusalem’s holiness and conduct a rational discussion befitting the modern age, but this is not a realistic option.

The late twentieth century has seen a revival of religion on a global scale. The type of religiosity that is often—misleadingly—called “fundamentalism” has erupted in all the major world faiths and is largely dedicated to breaking down the secularist distinction between politics and religion. Issues of faith now frequently dominate the headlines in a way that would have been inconceivable in the 1960s, when, it was thought, secularization was an irreversible trend and, after centuries of persecution and holy war, religion was safely relegated to the private sphere. Nowhere has this religious renewal been more dramatic than in the Middle East. The Arab-Israeli conflict began, on both sides, as a secular dispute. Since the Six Day War of 1967, however, it increasingly has been transformed by an aggressive and utterly intransigent religious element. Today, on both sides, the people who have been most active for peace have been secularists and those most belligerently opposed to the Oslo accords have been religious.

As a result of this radical religiosity, the holiness of Jerusalem has acquired a new centrality that secularists cannot afford to ignore. Most of the early Zionists were either indifferent or hostile to the religious significance of Jerusalem. Zionism aimed to create a new kind of Jew, unfettered by a religion which, it was thought, had encouraged an unwholesome passivity, encour-

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aging Jews to await the Messiah instead of taking their destiny into their own hands. The spectacle of Jews clinging to the Western Wall and weeping symbolized everything that Zionism hoped to transcend. When Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, visited Jerusalem in 1898, he was repelled by “the musty deposits of two thousand years of inhu-

manity, intolerance and foulness” in the “reeking alleys” of the Old City. He vowed that the first thing the Zionists would do when they got control of

Jerusalem would be to tear most of it down, building an "airy, comfortable, properly sewerred, new city around the holy places." A few days later, he had changed his mind: he would build a new secular city outside the walls and leave the holy shrines in an enclave of their own. It was a perfect expression of the secularist ideal: religion must be relegated to a separate sphere, where it would rapidly become a museum piece.<sup>1</sup> In this spirit, even if for tactical reasons, the Zionists accepted the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947, in which Jerusalem was to be a *corpus separatum* under international control. Possession of the Holy City was not, at this stage, regarded as essential to the new Jewish state.

Even though Zionism remained a secular movement, Jerusalem continued to be an important symbol of holiness for religious Jews. There was also a small number of religious Zionists whose principal spokesman was Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, chief rabbi of Ashkenazi Jews in Jerusalem as of 1921. He believed that the messianic Redemption was imminent and that Jews would soon see their Temple rebuilt on the site occupied by the Dome of the Rock. During the British Mandate and the first years of the Jewish state, Rabbi Kook and his disciples were regarded by the overwhelming majority of Jews as harmless cranks. Israelis on the right, such as Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, might on occasion use the Western Wall, the last remaining relic of the Temple built by King Herod in the first century BCE, as a nationalist rallying point, but Begin's Herut party was in the political wilderness after the establishment of Israel in 1948. The new state made a clear distinction between religion and politics. Labor Zionism, secularist and socialist and with little time for traditional religion, was the dominant strain in Israeli political life. Its heroes were not Talmud scholars studying in the holy city, but the kibbutzniks in the collective farms of Galilee and the Negev. Although the Labor Zionists cultivated a devotion to the Land of Israel that often filled them with exaltation, most preferred to live in the new worldly metropolis of Tel Aviv; many shared Herzl's distaste for Jerusalem, seeing it as too redolent of a religion that had failed the Jewish people. As the Zionist theorist Nahum Sokolov remarked, "The point of gravity has shifted from the Jerusalem of the religious schools to the farms and agricultural schools, the fields and the meadows."<sup>2</sup>

This attitude changed overnight after the Israeli conquest of the Old City during the 1967 war. On 5 June, Israelis were reunited with the Western Wall; since the partition of the city in 1948, Jews had been unable to visit East Jerusalem and the Old City, which was under Jordanian control, just as Palestinians had been forbidden entrance to Israeli-controlled West Jerusalem. On the day of the conquest, Israelis experienced their return to the Western Wall with an astonishing degree of emotion. Atheistic generals embraced one another beside the wall; tough young paratroopers clung to the great stones and wept. Within hours, politicians such as Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan were talking about the "holiness" of Jerusalem and vowing never to leave the holy places again. By the end of June, the

Israeli government had annexed the city, defying international opinion that officially still held Jerusalem to be a *corpus separatum* according to the United Nations partition resolution of 1947.

