

Al-Quds

Jerusalem
in Classical Judaic and Islamic Traditions

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Panorama of Jerusalem from Abu Tor and Mount Zion, across the Old city with Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount, Hebrew University on Mount Scopus, to the Mount of Olives

The Names of al-Quds in Jewish Tradition

In discussing the names of al-Quds, it is important to distinguish between real topographical names and metaphorical or symbolic titles. The former are the actual geographical names of the city used in administrative documents such as treaties, or in historical records; the latter are titles used in literary or poetic texts to express some characteristic of the city, or to make a theological statement about it.

Topographical Names

Jerusalem

‘Jerusalem’ is the oldest and most enduring topographical name for the city. It was found first in the Egyptian Execration Texts of the 19th – 18th centuries BCE in the form *Rushalimum*. It occurs next in Akkadian in the Amarna Letters of the 14th century BCE as *Urushalim*. In later Assyrian records, e.g. Sennacherib’s account of his siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE, the dominant spelling is *Ursalimmu*.

The consonantal base of the name is attested in two forms in the Hebrew Bible: *yruwshlm* and *yruwshlym*. Both are traditionally

vocalised as *yerushalayim*. The etymology is uncertain but is probably West Semitic. The most plausible explanation is that there are two elements: *yruw*, 'to found' or 'to establish', and *shlm*, the name of the Canaanite god Shalem, who was the tutelary deity of the city. Hence, 'foundation of (the god) Shalem'. The oldest reference to the city in Hebrew may be in the very early story about Ibrahim's meeting with 'Melchizedek, king of Salem' in Genesis. There seems to be little doubt that 'Salem' here is a shortened form of the name Jerusalem. In Psalm 76:2, Salem occurs in parallel to Zion in a clear reference to Jerusalem.

The Hebrew *Yerushalayim* was usually transliterated into Greek as *Ierousalem* or aspirated as *Hierousalem*. Some Greek writers derived the etymology of this name as 'Holy Place of the Solymi' (*hieron Solymon*) as if it were Greek. From Greek writers the name passed into Latin as *Ierousalem*, *Hierusalem* or *Hierosolyma*.

Jebus

In some Biblical texts (Joshua 15:8; 18:28; Judges 19:10; 1 Chronicles 11:4-5) the name Jebus (Hebrew *Yebus*) seems to be used as the pre-Dawudic name of Jerusalem. The tribe from whom Dawud took the city were certainly known as Jebusites (in Arabic *Yabus*) and they were descendants of and a subgroup of the Canaanites (*Kanan*), but some have doubted whether the city itself was ever known as Jebus. As we have already seen Egyptian and Akkadian sources from well before the time of Dawud already refer to the city as 'Jerusalem'. But where, then, did the name 'Jebusite' come from? It is more likely that it means 'inhabitant of the town of Jebus', than that the name Jebus was derived from the gentilic Jebusite. If Jebus was a real topographical designation for Jerusalem, then it may have been purely local.

Zion

The name Zion (Hebrew *Ziyyon*), the etymology and meaning of which is totally unclear (perhaps 'dry area'), occurs over 150 times in the Old Testament both as a toponym and as a title for

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to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, while al-Quds refers to the city as a whole. It recalls the common Hebrew designation of the Temple as *Beit ha-Miqdash*.



Masjid al-Aqsa



Dome of the Rock

The History of al-Quds

The Canaanite Period

Al-Quds has been looked upon as a holy city for the past thirty-eight centuries, first by the Canaanites who founded it, then by the Israelites, then by pagans, then by Christians, and lastly by Muslims.

Al-Quds is first mentioned as a Canaanite city-state in the Egyptian Execration Texts of the 19th – 18th centuries BCE. According to the evidence of archaeology, it was founded about 1800 BC by the Jebusites, a subgroup of the Canaanites, who migrated from the Arabian Peninsula to the Fertile Crescent and Palestine. It is under the name Jebus that it appears in the biblical books of Joshua and Judges. The numerous samples of pottery that the Parker Mission gathered from the caves on Ophel give concrete evidence of a primitive urban nucleus on this hill during the third millennium BC.

Israelite Period

According to Jewish tradition, Ibrahim, peace be upon him, the ancestor of the Jewish people, came to Palestine from Mesopotamia, passing through Syria and arriving in the region of Shechem (Nablus), where God promised him the land (Shechem and the surrounding area). Later, he moved to Egypt, and afterwards returned to Palestine. Ibrahim was succeeded by his son Ishaq and the latter by Ishaq's son, Ya'qub (Isra'il). Ya'qub and his children went into Egypt, where their offspring settled and increased in numbers. They were oppressed by the Egyptians, from whom they finally escaped around 1300 BCE.

Islamic tradition also mentions this Exodus, though in a slightly different form from that found in the Hebrew Bible. According to the Qur'an, Allah commanded the prophet Musa, peace be upon him, to lead the Children of Isra'il out of Egypt and into the holy land where they must fight against the idolaters.

Adam, and then successively been destroyed and restored. Thus Targum Pseudo-Jonathan translates Genesis 22:9 as follows:

They [Abraham and Isaac] came to the place which God had told him of. Abraham built there the altar which Adam had built, but which had been destroyed in the waters of the Flood. Noah had rebuilt it, but it was again destroyed in the generation of the division of tongues. Abraham set in order the wood upon it, bound Isaac his son, and laid him upon the altar, upon the wood.

