

*The Institute of Asian and African Studies
The Max Schloessinger Memorial Foundation*

Offprint from

JERUSALEM STUDIES IN
ARABIC AND ISLAM

34(2008)

Uri Rubin

**Between Arabia and the Holy Land:
a Mecca-Jerusalem axis of sanctity**

THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM
THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

BETWEEN ARABIA AND THE HOLY LAND: A MECCA-JERUSALEM AXIS OF SANCTITY

Uri Rubin
Tel Aviv University

The present article offers a new reading of some key passages found in the Qurʾān as well as in the earliest available Islamic historiographic sources. Reading these passages along the lines suggested here reveals what may be called a “Mecca-Jerusalem axis of sanctity.” Unveiling this axis will shed light on the earliest origins of the Islamic sanctity of Mecca on the one hand, and that of Jerusalem on the other. This will lead to a reassessment of some views of modern scholars of Islam concerning the status of these two cities in early Islam.

1 The Qurʾānic evidence

1.1 Blessed land

The Qurʾān defines the land of Israel as “the sacred land” (*al-arḍ al-muqaddasa*) (Qurʾān 5:21), and especially as a land on which God’s blessing (*baraka*) has been bestowed. The land which God has blessed (*al-arḍ allatī bāraknā fihā*) is the one to which Abraham and Lot escape (Qurʾān 21:71), and this is the land which is given to the Children of Israel as a safe haven after they are saved from Pharaoh (Qurʾān 7:137). Solomon rides the wind towards the same blessed land (Qurʾān 21:81).

1.2 Sacred land

Apart from the land that derives its sacredness from God’s blessing, the Qurʾān knows of other precincts whose sacredness is described differently, by means of the Arabic root *ḥ-r-m* which means forbidding or declaring something sacred. The Qurʾān describes the Kaʿba as *al-bayt al-ḥarām*, i.e. “the sacred house” (Qurʾān 5:2, 97), while the term *al-mashʿar al-ḥarām*, “the sacred place of worship” (Qurʾān 2:198), stands for a station of the *ḥajj* near ʿArafāt.

Most current in the Qur'ān is the phrase *al-masjid al-ḥarām*, “the sacred mosque,” i.e. the sanctuary in Mecca that contains the Ka‘ba. The Qur'ān often condemns people who have denied the believers access to the Sacred Mosque and violated its sacredness (e.g. Qur'ān 2:217; 8:34; 22:25; 48:25).

The term *ḥaram* which represents the sacred territory within which Mecca is located is derived from the same root. It is a secure region into which “fruits of every kind” are brought (Qur'ān 28:57; cf. 29:67; 16:112).

It follows that the Qur'ān is aware of two focal points of sacredness: one in the “blessed” land, namely the land of Israel, and the other in Arabia, in the sacred region of Mecca and of the Sacred Mosque.¹ The only difference between the two regions is that one of them, namely Mecca, is also the area in which the Qur'ān was revealed (Qur'ān 42:7). In other words, while the Holy Land is the blessed land of the prophets, Mecca is the sacred land of Muḥammad.

1.3 The night journey

The land of Israel and Arabia are by no means separate. The Qur'ān brings them into contact in several ways. On one occasion they are linked through a nocturnal journey described in Qur'ān 17:1:

Glory be to Him who made His servant go at night from the sacred mosque (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*) to the farthest mosque (*al-masjid al-aqṣā*) of which we have blessed the precincts, so that we may show him some of our signs; surely He is the Hearing, the Seeing.

This verse mentions two mosques, one being the [Meccan] Sacred Mosque, and the other being the “farthest mosque.” The latter is surrounded by an area blessed by God. The allusion to God’s blessing indicates that the “farthest mosque” is in the Holy Land as described in the verses discussed above. The mosque is described as “farthest” probably due to its geographical remoteness from Mecca where the verse was revealed.

This verse praises God for enabling His servant (i.e. Muḥammad) to travel to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā along an axis of sanctity that links Arabia with the Holy Land.

As shown elsewhere,² the significance of al-Masjid al-Aqṣā can be elucidated according to another verse found in the same Sūra. This is

¹See further, Uri Rubin, “Sacred precincts,” *EQ*, s.v.

²Rubin, “Muḥammad’s night journey.”

verse 7 which describes the destruction of the Temple of the Israelites at the hand of their enemies whom God has sent to punish them for their sins. The Temple is identified as *masjid* ("mosque"), which signifies the Islamic sanctity attributed by the Qur'ān to the land of Israel in general and to Jerusalem in particular.