Henceforth Jerusalem and its Jewish holy places acquired a new centrality in the Zionist vision. The 1970s saw the rise of a new form of religious Zionism, which has become increasingly powerful. Based on the once despised ideas of Rabbi Kook and his son Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, this movement is passionately and aggressively devoted to sacred space. It is most fully expressed in the Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), a group committed to building illegal settlements in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 in the belief that they will hasten the advent of the Messiah and the redemption of the whole world. Gush members insist that Labor Zionism, with its secularist ethos, is bankrupt and that it is their own settlers who express the old pioneering ideals of the kibbutzniks. Gush Emunim attracts many Israelis, who may not share its religious beliefs but who are ready to endorse its hard line. Nor does the movement neglect Jerusalem: in 1984, it was discovered that a group of extremist Gush members had plotted to blow up the Dome of the Rock to clear the way for the rebuilding of the Temple when the Messiah comes.

Such ideas were dismissed by most Israelis as madness in 1984, but they have gradually gained support. Gershom Salomon, founder of the Temple Mount Faithful, has campaigned since 1967 for the Haram al-Sharif to come under Jewish control and for the Temple to be rebuilt on the site of the Dome of the Rock. A 1996 opinion poll showed that more than 30 percent of the Israeli public supported his cause and that 3.4 percent would vote for Salomon's movement in an election, which would win it four seats in the Knesset.<sup>3</sup> Such views are shared by Netanyahu, who in 1996 sent by mistake as a Christmas gift to the Palestinian head of the Greek Catholic Church a silver relief map with a Jewish temple in place of the Dome of the Rock. The present had been intended for somebody more sympathetic to such a vision of Jerusalem's future, and the prime minister was forced to apologize: "We didn't notice that al-Aqsa was missing from the map."<sup>4</sup>

In fact, the notion of rebuilding the Temple used to be taboo. The fanatical devotion of a minority of Zealots to Jerusalem and its Temple had pushed the Jews of Palestine into a fatal war with Rome in 66 CE, which culminated in the total destruction of city and Temple in 70. A half-century later, it was chiefly devotion to Jerusalem that inspired the Bar Kochba revolt, which the Romans put down in 135 only after devastating 985 villages and killing 580,000 Jewish soldiers and innumerable Jewish civilians. Given this unacceptable loss of Jewish life, the rabbis who rebuilt Judaism after these catastrophes felt that their people could not afford to dream of rebuilding the Temple. Henceforth, belligerent talk of a new Temple was forbidden. The task of building it was reserved to the Messiah alone, and the attempt to hasten the messianic Redemption by planning a new Jewish sanctuary was regarded as sacrilege.

But taboos can be broken. Since the 1980s, the idea of rebuilding the Temple on the Haram al-Sharif, Islam's third holiest site, has been voiced so often that the Israeli public has become accustomed to it, and the idea is given tacit support by the establishment. The Temple Institute in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City has on permanent display the vestments, musical instruments, and ritual vessels that will be used in the new Temple; it receives grants from the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and Jerusalem City Hall.

### SACRED RELICS AND IDENTITY

It is, therefore, no longer possible to ignore the holiness of Jerusalem; it has now become a key issue in the conflict, and this means that we have to understand the dynamics of the sacred. The fact that, against all reason and prudence, this devotion should have surfaced so violently in a movement such as Zionism, which was originally so firmly committed to the secularist ideal, shows that it is never safe to imagine that we have outgrown the religious passion for sacred space.

Nor is this the first time in Jerusalem's history that such a reversal has occurred. The early Christians, for example, had also thought that they had gone beyond the need for a primitive dependence upon holy places and shrines: only pagans and Jews, they considered, claimed to find God in a physical location. Had not Jesus said that Christians no longer would encounter the divine on such holy mountains as Zion, but could worship God wherever they happened to be in spirit and truth?<sup>5</sup> This view changed abruptly, however, in 325, when Emperor Constantine, recently converted to Christianity from paganism and, not sharing this lofty disdain for sacred space, gave Bishop Makarios of Jerusalem permission to dig up the tomb of Jesus, which, it was believed, lay beneath the foundations of the Temple of Aphrodite. When, two years later, the pagan temple had been demolished and a little rock tomb unearthed, the find stunned the entire Christian world. Within six years, we read of pilgrims walking to Jerusalem from as far away as France simply to pray at Christ's sepulcher. Jerusalem very quickly became the center of the Christian world, as can be seen in medieval maps.