This clear 'genealogy' for the high altar in the Temple in Jerusalem is not easily paralleled elsewhere in Jewish tradition (it is missing from the other Targumim). Pseudo-Jonathan is a very late Targum, which was finally compiled in the Islamic era (it alludes to the Prophet Muhammad and his family). It has been suggested that its treatment of Genesis 22 is heavily polemical and contains both anti-Christian and anti-Islamic motifs. It is possible, therefore, that its author was aware of the Islamic traditions about the histories of the Ka'bah and of al-Aqsa Mosque as ancient places of worship, and that he was trying to assert the primacy of al-Quds.

Al-Quds as the First Qiblah in Islam

According to ahadith, when the prayers had been enjoined upon the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him, after his ascension to heaven, he used to face in the direction of Bait al-Maqdis in al-Quds, which the Prophet took as the qiblah. When he migrated to Madinah, he continued to follow this practice for a period of seventeen months. Yet, in his heart, he longed to turn his face toward the niche of Ibrahim in the Ka'bah at Makkah. Al-Bara' ibn 'Azib said,

I prayed with the Prophet towards Bait al-Maqdis for about seventeen months and he very much wished that the House [the Ka'bah] was his qiblah, until Allah, exalt-

ed is He, revealed the following ayah: 'We see the turning of your face (for guidance) to the heavens: now shall We turn you towards a qiblah that shall please you. Turn then your face in the direction of the sacred Mosque.' (Surat al-Baqarah, 144)

Al-Bara' ibn 'Azib also said, 'Until we were ordered to face the Ka'bah.' Ibn 'Umar narrated,

When we were offering our dawn prayer in Quba', a man came to us and said, 'Some Qur'an has been revealed to the Prophet and he has been ordered to face towards Makkah,' and at that time our faces were turned towards Bait al-Maqdis. (Bukhari)

They immediately turned about to face the Ka'bah. So, while the Prophet was offering Salat adh-Dhuhr or Salat al-'Asr in the Mosque of Banu Salamah, the above ayah was revealed to him and he immediately turned his face from Bait al-Maqdis to the Ka'bah in Makkah, and the Companions followed his example. Thereafter, the Mosque of the Banu Salamah became known as Masjid Dhu'l-Qiblatain (the Mosque of the Two Prayer Directions). At that moment, the first qiblah was abrogated for all Muslims for all time.

It is clear from the Qur'an itself that the change of qiblah provoked controversy particularly among the Jews and the hypocrites who were their allies.

The fools among the people will say, 'What has made them turn away from the direction they used to face?' Say, 'To Allah belong both the east and the west. He guides whomever He wills to a straight path.' Hence We have made you a midmost nation, so that you will be witnesses against mankind and the Messenger will be a witness against you. We did not appoint the direction you used to face except to know him who follows the Messenger

from him who turns back on his heels. Though in truth it is a very hard thing except for those whom Allah guides. Allah would not let your belief go to waste. Allah is All-Gentle, Most Merciful to mankind. (Surat al-Baqarah, 141-2)

The importance of the new qiblah is reaffirmed later in the same Surah:

From wherever you come out turn your face towards the Sacred Mosque. It is certainly the truth from your Lord. Allah is not heedless of what you do. From wherever you come out, turn your face to the Sacred Mosque. Wherever you are, turn your faces towards it so that people will have no argument against you, except for those among them who do wrong and then do not fear them but rather fear Me, and so that I can complete My blessing upon you so that perhaps you may be guided. (Surat al-Baqarah, 148-9)

Some of the Companions asked the Prophet concerning the fate of their brothers who had died before this command. In answer to this question, Allah revealed the following ayah: 'Allah would never let your belief (i.e. prayers) go to waste [i.e. those prayers offered towards Bait al-Maqdis].' So Bait al-Maqdis was the first qiblah for the Muslims while offering prayer.

Al-Quds as the place of the Prophet's Isra' and Mi'raj

Al-Quds was also the place from which the Prophet Muhammad ascended into heaven. The traditions regarding the Prophet's Mi'raj belong to a genre of ascension literature well known from Jewish and Christian sources, which is unsurprising to Muslims since many of the Prophets had similar experiences. It is noteworthy that in Islamic tradition the ascension is seen by some as a significant stage in the Messenger of Allah's divine

commissioning as Prophet and Messenger, or at least as confirmation of his prophetic calling, and that this commissioning occurs, as with many earlier commissioning visions of other prophets, in al-Quds. The rich Islamic material has many parallels to sources of the Children of Israel and deserves extensive quotation. The following compilation draws together the main elements of the tradition.

Glory to the One who took His Slave for a Journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts We blessed, – in order that We might show him some of Our Signs. (Surat al-Isra', 1)

Jabir ibn 'Abdullah heard the Prophet, peace be upon him, say, 'When Quraysh disbelieved me [about the Isra'], I stood up in al-Hijr [the unroofed part of the Ka'bah] and Allah displayed Bait al-Maqdis to me. So I began to describe its features to them whilst I was looking at it.' (Bukhari)

Abu Hurairah said, 'On the night in which the Prophet, peace be upon him, was taken to Bait al-Maqdis, he was offered two cups, one containing wine, the other milk. He looked at them, then took the milk. Jibril said, "Praise be to Allah, who has guided you towards man's true nature (*fitrah*). If you had taken the wine, your Ummah would have gone astray".' (Muslim)

Malik ibn Sa'sa'ah said that the Prophet, peace be upon him, told him about the night in which he was taken on the night journey. He, peace be upon him, said,

While I was lying down in al-Hatim [or al-Hijr], someone came to me and split open what is between this and this [he indicated the space from the top of his chest to below his navel] and he took out my heart. Then a golden cup filled with faith was brought to me. My heart was washed, filled up [with faith], and put back in its place.