It is no coincidence that the destruction of the Israelite Temple is mentioned in close juxtaposition with the mosque to which the Prophet was taken at night. This linkage creates a contrast between the old *masjid* that was destroyed and the *masjid* that has replaced it and survived till Muḥammad's lifetime.

We have here a reflection of the image of Jerusalem as it is known from Christian sources of late antiquity. This Jerusalem is a holy city which has replaced the Jewish one destroyed as punishment for the transgressions of the Jews. The Christian city was built around the ruined Temple Mount and was regarded as "the New Jerusalem." Several churches were erected to commemorate scenes from the life of Jesus, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which was built by Constantine I (d. 337).³

This new city must be the al-Masjid al-Aqṣā to which the Prophet is carried at night. The city is described as *masjid* because this word initially denotes "a place of prayer," and therefore the term can refer to the entire city as a sacred area, including the site of the destroyed Jewish Temple.

The Prophet's journey towards al-Masjid al-Aqṣā is a prophetic vision, just like similar visions known from the Bible and the apocalyptic literature. Nöldeke⁴ already suggested that Qur'ān 17:1 reflects Ezekiel 8:3 where Ezekiel experiences in Babylon a vision in which he was taken by a lock of his hair and a wind lifted him up "between the earth and the heaven" to one of the gates of the Jerusalem Temple. In the following verse it is stated that Ezekiel saw there the glory of the God of Israel. The Book of Enoch mentions a vision of a journey to a "blessed place" i.e. Jerusalem, which is situated in the "center of the earth."⁵

³The expression "New Jerusalem" is a New Testament term (Revelation 3:12; 21:2) that was applied by Eusebius, the biographer of Constantine I (d. 337 CE), to the earthly Jerusalem. For the texts of Eusebius and others, as well as for relevant studies, see Peters, *Jerusalem*, pp. 132-40; Stroumsa, "Mystical Jerusalems," p. 351; Bitton-Ashkelony, pp. 22-24; 78. Cf. Elad, "Pilgrims and pilgrimage," p. 304. Eusebius's attitude to the earthly Jerusalem and its supposed relationship to the idea of the New Jerusalem was, however, quite ambiguous, mainly because he was the bishop of Caesarea. See Z. Rubin, "The church of the Holy Sepulchre," p. 92.

⁴Nöldeke-Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorans*, vol. 1, p. 134 n. 7. See also Horovitz, "Himmelfahrt," p. 162; Wansbrough, *Quranic studies*, p. 68.

⁵1 Enoch 26:1. Cf. Alexander, "Jerusalem as the *Omphalos* of the world," p. 109.

It follows that the idea of Jerusalem as a destination of a visionary journey is pre-Islamic. Islam did not have to wait until the actual Islamic takeover of Jerusalem in order to envision its own prophet experiencing a vision in which he is taken there at night. Everything seems to indicate that the Qur'ānic night journey to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā alludes to such a journey to Jerusalem. The choice of this particular destination takes the Qur'ānic prophet on a visionary pilgrimage along the Mecca-Jerusalem axis of sanctity. He is taken to the very heart of the Holy Land; this creates a visual contact between the Prophet and the sacred locality of the biblical prophets and links him to their prophetic heritage, making him a prophet like them.⁶

1.4 Abraham

Another way in which the Qur'ān brings into contact the two sacred regions is revealed in the figure of Abraham.⁷ He does not only go to the blessed land — the Holy Land — in which he and Lot find shelter (Qur'ān 21:71) — but he also turns up in the sacred environs of Mecca. This seems to reflect the notion that Abraham went on a pilgrimage from Syria to Arabia along the Mecca-Jerusalem axis of sanctity.⁸ When in Mecca, God assigns to Abraham the “place of the House” (= the Ka'ba), and tells him to purify it and proclaim to the people the duty of pilgrimage (Qur'ān 22:26–27). The Qur'ān sees in Abraham the originator of Mecca's sacredness. This patriarch prays to God to make Mecca “secure” and “make the hearts of some people yearn” towards its inhabitants, and provide them with fruits (Qur'ān 14:35–40; 2:126). Abraham and Ishmael his son also “raised the foundations of the House” (Qur'ān 2:127).

Abraham's Qur'ānic twofold link to the Holy Land as well as to Arabia is well rooted already in the biblical tradition where he is the father not only of Isaac, but also of Ishmael.

Abraham, then, is the main link in the Qur'ān that brings into contact the two concurrent regions of sanctity. It seems most likely that here the Qur'ān transforms into a word of God ideas well-known in Muḥammad's Arabia where Jews and Christians as well as Arab polytheists lived next to each other and shared a common religious veneration for their various holy places, within Arabia as well as in the

⁶For a comprehensive analysis of the Qur'ānic *isrā'* verse, see Rubin, “Muḥammad's Night Journey,” pp. 149–53.