There are similarities in these two instances that reveal something very important about the devotion to holy cities and sacred space. But cerebral considerations in both the early Christian and the Zionist cases were dashed by an unexpected reunion with a sacred relic from their past. Both had recently emerged from centuries of persecution: the Christians at the hands of the Roman empire and the Jews in Christian Europe. Both had suddenly acquired a wholly new political importance and power: the Christians since the conversion of Constantine and the Zionists with the creation of the State of Israel. Both now had an entirely new place in the world and had to build a new identity. Both—and this is an important point—made a profound identification with their holy relic.

Thus the Christians could see themselves in the little rock tomb, which rose phoenixlike from the ruins of the pagan temple. The excavation seemed to repeat the miracle of Jesus's resurrection, rising again, as it were, from His own untimely grave. As Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea and Constantine's religious adviser, explained, the emergence of the tomb from Aphrodite's temple symbolized the Christians' own recent resurgence and imminent victory over paganism.<sup>6</sup> It was an image of the new Christian identity. In rather the same way in 1967, the Israelis saw themselves in the Western Wall. Like the Jewish people who had almost been exterminated in Europe, the Wall was a ruin; but, again like the Jewish people, it was also a survivor, having managed to withstand two thousand years of turbulent history in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup>

Sadly, the construction of a new self often entails the destruction of rivals who appear to threaten it. Eusebius certainly saw the demolition of the pagan temple and the building of a new Christian shrine on the site of Jesus's tomb as part of a holy war against paganism.<sup>8</sup> The new Church of the Resurrection also symbolized the defeat of Judaism at the hands of Christianity, and the Christians throughout the period of Byzantine hegemony kept the Temple in ruins. So crucial was this to their self-image that when the Emperor Julian, who had abjured Christianity and embraced the old paganism,

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attempted to rebuild the Jewish Temple in 360 (an event not mentioned in the Talmud: the great rabbis maintained a disapproving silence), the Christians were distraught. The presence of Jewish construction workers on the Temple Mount seemed to undermine the foundations of their faith. After Julian's death, the plan to rebuild the Temple was abandoned, and the Christians of Jerusalem began an aggressive new building program, creating Christian facts on the

ground to ensure that there would never be any question in the future of the city falling into the hands of their rivals.

In the Jewish case, too, identification with sacred antiquity led to the demolition of rival claims. On the night of Saturday, 10 June 1967, after the armistice had been signed, the 619 inhabitants of the Maghribi Quarter beside the Western Wall were given three hours to evacuate their homes. Then the bulldozers came and reduced this historic district, one of the earliest of the Jerusalem *awqaf*, to rubble. This was only the first act in a long and continuing process of "urban renewal" in Jerusalem, a renewal based on the dismantling of historic Arab Jerusalem and in which demolition, archaeology, and a selective preservation of antiquities all play their part in imposing a new Jewish identity on the city. In the holy climate of Jerusalem, archaeology, building, demolition, and antiquities have never been neutral; they become sacred because they are symbols of a self that is felt to be fragile. This is especially true during periods of transition, when people are struggling to create a new identity.

When people visit their holy places, they not only are encountering their God but often have what seems to be a moving encounter with themselves. Nor should it be surprising that the devotion to sacred space is bound up so profoundly with the experience of the self. In all the great world faiths, the divine or the sacred is not something experienced only as transcendent and “out there”; it also is sensed in the ground of the being of each individual. The devotion to holy places seems to answer some essential psychological need. Historians of religion tell us that it is the earliest and most universal form of religious expression, found in all cultures and taking remarkably similar forms. It seems to be one of the means by which men and women find their place in the world, spiritually as well as physically. Turning toward a holy place—which is regarded as the center of one’s world—in prayer helps us to orient ourselves, find our own center, reorder our priorities, and remind ourselves of our true direction.

