

Ethnic and Religious Pluralism in Jerusalem according to Quran and the Islamic Tradition

Abdul Rahman Abbad

Arabs Relationship with Jerusalem

Jerusalem is the oldest Arab Canaanite city.¹ It was built 3,000 B.C. and called Salem which means “the City of Peace”. The Jebusites were its first inhabitants. They settled in this land and were one of the Canaanite tribes.²

It is important to clarify that the Arab-Jebusites association with Jerusalem was connected with the original concept of belief in monotheism. It is known that the Arab Jebusites were one of the first believers in the existence of only one God. They believed in El-Elyon, which means God the Highest. They performed religious ceremonies which indicated that they possessed the greatest interest and respect for their Holy City.³ This can be understood from the action of Malki-Sadiq [Melchizedek], who ruled in 1900 B.C., when he gave the great welcome to Abraham, who hosted him in his cave under the “Jebusites Rock” and told him: Abraham, you are blessed by God the Highest king of Earth and Heavens (Genesis 14:19). This is proof that the Arab Jebusites were the first people to sanctify the city and use it as a place of worship. This was almost 1000 years before the building of Solomon’s Temple. This clarifies what certain historians mentioned, that the temple was built on an ancient foundation. It also agrees with one of the sayings of Rabbi Ka’ab al-Aḥbār, that Solomon built his temple on an ancient building.⁴

¹ [Ed.’s Note: A call for “the emergence of a Palestinian history as a subject in its own right” has been put forward by K.W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History*, London 1996. See a discussion of this issue by the same author and W.G. Dever in *JOT* 72 (1996) 3-44. A similar discussion, which further involves N.P. Lemche, is found in *Currents in Biblical Research: Biblical Studies* 4 (1996) and 5 (1997). Archaeology has also been treated in this regard. As stated in N.A. Silberman, “Structuring the Past: Israelis, Palestinians, and the Symbolic Authority of Archaeological Monuments,” in: N.A. Silberman - D. Small (eds.), *The Archaeology of Israel. Constructing the Past, Interpreting the Present*, Sheffield 1997, 62-81, until recently archaeology was not significant “in the crystallization of Palestinian Arab national consciousness” (p. 71), but “In the 1980s... the first steps were being taken toward the creation of a uniquely ‘Palestinian’ archaeological past” (p. 73). Also consult L.L. Grabbe (ed.), *Can a ‘History of Israel’ Be Written*, Sheffield 1997.]

² Muṣṭafā Murād Dabbağ, *Our Country Palestine*, vol. 3, Beirut 1988, 22.

³ Maḥmūd ‘Abbādī, *Our Jerusalem*, Arab Research Institute, Arab League, Cairo 1972, 9.

⁴ Muṣṭafā Murād Dabbağ, *Our Country Palestine*, vol. 3, 35-36.

The Jebusite kingdom was united with the Pharaohs during the second millennium B.C., when the Israelites left the country for Egypt, where they became slaves until they were freed by Moses.

Jewish tribes [‘Apiru] used to penetrate into Palestine and attack the Arab Jebusites. These attacks forced Abdou Hiba [Abdu-Heba], king of “Orsalem” (Urushalim, Jerusalem), to ask for the help of the Egyptian Pharaoh.⁵ The so-called Al-Amarna Letters, which refer to the 14th century B.C., before the Hebrews entered Palestine, confirm the presence of the Arab Jebusites in the city “Orsalem.” This name was then changed to “Orshaleem” [Yerushalaim] in Hebrew. During the Islamic conquest, it was named Aelia Capitolina, a name given by the Roman Emperor Hadrian, 135 A.D.⁶

From this historical introduction follows that Jerusalem was a place of worship and prayer for the Arab Jebusites right from the beginning. This continuous activity of prayer did not stop but was replaced by Judaism and then by Christianity, while the inhabitants remained the descendants of Arab Jebusites and they themselves passed Judaism and Christianity on to the world.

Muslims entered and ruled Jerusalem peacefully. Islam was the completion of the prior two monotheistic faiths. Since then, Muslims never left this land except during the Crusaders’ occupation.