⁷Cf. R. Firestone, “Abraham,” *EQ*, s.v.

⁸Already in Genesis 12:9 Abraham journeys “by stages” southward (“towards the Negeb”).

Holy Land. Their cohabitation resulted in a multi-cultural ritual system that revolved around the Mecca-Jerusalem axis of sanctity.

1.5 The priority of Mecca

But the fact that Mecca was the region in which the Qur'ān was revealed lent it some priority over the Holy Land. This advantage is stated explicitly in Qur'ān 3:96 where it is asserted that the house (i.e. the Ka'ba) in Bakka (commonly understood as Mecca) was "the first house appointed for the people." In the following verse (Qur'ān 3:97) the "standing place of Abraham" (*maqām Ibrāhīm*) is mentioned, a term standing for the Ka'ba or its vicinity (see also Qur'ān 2:125).

If the designation of the Ka'ba as "the first house" is chronological, then the meaning is probably that this sanctuary was created first. This idea transfers to the Ka'ba a well-known virtue of Jerusalem, and indicates that within the local religious structure there were opposing undercurrents caused by the tension between the two poles of the Mecca-Jerusalem axis. This tension seems to have caused the axis to lose some of its balance, as the Arabian side begins to outweigh the Syrian one.

1.6 The direction of prayer

The same inclination towards Mecca is discernible in the Qur'ānic verses which deal with the direction of prayer (*qibla*) (Qur'ān 2:142–50). These verses allude to a change that took place in the direction of prayer, which was received with apprehension by the "fools" (*sufahā'*). The verses also point to a disagreement between the Muslims and their opponents over the preferred direction of prayer, stating that the direction decreed by God is the "Sacred Mosque," i.e. Mecca.

As for the "Sacred Mosque" being the preferred *qibla*, the Qur'ān declares that the Jews and the Christians ("the People of the Book") are also aware of the fact, although they refuse to admit it.

The Qur'ānic *qibla* verses actually testify to the growth of a struggle over the identity of the common religious foundation. The common legacy of the prophets and mainly that of Abraham is interpreted differently by each party. On the one hand, the Jews and the Christians hold that their religion is the one that represents most faithfully the true legacy of the prophets, and therefore they expect of Muḥammad to embrace their own religion (Qur'ān 2:120–21). On the other side stand the Muslims who are convinced that they are the only true heirs to Abraham (Qur'ān 3:68). This is the reason why the Qur'ān declares adherence to the religion of Abraham and rejects the demand of the

Jews and the Christians to follow their own religions (Qur'ān 2:135). The Qur'ān also affirms that Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a pure Muslim, a *ḥanīf* (Qur'ān 3:67). The Qur'ān insists that the rest of the prophets, too, were neither Jews nor Christians (Qur'ān 2:140).

In conclusion, the Qur'ānic treatment of the *qibla*, as well as the allusion to the conflict between Muslims and others over the true legacy of the prophets, mark a crucial stage in the history of the Mecca-Jerusalem axis. This is a stage in which the Arabian pole begins to outweigh the Syrian one.

It is no coincidence that the Qur'ānic *qibla* verses are included in a *Sūra* that is regarded as Medinan, i.e. later than the Meccan *Sūra* in which the *isrā'* verse appears (Qur'ān 17:1). The latter still retains the axis in its perfectly balanced state.⁹

2 The evidence of tradition

The Mecca-Jerusalem axis of sanctity is reflected not only in the Qur'ān, but also in the earliest available extra-Qur'ānic Islamic texts about Muḥammad that have come down to us. These texts are also aware of two coexisting focal points of sacredness, as well as of the growing inclination within the ritual system of Muḥammad's time towards the Arabian pole of the axis.

2.1 The direction of prayer

The two focal points of sacredness appear in traditions dealing with the history of the *qibla*. The traditions are contained in the earliest versions of Muḥammad's biography (*sīra*), including Ibn Hishām's (d. 218/833) book which is based on Ibn Ishāq's (d. 150/768) *Sīra*. In these traditions, Muḥammad, when still in Mecca, at the earliest stages of his prophetic career, keeps a combined *qibla* which is aligned with the Ka'ba as well as with Syria (*al-Shām*). On one occasion we learn about his combined *qibla* from a tradition about Abū Jahl, Muḥammad's archenemy. The tradition relates how Abū Jahl plans to throw a stone at the Prophet when the latter prostrates in prayer. At a certain point the story is interrupted by details about Muḥammad's manner of prayer. It is stated that while he was in Mecca, the Prophet faced Syria in