We have not even managed to desacralize the secular world entirely. Whatever our theological beliefs, many of us have special places that are important to us. These may be associated with a loved one or an event with far-reaching significance in our lives—places where we feel most intensely alive and in touch with the deeper currents of life and thus in some sense “sacred” to our identity. Nearly all the great world faiths have places, rivers, or cities that in some way define the sense of the sacred and of the self. For Jews, Christians, and Muslims, Jerusalem has been such a defining place.

### A SHIFTING CENTRALITY OVER TIME

The discussion about Jerusalem’s future often uses history as a weapon, arguing fiercely about who was there first. Each side has derided the historical claim of the other. Thus, Palestinians point out that outside the Bible there is no evidence that David’s Kingdom and Solomon’s Temple ever existed. Israelis pour scorn on the story of the Prophet’s ascension to heaven from the Haram al-Sharif and insist that Islam’s real holy places are in Arabia. But this, it seems to me, is to miss the point. Places are holy not only because a formative event happened there.

It is true that Jerusalem is holy to Christians because it is where Jesus was believed to have died and risen again, thus giving birth to the new faith. But Jerusalem is not connected with any of the events of the Exodus from Egypt, the founding myth of Israel. The city is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah, the first five most sacred books of the Bible. The first time the city is specifically mentioned in the Bible, it appears as enemy territory.<sup>9</sup> Jerusalem did not figure in Israelite religion until King David conquered it from the Jebusites some three thousand years ago. In the same way, the formative events of Islam happened in Mecca and Medina in the Arabian Hijaz. But for all this, Jews and Muslims, as well as Christians, found their God in Jerusalem and it became holy to them, expressive of their religious and physical identity and place in the world.



It is noticeable in Jerusalem's history that the city became especially important to a people after they had lost it. Thus, Jerusalem did not become really central to the religion of Israel until the city and its Temple were destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE and its people were deported to Babylon. Until that time, it had not been the only Israelite capital, and some had felt it was tainted by pagan practice. But when the Jews were permitted by King Cyrus of Persia to return to their ruined city in 539 BCE and to rebuild their Temple, Jerusalem gradually became the spiritual focus of Jews all over the world, even though most Jews elected to continue to live in the Diaspora.

Similarly, although Jerusalem had been the first *qibla* of Muslim prayer and had always been of great spiritual importance to Muslims, especially under the Umayyads, there was a new upsurge of devotion to *al-Quds* after Saladin won the city back for Islam in 1187. The extraordinary beauty and architectural brilliance of the great *madrasas* built around the Haram al-Sharif by the Mamluks made this holy place an intensive center of study, prayer, and philanthropy in quite a new way. But while the *madrasas* yearn architecturally toward the great holiness of the Haram,<sup>10</sup> they also reflect the new fear that characterized the Muslim love of Jerusalem after the Crusades. Crouching protectively round the Haram, the *madrasas* can be seen as a bulwark between its vulnerable sanctity and a hostile world.

This, perhaps, explains the intensity of the struggle for Jerusalem today, when two peoples who recently have faced immense threat cling to Jerusalem more tenaciously than ever. Having narrowly escaped extermination in the death camps of Europe, Jews see Jewish Jerusalem as a symbol of their revived but still fragile self. Many Jews, still traumatized by the Holocaust, cannot believe that they are witnessing the height of Jewish political power. Some behave as though it were still 1939, the period of greatest Jewish weakness. Like their forebears in 539 BCE, they are in the first flush of their return to Zion and are as antagonistic as their ancestors to any perceived threat.

In a very different way, the Palestinians also have experienced an annihilation, having been wiped off the map. For the rest of the Arab and Muslim world, the disaster of Palestine symbolizes their ongoing, humiliating defeat at the hands of the Western world. Having lost everything else, the loss of *al-Quds* becomes an unthinkable catastrophe for the Palestinians. Further, surrounded by the Jewish settlements belligerently planted on expropriated Arab land, Jerusalem and the Haram al-Sharif have become a symbol of the beleaguered Palestinian identity. There is thus a profound identification with the threatened city. Feeling Jerusalem slipping daily from their grasp, the holy city has become more "sacred" to Palestinians—be they Muslim or Christian—than ever.