Muslims’ Relationship to Jerusalem

Many scholars and researchers believe that the beginning of Muslims’ contact with Jerusalem can be linked to the time of the second Caliph ‘Umar Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb when he received the key of the city from its ruler, Patriarch Sophronius. Actually the relationship of Muslims with Jerusalem goes back thousands of years before this time. This relation began with the erecting of Al-Aqṣa Mosque, the second mosque built after Al-Ka’ba in Mecca. To assure this fact, Abū Zarr al-Ġifārī, who was one of the companions of the Prophet Mohammed, says:

⁵ N. Mezrinsky, *The Jewish Faith in Jerusalem. The Key to World Peace*, Islamic Council of Europe, London 1980, 23-41. [Ed.’s Note: An English translation of the Amarna Letters is found in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3 ed., Princeton - New Jersey 1969, 483-490. For the history of the period, see A. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs. An Introduction*, London - Oxford - New York 1961, 207-211; J.M. Miller - J.H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, London 1986, 65-67.]

⁶ ‘Arif al-‘Arif, *The History of Jerusalem*, Jerusalem 1996, 132.

“I asked the Prophet which mosque was founded first. The Prophet replied: The Inviolable mosque in Mecca. Then I asked which mosque is the second. The Prophet said: Al-Aqsa mosque. I asked again about the time of building the two mosques. The Prophet replied: 40 years”.⁷

This *hadith* (tradition) shows that the Muslims’ relationship with Jerusalem goes back centuries before the times of Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ and Mohammed – Peace be upon them.

Many people believe that Abraham and his son Ismail were the first builders of Al-Ka’ba. But in reality, they were rebuilding it on its first foundations. A verse from the Holy Quran says:

“And remember that Abraham and Ismail raised the foundations of the House with this prayer, Our Lord, accept this service from us for thou art the All-hearing, the All-knowing.”⁸

Since we are not able to arrive at the historical time when Al-Ka’ba was built, so it is likewise difficult to set the moment of the building of the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. This is closely connected with what I am trying to explain in these terms:

- a) Because God is one, there is one religion.
- b) All prophets and messengers are brothers who complete each other in implementing the words of God.
- c) There is no contradiction in the one religion of God because the source of this religion is God himself and God does not contradict Himself.
- d) Human Beings veered away from the word of God and followed their own wishes and desires. So the continuous coming of messengers and prophets is the way God reminds Human Beings of His one message religion. This one message religion is Islam, which means submission to God.

In this Islamic conception all prophets and messengers from Adam through Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jacob, Jesus and Mohammed are Muslims. From the Islamic religious point of view, we Muslims believe in Moses, Jesus and all the other prophets because all that they brought to us had the same origin which is the One God.

The Islamic religious point of view towards other religions is considered to be the utmost respect for religions and the beliefs of others because Islam recognizes them and considers all messages to be equal, but it considers that Islam is the final message and Mohammed is the last of the prophets.

⁷ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, vol. 6, Cairo 1955, 17.

⁸ The Holy Quran, Sūrat al-Baqarah (No. 2), verse 127. [Ed.’s note: The English translation is taken from *The Glorious Qur’an, Translated to English by Abdallah Yousouf Ali, Corrected and Revised by F. Amira Zrein Matraji*, Beirut n.d., 50.]

So Al-Aqsa mosque is an Islamic mosque, and the Muslim relationship to it is associated with their relationship to the Inviolable mosque in Mecca, the first mosque, but this relationship with Al-Aqsa is prior to that with the mosque of the prophet in Al-Medina.

When 'Umar Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb came to Jerusalem, he did not build the Al-Aqsa mosque, but he asked Patriarch Sophronius to show him the place of the mosque and Sophronius did that by leading him to the gate called Gate of Mohammed. Since the door was blocked by garbage, 'Umar removed this garbage and his companions helped him. Then 'Umar looked around and cried, "Allahu Akbar (God is great). By God this is Al-Aqsa mosque that Prophet Mohammed informed us about in the night journey of Al-Isra'!" There was also much garbage on the Rock, thrown by the Romans. 'Umar removed it also. Then he went towards the *mihrab* (prayer niche) and prayed there and he recited a sura from the Quran.⁹

Concerning the event of the night of Al-Isra' and Al-Miraj, the *hadiths* (traditions) show that the Prophet Mohammed was sent by night to Jerusalem, riding the heavenly horse Al-Boraq and accompanied by Gabriel the Holy Spirit. Prophet Mohammed tied the Boraq to the mosque door, then he led the prayer with all Prophets who were waiting for him. Now, the wall where the Prophet tied the Boraq is called "Al-Boraq wall". Today the Jews name it the "Wailing Wall" because they consider it as one of their old ancient temple walls, while it is in fact an Arabic Islamic building. It has no relation with the old temple and there are no traces of its presence there. Indeed, the "Boraq wall" is located near the gate of the mosque which opens to its yard.¹⁰

The Quran mentions the Isra' event saying,

"Glory to Allah who did take His Servant for a journey by night from the sacred mosque to Al-Aqsa mosque whose precincts we did bless in order that we might show him some of our signs, for He is the One who heareth and seeth all things".¹¹

The interpretation of this sura reveals the relationship between the Muslims and Jerusalem before it was opened by 'Umar Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb, because the Prophet's night journey Al-Isra' is considered a spiritual opening of the city from a religious point of view.