⁹In other words, the traditional chronology of the Qur'ān corresponds to the history of the axis: with the transition from Meccan to Medinan passages, the local Arab pole gains predominance over the Syrian one.

prayer, and when he prayed, he stood between the southern corner of the Ka'ba and the eastern one, where the Black stone is situated, putting the Ka'ba between himself and Syria. Now the story resumes, and we are told how Abū Jahl failed to carry out his plan: as he tried to approach the prostrated Prophet, a mighty camel stallion got in his way and prevented him from coming close to Muḥammad.¹⁰

Muḥammad is described here not merely as being under divine protection, but also as a pious worshipper who prostrates before God. The place and position he chooses for his prostration indicate his veneration of God's sanctuary in Mecca as well as of the one in Syria. His simultaneous alignment with the Ka'ba and Syria puts the two places on a common axis, the same axis which the Qur'ān delineates through the person of Abraham and through Muḥammad's night journey.

The same details about Muḥammad's combined *qibla* are provided in another story relating the circumstances which caused 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb to stop harassing Muḥammad and to embrace Islam. The story is related by 'Umar in the first person. He says that when he was still an infidel, he once set out to purchase some wine; on his way he passed by the Ka'ba and decided to perform the *ṭawāf* (circumambulation) around it. Suddenly he saw Muḥammad standing in prayer opposite the southern wall of the shrine. 'Umar explains that whenever Muḥammad prayed he faced Syria (*istaqbala 'l-Shām*), positioning the Ka'ba between himself and Syria. 'Umar goes on to relate that he decided to listen to Muḥammad so as to hear what he said. He also presumed that if he came close enough he could frighten the Prophet. With this plan in mind, he got underneath the covering of the Ka'ba and walked quietly till he stood in Muḥammad's *qibla*, facing him, there being nothing between them but the covering of the Ka'ba. From there 'Umar could hear Muḥammad reciting the Qur'ān, and as he heard this, his heart was softened and Islam entered him.¹¹

Here the prophet is again under divine protection which this time is put into effect not by a miraculous beast but by the powerful magic of the Qur'ān itself. Muḥammad's mode of prayer is again in harmony with the Mecca-Jerusalem axis of sanctity.

2.2 The Muslims and the axis

The Mecca-Jerusalem axis also emerges from reports about Arab Muslims in Medina. Ibn Shabba (d. 262/876) and al-Balādhurī (d. 279/892)

¹⁰Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, vol. 1, p. 319.

¹¹Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, vol. 1, p. 372.

report that the mosque built in Qubā' (in Medina) before Muḥammad's arrival had a *qibla* facing Jerusalem (Bayt al-Maqdis). When Muḥammad arrived in Medina he prayed in that mosque without changing its structure.¹² The same is stated in a report of al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822) according to which Muḥammad built his own mosque in a sanctuary established already before his arrival in Medina by As'ad b. Zurāra, and its *qibla* was aligned with Bayt al-Maqdis. Muḥammad's own mosque also faced the same direction.¹³ On a more general level, several traditions say that the Anṣār, the Arab Muslims of Medina, had prayed towards Jerusalem two or three years before Muḥammad's arrival in their town.¹⁴

The veneration of Jerusalem as attributed to the Muslims of Medina does not seem to contradict their traditional devotion to the Ka'ba, although they are not praying towards the two sanctuaries at the same time. In fact, it is impossible to describe them praying in this manner, because Mecca is situated south of Medina while Jerusalem is north of it.

The dual orientation of the religious devotion of the Medinan believers appears more explicitly in a story about one of Muḥammad's Companions, al-Barā' b. Ma'rūr. The story forms part of a report about a delegation of Medinan believers who set out to Mecca to discuss with Muḥammad (at al-'Aqaba) the terms of his arrival in Medina. Ibn Ishāq relates that when the delegation was already on its way to Mecca, one of the believers, al-Barā' b. Ma'rūr, said to his friends: "I think that I will not turn my back on this building" (meaning the Ka'ba) "and that I shall pray towards it." His friends said that as far as they knew, the Prophet prayed towards Syria (*al-Shām*), and they did not wish to act differently. But al-Barā' insisted on praying towards the Ka'ba, so that when it was time to pray, all of them prayed towards Syria, while he prayed towards the Ka'ba. They did so until they came to Mecca. Eventually, al-Barā' is said to have felt some misgivings for acting against the general custom and not praying towards Syria like the others, and approached the Prophet for advice. Muḥammad said to him: "You already had a good *qibla*, if only you had kept to it." So al-Barā' reverted to the *qibla* of the Prophet and prayed towards Syria with the others, but his family claims that he kept praying towards the Ka'ba until he died.¹⁵ It is also reported that al-Barā' demanded that when he died,

¹²Ibn Shabba, *Ta'rikh al-Madīna*, vol. 1, p. 51; Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, vol. 1, pp. 311, 314. See also Lecker, *Muslims, Jews and Pagans*, p. 79.