This was very clear during the "tunnel affair" in September 1996, when, against the recommendation of his security advisers, Netanyahu gave permission for a new entrance to an archaeological tunnel running alongside

the Haram al-Sharif to be cut, leading directly in the heart of the Muslim Quarter of the Old City. There was immediate outrage, violence, and riots in which eighty-five people died and 1,500 were injured. There was talk of the tunnel violating the very "soul of Palestine." Israeli spokesmen tried to make light of the affair, pointing out that the tunnel did not encroach on the Haram itself. But, as we have seen, archaeology has not been a neutral activity in Jerusalem: since the time of Constantine, it has been a way of staking a claim in the city and undermining the presence of a rival.

The Palestinian distress should have reminded Israelis of the behavior of their own ancestors, who had reacted in exactly the same way when *their* foreign rulers had violated *their* holy places in the past. When the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes had entered the Temple's inner sanctum and ransacked the Temple treasury, this led to full-scale revolt. When the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate brought military standards sporting the bust of the emperor, who was revered as a god, into the Holy City in 26 CE, Jews marched in a body to his residence in Caesarea and proved that they were ready to die rather than permit this insult to their Temple. It was in vain that the Romans pointed out that the offending standards only had been parked in the Antonia Fortress—*beside* but not actually *in* the sacred precincts. So deep was the identification of the Jewish people with their sanctuary that they experienced any penetration of their sacred space—however proximate—as a rape of the nation.

The fact that the connection between Jewish and Palestinian experiences was not made is significant. In the Torah, the holiness of the Temple and the Land of Israel is seen as essentially bound up with the sanctity of the individual, even the "stranger" who does not belong ethnically or religiously. Thus in the Holiness Code of Leviticus, amidst all the regulations about the Temple cult and the farming of the sacred land, we find such stern admonitions as this: "If a stranger lives with you in your land, do not molest him. You must treat him as one of your own people and love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt."<sup>11</sup> Jews are commanded to use their own past sufferings (as strangers in Egypt) to help them to identify with others, not to justify committing further injustice.

### SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SANCTITY

Instead of continuing the fruitless debate about the historicity of King David or who was in Jerusalem first, it might be helpful to consider exactly what the various traditions have meant when they have claimed that Jerusalem is "holy" to them. Religion is not simply about experiencing a warm glow when visiting sacred shrines, nor is it solely about building an identity. Religion must have an ethical dimension. All the great world faiths insist that the only valid test of true religiosity is that it issue in practical compassion, a virtue which, far from building up a sense of self, forces us to modify the demands of the clamorous, grasping, and frightened ego. The Buddha said

that the adept, after achieving enlightenment, must not linger on the mountaintop, relishing the sensation, but must return to the marketplace and there practice compassion for all living beings. The monotheistic faiths have also stressed the paramount importance of love of neighbor and respect for the sacred rights of others. This virtue also has been central to the cult of Jerusalem.

From the very earliest times, possibly even before the conquest by King David, Jerusalem's holiness was inextricably bound up with the quest for social justice. This was the case throughout the ancient Near East. At the dawn of civilization, every city was in some sense "holy." Its god was believed to dwell in the temple; there he or she established the divine order of peace and security within the city walls. One of the king's sacred duties was to fortify the city against its external foes, but this was pointless if iniquitous governments created internal enemies. Thus, the king's chief job was to establish on earth the justice and order that characterized the divine realm, where the gods dwelt. He would thus bring heaven to earth. In his code of law, Hammurabi claims that he was appointed by the gods "to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak."<sup>12</sup>

This ethos also can be found in the Hebrew psalms, many of which were connected to the Jerusalem cult. The King of Judah, who was crowned in the Temple, had to swear on his coronation to "defend the poorest, save the children of those in need, and crush their oppressors."<sup>13</sup> His task was to impose the rule of God and to ensure that God's own justice prevailed in the land. If there was justice in the kingdom, there would be peace, harmony, and fertility.<sup>14</sup> God would then provide the people of Jerusalem with all the security they needed; the city would be "God-protected for ever."<sup>15</sup> But there could be no security, no peace (*shalom*) if there were no "righteousness" (*tzedek*) in Israel.

