
DECEMBER 19, 2017

Jerusalem in the Islamic Imagination

DERYA LITTLE

There is no story of salvation in Islam because the climax is not the Incarnation, but the mere example of the “ideal man.” There is no grace to save us from the stain passed on by Adam and Eve because there is no such thing as original sin. If a Christian reads the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, he will see the Lord’s progressive plan to save mankind. There are countless sinful people, disobedient prophets, and fallen nations. But in the midst of all the failure and rampant sin, the God of Abraham slowly weaves the tapestry of history until the Son of God becomes man.

Islam does not acknowledge original sin, grace, Trinity or Incarnation. Allah, the unreachable creator, only demands obedience. If man falls, it is because man failed to obey. Reaching heaven is a constant struggle to balance the good deed against sins. Because Allah is so distant and demands perfect obedience, then the constant failure of human beings can only be redeemed by other human beings. Forgiveness is only for Allah on the other side of death, and grace is a hollow concept.

In the Muslim mind, the history of nations is similar to the salvation of man. When a Muslim reads the Old Testament, or learns about Judaism, all he sees is a nation that failed time and again to obey the commands of Allah. There is no excuse for this

failure. It is sinful, shameful, and disgraceful. It is not an occasion to acknowledge that without grace all will fail.

One such command Allah gave the Jews was to protect Jerusalem and the surrounding sacred lands. Muhammad never traveled to Jerusalem, yet today Muslims consider it a sacred city and will resist any attempt to [recognize it as the capital of Israel](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/uncertainty-anger-as-trump-keeps-alive-dispute-over-moving-us-embassy-to-jerusalem/2017/12/05/e514b852-d9ab-11e7-b859-fb0995360725_story.html?utm_term=.bc4b0172dad3) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/uncertainty-anger-as-trump-keeps-alive-dispute-over-moving-us-embassy-to-jerusalem/2017/12/05/e514b852-d9ab-11e7-b859-fb0995360725_story.html?utm_term=.bc4b0172dad3). Decades of war and conquests that eventually led to the Crusades all revolved around this ancient metropolis. Yet the failure of Jews to protect the city is not the only reason why Jerusalem will remain a source of conflict between Israelis and the surrounding Muslim population.

There are also two distinctive incidents directly involving Muhammad himself that renders Jerusalem a must-have for Muslims. The first one is that Jerusalem was the first place Muslims directed their prayer, and the second is Muhammad's mystical visit to Jerusalem known as Miraj.

Jerusalem: Center of Monotheism

Soon after Muhammad conquered Mecca, Muslim prayers were directed towards Jerusalem. Therefore, long before the [Kaaba](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaaba) (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaaba>) in Mecca became the direction of all worship, it was Jerusalem that was exalted among all cities—doubtlessly because Muhammad knew it was the center of monotheistic religion. Muslims henceforth began to believe Jerusalem should forever be under the banner of Islam. This is why the true invaders of Jerusalem were not Muslims but the Crusaders and the Jews. Making matters worse, the invaders defiled this holy city with their corrupt and perverse ways.

Living in a city of commerce and trade, Muhammad was exposed

to Judaism and Christianity, and the pivotal role Jerusalem played as the center for Jewish worship and as the location of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Since the central claim of Islam is that Jews and Christians corrupted Allah's message, Muhammad's followers would have to fulfill the mission that was entrusted to earlier prophets whose words went unheeded.

This belief is based on the notion that Jerusalem was given to the prophets of Allah starting with Adam, not to the Jews as God's chosen people. The Holy Land should be passed on to those who lived in accordance with Allah's will, something the Jews and the Christians have failed to do. This mission to reconquer Jerusalem became even more important because the Israelites failed to protect the land after Kings David and Solomon, who, Muslims claim, ruled with Sharia Law. The Jews had declined to fight to defend Jerusalem, and because of their cowardice they lost the Holy Land.

Muhammad's Magical Mystical Tour

The second reason why Jerusalem and the surrounding lands are important to Muhammad and his Umma (or Islamic community) until the end times is the Miraj.

The literal translation of Miraj is "ascension," which refers to the night Muhammad claimed he traveled to Jerusalem and then up to heaven to have a conversation with Allah. The event is recorded both in the Quran and the Hadith arguing that one night Muhammad was physically and miraculously taken from the Grand Mosque of Mecca to the al-Aqsa Mosque.

When Muhammad arrived in the Holy Land atop his heavenly Pegasus-like steed, the prophets Abraham, Moses, and Jesus greeted him. Muhammad led all these "minor prophets" in prayer as their imam. Then, he was presented with two cups, one containing wine, one milk. Muhammad picked milk, and was awarded with a promise that his followers will grow in number

and strengths. This was also the night wine was forbidden for Muslims.

After Jerusalem, Muhammad was taken up to seven levels of Heaven with the guidance of Angel Gabriel. He had conversations with Adam, Elijah, Jesus, Joseph, Aaron, Moses, and Abraham. They all greeted Muhammad with joy and congratulated him. Then, he visited a really big tree and traveling so high along its branches that he could hear the scratching of the pens that scribed everyone's fate. A green cushion carried Muhammad up the rest of the way as Angel Gabriel departed.

Allah told him not to be afraid, and Muhammad became the only person ever to have been in his divine presence. He was given the mandate to pray only five times a day instead of fifty. Once back on earth, he went back to Mecca on the heavenly steed.

These are the reasons for the Muslim obsession with Jerusalem. The city represents the idea that Islam has come to perfect what Judaism and Christianity failed to accomplish. It is one of the three cities mentioned in the Quran. Even though Muhammad had expressed the desire to bring Constantinople and Rome under Muslim rule, it was an obligation to conquer Jerusalem.

The Muslim obsession with Jerusalem is indicative of the way Islam sees the entire world: a chessboard to be conquered. While Christ emphasized many times that his kingdom was not of this world, Muhammad's desire to become the temporal sultan required the conquest of certain cities, namely Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. While before the end times, Muhammad promised that Constantinople, then Rome, would be conquered, Miraj sealed the fate of Jerusalem as an immediate target of Islamic Jihad, not a hope to be fulfilled in time.

While the realist political scientist in me wants to read world affairs in light of national interests and balance of power, there is

no denying that the Muslim claim on Jerusalem is not merely a territorial ambition. To the Muslim mind, Jewish sovereignty over Jerusalem is an abomination that cannot be tolerated. Any attempt to prevent the Muslim domination of Jerusalem is seen as a religious affront, not a political maneuver. Because of the nature of this particular beast, Jerusalem will remain a source of regional conflict for years to come.



By [Derya Little](#)

Derya Little has a Ph.D. in politics from Durham University in England. Her articles on foreign affairs have appeared in academic journals and Catholic World Report. She is the author of *From Islam to Christ*, published by Ignatius Press (2017).