¹³Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, pp. 239–40.

¹⁴Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, p. 4. See also Huwwārī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 154.

¹⁵Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, vol. 2, pp. 81–83. See also Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, Series I, pp.

his body be put in alignment with the Ka'ba.¹⁶

This story demonstrates the interchanging function of the two poles of the Mecca-Jerusalem axis on the eve of Muḥammad's *hijra*. While some believers like al-Barā' incline towards a certain pole (the Ka'ba), the other pole (Jerusalem) still retains its position as an optional *qibla*.

2.3 Balance lost

As one moves on to traditions describing the history of the *qibla* after Muḥammad's *hijra* to Medina, one is confronted with a new situation: the Mecca-Jerusalem axis loses its balance in favor of Arabia.

To begin with, a tradition of the Meccan Mujāhid (d. 104/722) on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās, as recorded by Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845), says that while in Mecca, Muḥammad used to pray towards Jerusalem (Bayt al-Maqdis), with the Ka'ba in front of him. After his *hijra* to Medina he continued [praying towards Jerusalem] for sixteen months and then he was instructed to turn towards the Ka'ba.¹⁷

In this tradition, the history of the *qibla* before the *hijra* — as related also by Ibn Ishāq (see above) — remains intact, but a post-*hijra* stage has been added to it, in which Jerusalem loses its status and Mecca becomes the only *qibla*. With this change, the Meccan pole of the axis has outweighed the Syrian one. No reasons are provided for this development.

Another tradition which delineates the history of the *qibla* before and after the *hijra* is of al-Wāqidī. It is related on the authority of the Companion Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī who says that he once asked 'Abdallāh b. Salām, the Jewish convert to Islam, about the significance of the footprints seen on the stone known as Maqām Ibrāhīm (located in front of the Ka'ba). Ibn Salām explained that Abraham stood on the stone while announcing the obligation of pilgrimage to Mecca, and he transformed the stone into a *qibla*. Abraham used to pray towards the door of the Ka'ba, putting the stone between himself and the door. His son Ishmael continued to pray in alignment with the stone and the door. When Muḥammad emerged as a prophet he was commanded to pray in alignment with Jerusalem (Bayt al-Maqdis); the Prophet prayed towards Jerusalem before and after the *hijra*. Then, after a few months in

1217–19.

¹⁶Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, vol. 3, no. 6064. See also Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, vol. 1, p. 285.

¹⁷Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. 1, p. 243; Aḥmad, *Musnad*, vol. 1, p. 325; al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu'jam al-kabīr*, vol. 11, no. 11066; al-Bayhaqī, *Sunan*, vol. 2, p. 3; al-Haythamī, *Majma' al-zawā'id*, vol. 2, p. 15. Cf. Rubin, "Ka'ba," pp. 103–104, n. 29.

Medina, God decided to turn the Prophet towards His *qibla* which He preferred for Himself and for His prophets. So, as long as Muḥammad remained in Medina he prayed in alignment with the spout (*mīzāb*) of the Kaʿba, and when he afterwards came to Mecca (after its takeover in 8/630), he faced the Maqām in prayer.¹⁸

In the pre-*hijra* history of the *qibla* as described in this tradition, the Kaʿba and Jerusalem are still two legal *qiblas*, but now each is observed by different persons. Abraham’s and Ishmael’s *qibla* is the Kaʿba, while Muḥammad’s is Jerusalem. After the *hijra*, the *qibla* of Jerusalem is eliminated, and the Kaʿba remains the only *qibla*, and is identified as the ultimate *qibla* of God’s prophets. This alludes to anti-Jewish polemics, because the Jews are said to have argued that their own *qibla* (i.e. Jerusalem), not the Kaʿba, was that of the prophets.¹⁹

This polemical rift provides the circumstantial background to the Qurʾānic polemical verses mentioned above, in which the Sacred Mosque (in Mecca) appears as the one decreed by God as a *qibla*. The reports as well as the Qurʾānic verses describe a conflict among the inhabitants of Medina which revolves around opposing interpretations of the legacy of the prophets, mainly that of Abraham.