This interpretation also shows the holiness of this place because God made the name of the Inviolable shrine in Mecca equal to that of Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. This means that these two places are fully linked with Islamic belief.

⁹ Muḡīr al-Dīn al-Ḥanbalī, *Al-Anas al-ḡalīl fī tāriḥ al-Quds wa-al-Ḥalīl*, Beirut 1973, 225-227.

¹⁰ 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Ṣayḥ, *The Importance of Jerusalem in Islam*, Amman n.d., 46.

¹¹ The Holy Quran, Sūrat al-Isrā' (No. 17), verse 1 [*The Glorious Qur'an*, 620].

God even included the land around Al-Aqsa mosque in His blessing, but He did not include the land around the Inviolable mosque. This means that all of Jerusalem is blessed by God Himself and not by a human or a prophet. For example Mohammed blessed Al-Medina and Abraham blessed Mecca, but Jerusalem was blessed by God. This is why Muslims consider Jerusalem to be holy and all its land as a blessed mosque. That is why Muslims migrate to it, because it is their beloved land and God promised any believer who settles in it that He will increase his reward till the day of Judgment.

From Jerusalem and from the honorable Rock, Prophet Mohammed ascended to heaven to see some signs from His Lord. This night journey was an honor given to Prophet Mohammed by his Lord. At the same time, it was an honor to the place from which the Prophet ascended. This also makes a link between Islam, represented by Mohammed, the last Prophet, and the place from which he ascended.

Since the beginning of Islam, Muslims look forward to free and liberate Jerusalem from idolaters and atheist groups. After Al-Ka'ba, the Inviolable shrine, was liberated, the matter is incomplete for Muslims without liberating also the Al-Aqsa mosque and the Holy Land since it is an organic part of their religion.

The ascension of Mohammed took place from Jerusalem and not from Mecca, where he was, to make Muslims understand their relationship to Jerusalem and to keep the mosque and all other holy sites under their protection and control. In fact they are the bearers of the final message which overrides all previous messages. God says: "To thee we sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety".¹²

By leading the prayer of the prophets in Al-Aqsa mosque, Mohammed is recognized by them as their leader and Islam as their religion, because they know that it is the truth revealed from God. In this recognition there is the evidence that they accept this religion because there is no contradiction between it and what was revealed to them.

The event of ascension to heaven was the first connection between earth and heaven in the history of religions. While the holy verses were revealed from heaven, and brought down by Gabriel to the prophets, this event is the opposite of what usually happens, because Mohammed was ascended upward to heaven.

This is an honor both to the human person Mohammed and to Jerusalem the place on earth. As Ibn Kaṭīr says, "The leadership of Mohammed in the prophets' prayer during the nocturnal journey is a recognition from the prophets

¹² The Holy Quran, Sūrat al-Mā'idah (No. 5), verse 48 [*The Glorious Qur'an*, 250].

that Islam is the last word of God to humans and the Islamic nature of Al-Aqsa mosque”.¹³

Muslims used to direct their faces to Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem during their five prayers a day. They went on doing this for sixteen months after this period, when they turned their faces towards Al-Ka’ba mosque by a commandment of God.¹⁴ The five prayers a day were imposed upon Muslims during the nocturnal journey; because of this event Jerusalem was linked from the very beginning with Islamic praying. It was the first *Qibla* (direction) for Muslims. So the relationship with it existed before they were its rulers.

So many verses from al Quran describe the land of Jerusalem as holy and blessed. God says,

“O my people! Enter the holy land which Allah hath assigned unto you, and turn not back ignominiously, for then will ye be overthrown, to your own ruin.”¹⁵

And it is the land in which the mother of saint Mary the Virgin had promised her coming baby as a servant of God. The Quran says:

“Behold! the wife of ‘Imrān said: O my Lord! I do dedicate unto Thee what is in my womb for Thy special service: So accept this of me: For Thou hearest and knowest all things.”¹⁶

It is also the safe and secure country, for God says, “By the fig and the olive and the mount of Sinai and this city of security”.¹⁷ Many other verses describe this land as purified and holy. This increases longing, respect and honor in Muslims and encourages them to pray, work, learn and settle in the city. However, this holiness is not a contradiction for other believers, who are not Muslims, because Muslims and Islam recognize Jerusalem’s unique status for other religions.