The sages, prophets, and Psalmists constantly reminded the people that Jerusalem could not be a holy city of peace if it were not also a city of

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*The sages, prophets, and Psalmists constantly reminded the people that Jerusalem could not be a holy city of peace if it were not also a city of righteousness.*

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*tzedek.* Thus, from the very earliest days, the cult of Jerusalem's sanctity was bound up with the quest for social justice. Nobody could have been more devoted to Jerusalem than the Prophet Isaiah, who was active in the holy city in the eighth century BCE. Yet his prophecy, as it has come down to us, begins with what seems like a denunciation of the whole Jerusalem cult. Isaiah imagines God complaining that he is weary of the endless sacrifices, sickened by the

stench of the sacrificial victims, irritated by the endless throng of worshipers tramping through the Temple courts. Why? Because the people of Jerusalem were not taking care of the widows, the poor, the orphans, and the oppressed.<sup>16</sup> No decorous liturgy or elaborate buildings could compensate for the lack of justice in Zion.

The worst atrocities in the history of Jerusalem have occurred when people have put the desire to possess the holy city and gain access to its great sanctity ahead of the paramount duty of social justice and respect for the rights of others. This is particularly evident in the various conquests of the city. The name *Rushalimum* first appears in an Egyptian text in about 1800 BCE; it probably means "Shalem [the Syrian god of the setting sun] has founded." Before the city was dedicated to the God of historical monotheism, it was a center of pagan worship for the indigenous people of Canaan. Thus, every time Jews, Christians, and Muslims utter the word "Jerusalem," they should remember that the city was holy to other people before them, and, because they are all committed officially to the ideals of compassion and justice, the integrity of their tenure in the holy city will depend upon the way they treat their predecessors.

The nadir of Jerusalem's history came in 1099, when the Crusaders from Western Europe conquered the city in a ghastly bloodbath. Some 30,000 Jews and Muslims were killed in two days. One admiring eyewitness records that blood came up to the horses' knees in the Haram al-Sharif. Perhaps the most exemplary conquest occurred in 638 CE, when Caliph 'Umar took possession of the holy city for Islam. Mindful of the Qur'anic injunctions to respect the People of the Book, he ensured that the Christians remain in secure possession of their holy places and enjoy full religious liberty. 'Umar also invited the Jews, who had always been forbidden to reside permanently in Jerusalem while it was under Christian rule, to return to their holy city. Seventy families from Tiberias came to settle in Jerusalem, establishing a quarter for themselves beside the Muslim community at the foot of their old Temple Mount. 'Umar also purified the site of the ancient Jewish Temple, which, as we have seen, had remained in ruins for nearly six centuries; in recent years, the Christians had used it as the city garbage dump. 'Umar built a simple wooden mosque at the southern end of the cleared platform, where al-Aqsa Mosque now stands. For this piety, the Muslims were hailed by some Jews during the seventh century as the precursors of the Messiah.

### AN INCLUSIVE NOTION OF HOLINESS

'Umar's conquest shows that from the very beginning there was a critical difference between the Muslim concept of holiness and that of the Jews and Christians, whose cult of Jerusalem's sanctity was essentially exclusive. As we have seen, Christians would not allow their rivals, be they pagans or Jews, either to live in the city or maintain holy places and shrines there. In a very different way, the cult of Jerusalem's holiness became exclusive in Judaism. The Hebrew word *qaddosh*, which is usually translated as *holy*, means *separate*, *other*. Jews were to be a holy people because they dwelt apart from non-Jews; they celebrated the sanctity of something by marking it off from everything else; thus, in dietary matters, milk must be separated from meat, the Sabbath from the rest of the week. By this ritual isolation, Jews

would symbolically place themselves near to the holy God who was utterly "other" (*qaddosh*) and separate from all other realities. Thus, the sanctity of the Temple was celebrated by a series of separations and exclusions; each one of its courts was holier than the last and therefore forbidden to an increasing number of people. Gentiles (non-Jews) could enter the outermost court but a balustrade forbade them to go further on pain of death. Jews could go further toward the center of holiness, but women and men separated; women had a precinct of their own on the outskirts of sanctity, close to the Court of the Gentiles. Male Jews could enter the Court of the Israelites, but not the Court of the Priests nor the Hekhal, the Cult Hall. Finally, only the high priest could enter the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies, and that only once a year, on Yom Kippur.