The same conflict emerges in a tradition stating that when Muḥammad shifted the *qibla* from Syria to the Kaʿba (in the month of Rajab, 17 months after Muḥammad’s *hijra*), some leaders of the Jews of Medina came to the Prophet and asked what made him abandon his former *qibla*, while at the same time claiming that he was following the religion of Abraham. They asserted that if he resumed the former *qibla* they would follow him. However, they were only saying this to lead Muḥammad astray from his religion. The tradition concludes with the statement that at this point God revealed the Qurʾānic verses that denounce “the fools” who have condemned the believers for abandoning their former *qibla* (Qurʾān 2:142ff.).²⁰

The conflict over the legacy of the prophets also arises from the *Tafsīr* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767). He reports that Muḥammad put to the Jews that they knew that the Kaʿba was referred to in the Torah as a *qibla*, but had expunged the evidence.²¹ The same Muqātil says that when the Children of Israel were ordered in the time of Moses to “make your houses *qibla*” (Qurʾān 10:87), they were actually

¹⁸ Azraqī, *Akhhbār*, p. 273 (from al-Wāqidī).

¹⁹ See Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, pp. 144–5. On the debate on which was the prophets’ *qibla* — Mecca or Jerusalem — see also Bashear, “Qurʾān 2:114 and Jerusalem,” p. 237; Kister, “Sanctity,” pp. 49–50, 52.

²⁰ Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, vol. 2, pp. 198–9.

²¹ Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 148 (on 2:146).

ordered to turn their “mosques” towards al-Masjid al-ḥarām.²²

These traditions actually describe disagreement among the two main parties in post-*hijra* Medina that pursue Abraham’s religion, i.e. Jews and Muslims. They disagreed on which is the true Abrahamic *qibla*, and thus that Mecca and Jerusalem can no longer function as concurrent directions of prayer. The Mecca-Jerusalem axis has lost its balance, and as far as the Muslims are concerned, Mecca has eventually eliminated Jerusalem as the *qibla*.

2.4 ‘Umar and Ka‘b

Proceeding to traditions dealing with later years, one realizes that the Jewish Islamic conflict over the *qibla* has not ended. It reappears in a well-known story which takes place a few years after the death of the Prophet, when Jerusalem has already come into the Islamic fold (17/638). The story is available in several versions,²³ and describes a dialogue between the caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and Ka‘b al-Aḥḥbar, a Jewish convert to Islam. ‘Umar and Ka‘b are exploring the Temple Mount in Jerusalem after the Muslim conquest, and the caliph asks his companion where he thinks the Islamic place of prayer should be placed. According to a version of the report as recorded by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/856), Ka‘b suggests to ‘Umar that he locate the place of prayer “behind” the Rock [i.e. the “Foundation Rock” on the Temple Mount], so that the entire city of Jerusalem [here: al-Quds (!)] would be in front of him (when praying there towards Mecca). Ka‘b’s advice preserves the old Mecca-Jerusalem axis, because prayer behind the Rock (i.e. north of it) towards the Ka‘ba brings one into alignment with Mecca as well as with the Rock. Upon hearing this, ‘Umar accuses Ka‘b of adhering to his old Jewish customs (i.e. taking Jerusalem as *qibla*), and advances further towards the *qibla*, which means that he went southward and left the Rock behind him, so that the Ka‘ba remained his only *qibla*. He stated that this was how Muḥammad himself had prayed during his night journey.²⁴

In the version of Abū ‘Ubayd (d. 224/838), Ka‘b explicitly suggests that the place of prayer be located behind the Rock, so that the two *qiblas*, that of Moses and that of Muḥammad, should merge.²⁵ In al-Ṭabarī’s version, the caliph rejects Ka‘b’s Jewish-oriented advice

²²Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, p. 246.

²³Goitein, “Sanctity,” p. 140; Elad, *Jerusalem*, p. 30; *idem*, “Status,” p. 51.

²⁴Aḥmad, *Musnad*, vol. 1, p. 38.

²⁵Abū ‘Ubayd, *Amwāl*, no. 430. See also Al-Minhājī, *Ithāf al-akhiṣṣā*, vol. 1, pp. 236–37; *Kanz*, vol. 5, no. 14215 (from Abū ‘Ubayd).

and says: “We were not ordered [to face] the Rock, but [to face] the Ka‘ba.”²⁶

The various versions of this episode reveal ‘Umar’s Arab-oriented dedication to the Ka‘ba, while the Jewish-oriented Ka‘b appears as trying to preserve the balance of the old Mecca-Jerusalem axis. He actually strives to restore the Islamic ritual to its state before Muḥammad’s *hijra* to Medina.