Prophet Mohammed mentioned Jerusalem so many times in his *hadiths* (traditions). Abū Zarr al-Ġifārī says:

“Prophet Mohammed said, Muslims should travel to three mosques for the purpose of pilgrimage and worship. The three are Al-Aqsa and the two mosques of Mecca and Medina.”¹⁸

¹³ Ibn Kaṭīr, *Tafsīr. The Interpretation*, vol. 4, Beirut 1986, 22.

¹⁴ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḥārī, *The Book of the Prayer*, Cairo n.d., 92.

¹⁵ The Holy Quran, Sūrat al-Mā’idah (No. 5), verse 21 [*The Glorious Qur’an*, 240].

¹⁶ The Holy Quran, Sūrat al-Imran (No. 3), verse 35 [*The Glorious Qur’an*, 120].

¹⁷ The Holy Quran, Sūrat al-Tīn (No. 95), verses 1-3 [*The Glorious Qur’an*, 1492].

¹⁸ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḥārī, vol. 3, 86, N. 1189.

The meaning of this *hadith* is very clear to Muslims, because Muslims usually pray in their mosques in their own countries except for these three special mosques. Muslims are also commanded to pray, visit and make pilgrimage to them.

Maymūnah, wife of Mohammed, narrated that once she asked the Prophet about holy Jerusalem, and he said,

“It is the place of gathering and resurrection in the last day. He also ordered his followers to come to it and pray, for every prayer there is equal to 1,000 prayers elsewhere. I said: If I can not, what should we do? He said: Then the Muslim believers have to send oil to be lit in its candles. Anyone who does this is considered equal to the one who comes to it”.¹⁹

This means that this mosque must be kept open day and night and it is not the responsibility of governments and rulers to protect and keep Al-Aqsa mosque open but it is the responsibility of every Muslim believer.

Prophet Mohammed urged his Muslim followers to leave their countries and settle around Al-Aqsa mosque. Zo Alisbā narrated that once he asked the Prophet: If we were obliged after your death to choose to settle down, what is your advice? The Prophet’s response was to go to Bait Al-Maqdis [Jerusalem], where Al-Aqsa mosque is situated, for the best rewards are for you and your descendants.²⁰ In another *hadith* narrated by Abū Zarr al-Ġifārī, the Prophet advised the narrator to go to the blessed land around Jerusalem.²¹

God promised every Muslim believer who begins his pilgrimage from Jerusalem forgiveness and a big reward in the Day of judgement. Umm Salāmah, the prophet’s wife, narrated that she heard the messenger of God Mohammed say:

“Any person who begins his pilgrimage or Omra from Al-Aqsa mosque, God will wipe all his previous sins and will send him to paradise”.²²

Because of these rewards ‘Umar Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb and his son Abdullah began their “Iḥrām” pilgrimage from Al-Aqsa mosque.²³ ‘Umar also asked some of his companions who came with him to stay and to settle, to work, to teach at Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem in addition to their official business. One of the companions was ‘Ubādah Ibn Al-Šāmit, the first judge of Palestine, and Šaddād

¹⁹ Ahmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 6, Cairo n.d., 463.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, narrated by al-Ṭabarānī.

²¹ ‘Uṭmān Ibn ‘Aṭā’, *Tahḏīb al-Tahḏīb*, vol. 7, Cairo n.d., 38.

²² Narrated by Abū Dāūd in his *Sunan*, vol. 3, Cairo 1988, 116.

²³ Muġīr al-Dīn al-Ḥanbalī, *Al-Anas al-ġalīl fī tāriḥ al-Quds wa-al-Ḥalīl*, vol. 1, Beirut 1973, 146.

Ibn Aws, who remained al Bait Al-Maqdis (Jerusalem) until they died and were buried in Al-Raḥmah cemetery outside the Eastern wall of Al-Aqsa mosque.

Muslim scholars, preachers, ‘Ulamā and leaders continued their visits, pilgrimage and departures to Jerusalem as a kind of implementation of their Prophet’s commandment. Among them were the famous Imām Alawzaie, the Imām of the great Syria, Sufyān Al-Taw’rī, the Imām of Iraq, al-Layṭ Ibn Sa’d, the Imām of Egypt, al-Šāfi’ī, one of the four well known Imāms of al-Sunnah and Abū Ḥāmid al-Gazālī “Ḥuḡḡat al-Islām” in addition to thousands of teachers and scholars who came to Jerusalem for different purposes. It is worthy to say that Al-Aqsa mosque was the biggest Islamic university in that time, and there were 360 professors in it. If we want to count the number of ‘Ulamā, scholars, jurisprudence people, reciters and *hadith* readers who came to Jerusalem, we will not be able to count them, because they are uncountable; yet their deeds still are a sign of their achievements in all fields of knowledge.