Muslims have a more inclusive notion of holiness. The mosque is not separated from ordinary life as the Temple was: it is also a center for political, military, and social life. Trees, forbidden on the Temple Mount, are grown in Muslim sanctuaries, birds can fly into the mosque, which welcomes the world into its precinct. This is part of *tawhid*, the sacralization of the whole of existence: all things must be brought into the ambit of the holy. In the case of Jerusalem, this holiness meant that other peoples must be welcomed. The story of the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey to Jerusalem and his Ascension to the Divine Throne from the Haram al-Sharif is a story of pluralism. First recounted in the *Sirah* of Muhammad ibn Ishaq (d. 767), it tells us that the Prophet was conveyed—probably in spirit—from the *Ka'bah* in Mecca to the site of the old Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. There he was welcomed by all the great prophets of the past, and Muhammad preached to them. Then he began his ascent to the Divine Presence through the seven heavens. In each heaven, he met prophetic predecessors: Moses and Aaron, Jesus and John the Baptist, Enoch, and, at the threshold of the divine sphere, Abraham. Muhammad talked with these prophets, took advice from them, especially from Moses. It is a story of religious unity, dialogue, and respect for other traditions. It also shows, as does the adoption of Jerusalem as the first *qibla*, Muhammad yearning to bring his people into the heart of the monotheistic family from what was at that time the pagan isolation of Arabia. This plural vision was preserved in the devotion on the Haram al-Sharif where, by the ninth century CE, there were shrines dedicated to David, Solomon, and Jesus, as well as shrines commemorating Muhammad's Night Journey.

The story also shows Muhammad linking, in his own person, the sanctity of Mecca with that of Jerusalem. When people object that Jerusalem is not as holy to Islam as Mecca or Medina, they fail to understand the Muslim notion of sacred space. In the Qur'anic vision, there is only one God and one religion made manifest in many forms. So, too, there is one sacred place—Mecca—from which all subsequent holy places derive their sanctity. The Prophet's journey from the *Ka'bah* to Jerusalem, al-Aqsa Mosque, symbolized this divinely established connection between the two holy cities. This link was celebrated in the *fada'il al-Quds*, the traditions praising the excel-

lence of Jerusalem, which began to be collected during the Umayyad period. Maxims attributed to the Prophet Muhammad say that on the Last Day, paradise would be established in Jerusalem like a bride, and the *Ka'bah* and the Black Stone would come from Mecca to Jerusalem, which was the ultimate destination of the whole of humanity.<sup>17</sup> In Abbasid times, the link between the cities was celebrated in local lore. During the month of the hajj to Mecca, on the night of the vigil on the plain of Arafat, it was said that the water from the holy well of Zamzam, near the *Ka'bah*, came underground to the Pool of Siloam, in Jerusalem, and there was a special festival there that night. In the early eleventh century, Muslims who could not make the hajj would gather in Jerusalem during the days of pilgrimage.

It is sometimes said that Muslims did not value Jerusalem; they never made it their administrative capital. But Muslims have usually kept administration and holiness separate. Medina remained the first capital of the Muslims, not Mecca. In any case, Jerusalem would have been an unsuitable capital because until the Crusades it remained a predominantly Christian city, albeit with an important Muslim shrine. This was due not to Muslim indifference but to Muslim tolerance.

An arresting instance of Muslim respect for the holy places of the other monotheistic traditions concerns the Western Wall, which had not been a holy place for the Jews until the sixteenth century. Jews may have had a small synagogue in the vicinity of the Wall during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, but until the end of the Mamluk era, the main focus of Jewish piety in Jerusalem was the Mount of Olives. Jews would hold big rallies there on the principal feast days. The Prophet Ezekiel had seen the Divine Presence leave Jerusalem over the Mount of Olives after the destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar, and the Jews would pray there for this Presence to return. We hear of no devotions at the Western Wall. When the Italian Jew Obadiah da Bertinero visited the Holy City in 1487, he was impressed by the massive stones in the Wall but felt no special religious emotion.<sup>18</sup>

The gradual collapse of the Mamluk empire, however, initiated a change. In Palestine, the authorities no longer could control the bedouin, and it probably became unsafe for Jews to congregate in the open country on the Mount of Olives. During this time, Jews may have begun to gather at the Western Wall instead, a suitable site since it was a last link with the Temple. We do know that during the 1530s, while the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent was building the magnificent walls around Jerusalem, he issued an edict permitting Jews to have a place of prayer at the Western Wall. It is said that the court architect Sinan, who was working on the Damascus Gate, designed the small prayer enclave, excavating downward to give the Wall height and building a wall parallel to it to separate the Jewish oratory from the Maghribi Quarter.<sup>19</sup>

Suleiman was praised in Jewish legend for this good deed. His motives were not entirely disinterested, however. There was bellicose talk in Europe about a new Crusade in Jerusalem at this time, and the sultan wanted to for-

tify the city (hence, the construction of new fortifications) and attract friendly inhabitants, such as the Jews, to help defend it. Nevertheless, his gift to the Jewish community is an example of cooperation between Judaism and Islam that would be unthinkable today.