2.5 The survival of the axis

In contrast to the aversion to the *qibla* of Jerusalem as evinced in the texts cited above, other texts pertaining to the first Islamic era rather reflect the opposite, i.e. the survival of the veneration of the Mecca-Jerusalem axis. This is attested in traditions like that of the Baṣran Muḥammad b. Sīrīn (d. 110/728). He declares that people used to avoid facing either of the two *qiblas* while relieving themselves (*kānū yakrahūna an yastaqbilū wāḥidatan min al-qiblatayni bi-ghā’itin aw bawl*).²⁷ This statement reflects a situation in the early Islamic era, wherein Mecca and Jerusalem function as two lawful *qiblas*, each maintaining an equal degree of sacredness. So much so that the Prophet himself was eventually brought into the scene in a tradition attributing to him the prohibition to turn one’s face or back towards either of the two *qiblas* while answering a call of nature.²⁸

These versions differ from other texts in which the prohibition does not pertain to the two *qiblas* but rather to “the *qibla*,” i.e. that of Mecca.²⁹

Muslim *ḥadīth* scholars explained that the versions about the two *qiblas* were brought into existence by the ongoing respect (*iḥtirām*) accorded to Jerusalem which had once been an Islamic *qibla*.³⁰

Jerusalem, and mainly the site called al-Masjid al-Aqṣā, indeed retained its old status as a *qibla*. This is indicated in a report about the

²⁶Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, Series I, p. 2408.

²⁷Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, vol. 1, p. 151.

²⁸See the version of the Companion Ma‘qil b. Abī Ma‘qil al-Asadī from the Prophet (transmitted from Ma‘qil by Abū Zayd [al-Walīd], a *mawlā* of the Banū Tha‘laba) in Ibn Abī Shayba, vol. 1, pp. 150, 151; Aḥmad, *Musnad*, vol. 4, p. 210, vol. 6, p. 406; Ibn Māja, vol. 1, no. 319 (1:17); Abū Dāwūd, vol. 1, p. 3 (1:4). See also the version of Nāfi‘ indirectly from the Prophet: Aḥmad, *Musnad*, vol. 5, p. 430. The version of Abū Ayyūb: Aḥmad, *Musnad*, vol. 5, p. 415. Here it is stated that the restriction was especially hard to follow when one was using the lavatories in Egypt (*karābīs Miṣr*), probably because they were facing east, i.e. towards Mecca as well as Jerusalem. For the meaning of the term *karābīs* see Mālik/Zurqānī, vol. 2, p. 155.

²⁹E.g. Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, vol. 1, pp. 2–3 (1:4).

³⁰See *‘Awn al-ma‘būd*, vol. 1, p. 7 (on Abū Dāwūd, *loc. cit.*).

ascetic (*zāhid*) Abū ‘Alī al-Awaqī who renounced worldly life and dedicated himself to reading the Qur’ān in Jerusalem. Yāqūt saw him in 624/1226 praying in alignment with the “*qibla* of al-Masjid al-Aqṣā.”³¹ This means that in certain instances Jerusalem kept its position as the Syrian pole on the Mecca-Jerusalem axis of sanctity. Some, however, rejected as *bid‘a* (unlawful innovation) the custom of praying in Jerusalem towards Mecca while standing behind (i.e. north of) the Rock.³²

The memory of the axis was preserved especially in association with Muḥammad’s night journey to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā. Medieval Muslim writers perceived it as a journey between the two Islamic *qiblas*. They asserted that God took His prophet to Jerusalem in order to combine the two *qiblas* (*li-yajma‘a bayna ‘l-qiblatayni*), because Jerusalem was the destination of the *hijra* of most prophets, and in this manner all sorts of virtues were combined for Muḥammad.³³

3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the reading of the Islamic texts along the lines suggested above shows that these texts reflect an awareness of a Mecca-Jerusalem axis of sanctity which is supposed to have its origin in the multi-cultural environment of pre-Islamic Arabia. This reading has thus unveiled an important aspect of the manner in which Islamic historiography records the origins of Islam in general, and the pre-*hijra* history of the *qibla* in particular. Furthermore, the fact that the axis is already discernible in the Qur’ān may well suggest that it has some roots in the actual religious conditions of Arabia on the eve of Islam.

This calls for a reassessment of the views of modern scholars concerning the history of the *qibla*. None has taken into consideration the Islamic traditions about the history of the *qibla* before the *hijra*, thus forming an outlook which clearly contradicts these traditions. This outlook is largely based on the views of Snouck Hurgronje. He (mainly in his *Het Mekaansche Feest*) and his followers held that Muḥammad adopted the Ka‘ba as an Abrahamic sanctuary and as a *qibla* after he came to Medina, as a reaction to his “break with the Jews.”³⁴ But as far

³¹Yāqūt, *Buldān*, vol. 1, p. 283.