Many of these Muslims named themselves after Jerusalem; among them were Ahmad Ibn Mas’ūd the Jerusalemite, Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh Sālīm the Jerusalemite, the famous *Ḥadīṭ* reader Abū Hāšim al-Rabī’ the Jerusalemite, Mutarher Ibn Ṭāhir the Jerusalemite, the famous historian al Husayn Ibn Muḥammad the Jerusalemite, the jurist²⁴ and dozens of women and men still have the name of Jerusalemite in many parts of the Islamic world.

The Objective of the Nocturnal Journey

According to the traditions concerning the nocturnal journey of Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Jerusalem and then to heaven, Prophet Mohammed was taken to heaven accompanied by the Holy Spirit Gabriel and met there by a number of messengers and prophets: Adam, our father, Jesus Christ, Mary, Joseph, Idrīs, Aharon, Moses – Peace and blessing be upon them.

Mohammed described some of them. For example, Joseph was very handsome; Idris was raised by God to a higher status; Abraham was backed by “much frequented House Al-Ka’ba”. All these prophets were on the seventh heaven while Gabriel the Holy Spirit accompanied Mohammed through this journey among the different heavens. He was welcomed by all other prophets who prayed for his success. At last he reached “Sidrat Al-Muntahā,” the Lote-

²⁴ *The Holy Mosque Al Aqsa*, The Islamic Center, Jerusalem 1991, 27-28.

tree of the last boundary, and then Mohammed returned to Jerusalem with his gift of God, the five prayers a day.²⁵

The obligation to pray is connected with a fruitful dialogue between Mohammed and Moses – Peace be upon them. This dialogue begun after Mohammed returned with fifty prayers imposed by God. Moses told Mohammed that the number was too much to bear, and to return to God and ask him for a decrease. Mohammed followed Moses' advice and asked God to do so. God responded to the request of Mohammed and reduced the number to forty. On his return, he met Moses again and told him what happened. Moses repeated his request for another reduction since he knew human nature. Mohammed went back to God again and asked for another reduction. God reduced the number to thirty. This process of reduction went on until the number became five prayers a day. Moses was still not satisfied and asked Mohammed to return once more to ask for another decrease. But Mohammed was too ashamed to return to ask his Lord since he had already done this five times.

What do we learn from this dialogue? We learn how to listen to each other, as Prophet Mohammed listened to Prophet Moses. We learn how everyone looks after the interests of the other person just as he does for himself; thus he wishes him good as Prophet Moses wished good to Prophet Mohammed and his followers. We learn how everyone looks out for the other person and regards the good of the other person as the same as for himself. We learn how man helps his fellow brothers; when one does not know how to behave, he guides him. We learn from them how to negotiate things in order to achieve better results in a constructive way rather than in a destructive way. This is the greatest lesson we learn from the dialogue of the two prophets especially in these difficult times.

Jerusalem under Islamic Rule

Jerusalem was brought under Islamic rule in the year 15 Hijra (635 A.D.) according to historians, that is during the reign of the Caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb – God bless him. The inhabitants of the city asked the military leader that the Caliph of the Muslims come, then the city would surrender to him. The military leader agreed and passed this request to the Caliph, who came personally and signed the peace treaty.²⁶

²⁵ *Ḥadīth* on Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḥārī.

²⁶ Ibn al-Aṣṣir, *Al-Kāmil fī al-tārīḥ*, *The Complete in History*, part 2, Cairo 1965, 349.

The Caliph accepted to come in order to avoid bloodshed and killing of innocent people, because Islam protects human life and considers it sacred. The population of Jerusalem and Patriarch Sophronius received 'Umar Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb and signed with him what came to be known as the Treaty of 'Umar. In this treaty the Caliph accepted the demands of the people of Jerusalem. This is the first document ever in history in which the conqueror accepts the demands of the conquered, although they were of a different religion. The text of the treaty reads as follows:²⁷

“In the name of the compassionate and merciful God. This is what is given by the slave of God, 'Umar, commander of the faithful, to the inhabitants of Aelia, regarding security. He gave them security for themselves, their money, their churches, crosses, the sick people in Jerusalem as well as the healthy and the rest of its dominion.