A rather similar spirit may, perhaps, be discerned in the story of King David's conquest of Jerusalem. The Israelite religion practiced by David had not yet developed the exclusiveness that would characterize some aspects of the later religion of Judaism. In 1996, the Israelis decided to celebrate the 3000th anniversary of King David's conquest of Jerusalem. This was widely seen as a blatant publicity stunt to advertise the Jewish claim to Jerusalem. The celebrations fell flat. But in fact, the biblical account of David's conquest<sup>20</sup> is not so antithetical to the Palestinian cause as many people assume. David, who was famous for his wholesale slaughter of such peoples as the Edomites and the Philistines, seems to have been a just and merciful conqueror of Jerusalem. We read of no massacres of the Jebusite inhabitants of the city, no destruction of their property, no attempt to interfere with their religious practices. The Bible carefully records that David simply conquered the *citadel* of Zion, in what amounted to a palace coup, leaving the town beside the citadel intact. The first time we read about Jerusalem in the Bible, we are told that the people of Judah still—some time after David—lived side by side with the Jebusites.<sup>21</sup> David's wife Bathsheba may have been a Jebusite woman, and, if so, their son, the great King Solomon, would have had Jebusite blood: it was only later that Jews were forbidden to intermarry with gentiles.<sup>22</sup> When David decided to build an altar to his God on the estate of Arauneh, who may have been the last Jebusite king, he did not simply expropriate the land, but gave Arauneh a fair price, and Arauneh provided the first sacrifice there.<sup>23</sup> Thus the holy place, which today is so bitterly disputed by Jews and Muslims, began with an act of cooperation between the Kingdom of Israel and the indigenous population of the holy land.

Today Jewish fundamentalists who claim that the land is so "holy" that they need not respect Palestinian and Muslim rights are flying in the face of their own most sacred traditions. They have forgotten the elementary religious principle that the holiness of a city does not depend solely upon the sanctity of its shrines but also on the behavior of its inhabitants. A city cannot be holy if it is not ruled with justice. Expropriating land, torturing, destroying property, threatening other people's holy places, ejecting people from their ancestral homes, and depriving them of essential human rights cannot be justified in Jewish tradition by the overriding sanctity of Jerusalem, because holiness is also and inescapably a moral imperative to justice. A city can be made holy or unholy by its citizens every day. Today, the violation of basic principles of Israelite and Jewish religion is a desecration indeed.

## NOTES

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4. Quoted in Con Coughlin, *A Golden Basin Full of Scorpions: The Quest for Modern Jerusalem* (London, 1997), p. 240.
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6. Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, 3.28.
7. Meir Ben Dov, *The Western Wall* (New York: Adama Books, 1986), pp. 73, 146-8.
8. Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, 3.27.
9. Josh. 15:63; cf. Judg. 1:21.
10. Michael Hamilton Burgoyne and D. S. Richards, *Mamluk Jerusalem: An Architectural Survey* (London: World of Islam Festival Trust with Scorpion Publishing, 1987).
11. Lev. 19:33-34.
12. J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 164.
13. Ps. 72:4.
14. Ps. 9:10-16.
15. Ps. 48:8.
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17. Quoted in Guy Le Strange, *Palestine Under the Moslems: A Description of Syria and the Holy Land from AD 650 to AD 1500* (London: AMS Press, 1890), pp. 164-65.
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19. Ben Dov, *The Western Wall*, pp. 33-36, 60; F. E. Peters, *Jerusalem and Mecca: The Typology of the Holy City in the Near East* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1986), pp. 126-31.
20. See 2 Sam. 5:6-10; 1 Chron. 11:24.
21. Josh. 15:63; Judg. 1:21.
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23. 1 Chron. 21.