Their churches will not be lived in or destroyed. Nothing will be removed from these churches of their bounty, their crosses or any of their money.

That they shall not be forced to change their religion, none of them will be hurt.

The inhabitants of Jerusalem Aelia shall pay the poll tax like the people of other cities.

They shall expel the Romans and the thieves from it. Those who go out are secure in themselves and their money until they reach their secure destination.

Those who reside among them are safe and they have to pay the poll tax like the inhabitants of Aelia Jerusalem.

Those inhabitants of Aelia wishing to go out with their money with the Romans and evacuating their churches and their crosses are secure in themselves, their churches and their crosses until they reach their secure destination.

The people of other lands living in Aelia and wishing to stay in it have to pay the poll tax like the inhabitants of Aelia.

Any one wishing to do so can go out with the Romans or can return to his people.

The covenant of God and the guarantee of the Messenger Mohammed and of the Caliphs and faithful shall witness to what is mentioned in this letter provided that the people of Aelia pay the poll tax.”

Witnesses to this treaty include Ḥālid Ibn al-Walīd, 'Amr Ibn al-'As, 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn 'Awf and Mu'āwiyah Ibn Abi Sufyān.

This treaty was kept faithfully during fifteen centuries by Muslims. It clearly shows how Muslims granted full religious freedom to others who were of the monotheistic religions. They granted them security and control over their properties and assets. They did not destroy a church or a synagogue for the Christians or the Jews. They did not confiscate any house or land

²⁷Ibn Kaṭīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa-al-nihāyah, The Beginning and the End*, part 7, Cairo 1932, 56.

and did not prevent a believer from reaching his place of worship. On the contrary, it is historically documented that ‘Umar Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb once found an old deserted structure, and when after investigation he realized that it was a Jewish synagogue, he ordered it to be renovated and then turned it back over to the Jews to pray in it. It is also well known that he refused to pray in the church of Holy Sepulchre so that in the future the Muslims would not take it from the Christians, the true owners of the church, on the pretext that ‘Umar had prayed in it.

We know that the Prophet had named ‘Umar the Fārūq, i.e. the One who distinguishes between what is right and wrong. He applied justice as demanded by Islam. Had Islam demanded other measures than what ‘Umar was doing, he would have done so immediately.

Conquerors through the ages never allowed another religion except their own amidst their people, but when Islam came, it approved other religions of the same God and did not force people to convert. It was the first time in history that such a thing happened. Muslims granted the people of Jerusalem complete freedom for fourteen centuries before the charter of human rights of the United Nations.

Islam even recognized doctrines of non-Muslims and allowed them to be practiced with no interference from the state. Besides, Islam accepted the principle of pluralism of religion, sects and ethnicity under its rule.

The fact that Jerusalem was the first city to be granted security and freedom from the Caliph himself and not by a military conqueror testifies to its importance and significance in the souls of Muslims in general.

People of other religions, especially the Jews, viewed the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem as a liberation for them from the despotic rule of the Byzantines.

The Muslims put their special relationship with the people of Jerusalem into deeds. They protected the sites that were sacred for Christians and Jews. They even preserved them by special protection from intersectarian fights and disputes which took place and still take place today. They were rulers of justice among different sects.

A close examination of the total area occupied by mosques, corners, schools, Quran-houses, Hadith and Islamic “Takāyā” in Jerusalem compared with Christian and Jewish religious sites clearly shows that Muslims did give Christians and Jews religious, social and economic freedom both inside and outside the city. It is narrated that the number of churches, monasteries and Christian religious schools exceeded one hundred without any objection from the Muslims. They looked upon such an increase as a natural one. The same thing happened with the Jews even at the time of the Ottoman Empire, which they say oppressed them while in fact they were unjust to it.

Examples of the Mercy of Islam

The historian Karen Armstrong writes that the history of Jerusalem is the history of Islamic mercy and justice.²⁸ In fact, Muslims welcomed pre-Islamic religions. She explains that through the Treaty of 'Umar ("Uhdah 'Umariyeh"), the Caliph granted the inhabitants equal rights with Muslims; he also granted the Jews the right to live in the Holy City, a right which was denied to them during the Roman (i.e. Byzantine) rule. The writer describes the vicious massacres which the European invasion of the city initiated, when the invading Crusaders killed seventy thousand Muslims inside Jerusalem, flooded the city and entered Al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock, killed worshippers mercilessly, removed the crescent from the dome of Al-Aqsa mosque and replaced it with a cross. They did the same thing with all other mosques. They used some of those mosques as stables for their horses or store-houses for food.

During the Ottoman rule, Siān Pasha the Turk managed to obtain a decree from the Ottoman Caliph to allow Jews to pray near the Western Wall known as the Boraq wall, where the Prophet Mohammed tied his horse Boraq during his nocturnal journey to Jerusalem. This decree, dated 1541, clearly shows that Muslims are the ones who allowed the Jews to pray near Al-Boraq, which later came to be known as the Wailing Wall.

Christians and Muslims enjoyed justice from all governments and countries of Islam which ruled in Jerusalem. Egyptians during the reign of Mohammed 'Alī Pasha granted both religions entire freedom equal to Muslims.

When the Muslim leader Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn the Ayyubi regained Jerusalem from the European strangers, he did not take revenge on them. He even refused to attack the Holy City and take it by force. Rather he offered its inhabitants the chance to surrender without fighting in return for full security for their lives, women and children and safe passage to those who wished to leave the city. The "Šūrah Islamic Congress" had met in a special session in which the safety and security for the people of Jerusalem was approved.²⁹

What Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn and "Šūrah Council" did was in complete agreement with Islamic doctrine which recognizes the rights of others in Jerusalem. Whether these rights are civil or religious, this policy was a continuation of the Treaty of 'Umar Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb (Al-'Uhdah), which was adopted as the model of social interaction by the inhabitants of the city.

²⁸ K. Armstrong, *Jerusalem – One City, Three Faiths*, New York 1996, esp. section 11 on "Bayt Al-Maqdis."

²⁹ Kamāl-al-Dīn al-maqdisī al-Šāfi'ī, *Ithaf-al-Ekhsa: for Al Aqsa Mosque*, photograph of a manuscript of the Heritage House, N. 407, p. 79.

During the Turkish rule Muslims allowed the renovation and construction of Jewish synagogues for worship as stated in law 1/136, immunity from inspection and a police escort for Christian pilgrims who came to visit the church of the Holy Sepulchre as stated in the law 1/138. They also cancelled the taxes and interests collected from the religious leaders of Christians and Jews as outlined in the law 1/188. They also allowed the Christian state of France to build four new sites near the Iفرanj Hospital in Jerusalem through law 2/314, and also to construct other buildings for patients inside the Catholic Monastery 2/380.³⁰

In 1856 the governor of Jerusalem ordered the handing over of the Salahiyeh – a large Islamic building complex not far from Al-Aqsa mosque, at the entrance of the Lions' Gate – to the consul of France as a gift from Sultan Abdul Majeed to the Emperor of France Napoleon the Third.³¹

As a consequence of this just Islamic treatment, the population of the district of Jerusalem grew to 340,000 people in 1912, two years before the First World War. They included 226,000 Muslims, 70,000 Jews and 24,000 Christians. The Muslims had 342 schools, the Jews 100, and Christians 40.³²

The growth of Jewish population was due to the increase in immigration to Jerusalem after the Basel conference in Switzerland in 1899, when the Zionists intensified their plans for immigration to Jerusalem. Since they found a warm welcome and lenient regulations among the Turks, they continued immigrating in increasing numbers. This resulted in a major change in the original composition of the inhabitants. Later on relations changed to a very aggressive attitude and conflicts during the British Mandate. Today Israel does not recognize any right for others although the Jewish holy places cannot be compared in number and size with the Christian and Muslim holy places.

Another example of the Islamic justice is what happened in 878 Hijra (1473 A.D.) when Muslims and Jews differed regarding a house that was situated between a mosque and a synagogue and each side claimed that house. A legal case was submitted to the Islamic court. After studying the case it was judged that the house should belong to the synagogue, so the property was awarded to the Jews. This happened during the reign of King al-Ašraf Abū Naşr Qaiyttibāy.³³

³⁰ Muştafā Murād Dabbağ, *Our Country Palestine*, vol. 4, 20-21.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 39-40.

³² Khairiyeh Qasmiyeh, *Zionist Action in the Arab East and its Impact (1808-1818)*, Beirut 1973, 123.

³³ Muştafā Murād Dabbağ, *Our country Palestine*, vol. 3, 290.

In 1480 a priest from the city of Ulm, Felix Fabri, who visited Jerusalem wrote as follows:

“There are 500 Jews and twice as many Christians. I went shopping and bought some gifts like cloth and rosaries. Some pilgrims would transport such items to their countries so they would make profit. Some religious people did that too. We walked around on Mount Zion, visited churches and they were carpeted. The Muslim inhabitants of the city respect pilgrims especially visiting clergy. They would offer them cakes, honey, seasoned bread and fruits like grapes, almonds, melons and cold water. No wonder that they would care about everything since they are the rulers of the city”.³⁴

Another visitor to Jerusalem in 870 is Bernard the Wise who wrote:

“Muslims and Christians in Jerusalem enjoy full understanding from each other to the extent that when I travel, if my camel or donkey dies on the way, I leave my luggage right there on the road and go to the nearest town to find another animal. I would return and find that everything is exactly the way I left it, no one touching it”.³⁵

It was very difficult for tourists from foreign lands to distinguish between Christians and Muslims living in Jerusalem, due to their common language and to their Arab national feeling that was so prominent among all citizens in the city. Their friendship was so noticeable and so was the mutual care they had among themselves. They exchanged their feelings, gifts and greetings in every occasion, religious and secular. It was especially common during feasts, family and social get-togethers, visits, sharing good times in cafes, work places and schools which hosted all inhabitants regardless of religion.

The duties of the police force during the reign of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and according to his direct orders were to prevent any harm from coming to Christian or Jewish inhabitants. Such a police force would patrol the streets providing security. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn also returned Christian holy places to the Orthodox church, which the Crusaders had taken away. He also returned St. John’s Monastery to its original Christian owners after the Crusaders changed it into a hotel. Finally, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn ordered the release of 7,000 prisoners from the Crusader army letting them go home to their wives. Old people

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 306.

³⁵ N. Ziyadah, *Pioneers of Arab East in Middle Ages*, Cairo 1943, 55. [Ed.’s note: Also see J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades*, Jerusalem 1977, 145, no. 23; F.E. Peters, *Jerusalem. The Old City in the Eyes of Chroniclers, Visitors, Pilgrims and Prophets from the Days of Abraham to the Beginnings of Modern Times*, Princeton (NJ) 1985, 223.]

and women were also guaranteed freedom.³⁶ He declared the city open and secure to all believers.

Conclusion

Concluding this brief study, we can safely say that Islamic history in Jerusalem is one of justice, mercy and openness. It also includes recognition of human rights irrespective of color, race or religion. Islam respects the human being and considers the main task of peoples to cooperate. In fact God said:

“O ye people, we created you males and females and made of you different peoples and tribes to know each other. The best of you in God’s eyes are those who are pious.”³⁷

This verse from the Quran made all people equal because they had the same father and mother. Their mission on earth is to meet and cooperate with one another, and the best of them are those who are pious.

Muslims fulfilled these teachings and treated others well. They did not revenge their murderers and those who usurped their rights, rather they reinstated the rights taken away from the oppressed by their own fellow-religion oppressors.

This was the faith of Islam which honored all people and recognized all prophets prior to Prophet Mohammed and the holy scriptures that preceded the Quran. The Quran mentioned stories of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Aaron, Elias, Zakharia, Noah, Adam and Yūnis, in extreme reverence and great respect. It was essential in Islam that the Muslims should believe in these prophets. Some of those prophets are mentioned in the Quran tens of times more than Prophet Mohammed. They are the chosen messengers of God in whom we believe and whom respect.

No wonder that we love Moses although he is from the Israelites, because he is a true believer of God, and we hate Pharaoh although he is Egyptian because he is an enemy of God and a supporter of the devil. We love Joshua, David, Solomon, Issa (Jesus), Maryam – Peace be on them; we love their followers because they believe in one God and we hate Goliath the Palestinian because he was an atheist and not a believer. We support the truth but not evil, racism and sectarianism; that is why Muslims call their sons Moses,

³⁶ S. Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, vol. 2, Beirut 1968, 752-756.

³⁷ The Holy Quran, Sūrat al-Ḥuġūrāt (No. 49), verse 13 [*The Glorious Qur’an*, 1186].

Issa, Maryam, Aaron, Zakharia, Noah, Adam etc. and call their mosques and schools by these names.

All these names are sacred names to us. We do not distinguish between one prophet and another. A look at the names of places in Jerusalem that Muslims use shows us the truth of this statement as we see places like Mihrab Maryam, Mihrab David, Mihrab Issa, Mihrab Al-Khader (St. George) and Mihrab Al-Khaleel (Abraham).

This is our history in Jerusalem, we are proud of it and not ashamed of it; neither do we deny it because it is a history of shining dignity, respect, justice, mercy and one of securing the rights of others.

Our last prayer is to thank God the Lord of all worlds.