³²Kister, “Three mosques,” p. 194. See also Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem*, p. 158.

³³Shāmī, *Subul*, vol. 3, p. 32.

³⁴This theory was adopted mainly by A.J. Wensinck in the article “*Kibla*” *EI*¹, and his observations were repeated verbatim in *EI*² (s.v. “*Kibla*”). Other scholars writing about Muḥammad and the Jews after Wensinck remained faithful to the same line of thought (e.g. von Grunebaum, *Muhammadan festivals*, p. 8; Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, pp. 201–205; Kennedy, *The Prophet and the age of the caliphates*, p. 41;

as the above-mentioned texts are concerned, the Ka'ba was an Islamic *qibla* from the very first stages of Muḥammad's activity in Mecca, long before his so-called "break with the Jews."³⁵

As for Jerusalem, some modern scholars have contended that its sacredness has no substantial roots in Muḥammad's Islam. It is not mentioned in the Qur'ān; the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā is rather in heaven, and the Prophet's prayer towards Jerusalem was only designed to win the Jews over to Islam.³⁶ Such views do not do justice to the above-cited material in which a Mecca-Jerusalem axis of sanctity emerges in materials pertaining to the earliest stages of the history of Islam, long before the *hijra*.

REFERENCES

- ʿAbd al-Razzāq, Abū Bakr b. Hammām al-Ṣanʿānī. *Al-Muṣannaf*. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-Aʿzamī, ed. 11 vols. Beirut, 1970.
- Abū Dāwūd. *Al-Sunan*. 2 vols. Cairo, 1952.
- Abū ʿUbayd, al-Qāsim b. Sallām. *Kitāb al-amwāl*. Beirut, 1981.
- Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. *Al-Musnad*. 6 vols. Cairo, 1313/1895, repr. Beirut, n.d.
- Alexander, Philip S. "Jerusalem as the *Omphalos* of the world: on the history of a geographical concept." In Lee I. Levine, ed. *Jerusalem: its sanctity and centrality to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. New York, 1999, pp. 104–19.
- Al-Azraqī, Abū ʿl-Walīd. *Akhbār Makka*. In F. Wüstenfeld, ed. *Die Chroniken der Stadt Mekka*. Göttingen, 1858, repr. Beirut, n.d., vol. 1.
- ʿAwn al-maʿbūd = *Sunan Abī Dāwūd maʿa ḥāshiyat ʿAwn al-maʿbūd*. Ḥasan Īrānī, ed. 4 vols. Beirut, n.d.

Peters, *Muhammad and the origins of Islam*, pp. 207, 209–210; *idem*, *The Hajj*, p. 49).

³⁵Cf. Rubin, "Ḥanīfiyya and Ka'ba."

³⁶E.g. Hasson, "The Muslim view of Jerusalem," *passim*. Some traditions do mention the tactical purpose of Muḥammad's prayer towards Jerusalem (e.g. Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, p. 4 [on Qur'ān 2:142]), but they seem to serve an apologetic need: to explain away Muḥammad's problematic adherence to a Jewish practice.

- Al-Balādhurī, Aḥmad b. Yahyā. *Jumal min ansāb al-ashrāf*. Suhayl Zakkār and Riyād Ziriklī, ed. 13 vols. Beirut, 1996.
- Bashear, Suliman. "Qur'ān 2:114 and Jerusalem." *BSOAS* 52 (1989): 215–38.
- Al-Bayhaqī, Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn. *Al-Sunan al-kubrā*. 10 vols. Ḥaydarābād, 1355/1936, repr. Beirut, n.d.
- Bitton-Ashkelony, Brouria. *Encountering the sacred: the debate on Christian pilgrimage in late antiquity*. University of California Press, 2005.
- Elad, Amikam. *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic worship: holy places, ceremonies, pilgrimage*. Leiden, 1999.
- . "Pilgrims and pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the early Muslim period." In Lee I. Levine, ed. *Jerusalem: its sanctity and centrality to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. New York, 1999, pp. 300–14.
- . "The status of Jerusalem in the Umayyad period." *Ha-Mizrah ha-Haddash* 44 (2004): 17–68 [in Hebrew].
- EQ = *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*. Brill, Leiden, 2001–2006.
- Goitein, S.D. "The sanctity of Jerusalem and Palestine in early Islam." In *idem*. *Studies in Islamic history and institutions*. Leiden, 1966, pp. 135–48.
- Hasson, Isaac. "The Muslim view of Jerusalem: the Qur'ān and ḥadīth." In Joshua Praver and Haggai Ben-Shammai, eds. *The history of Jerusalem*. Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi and New York University Press, 1996, pp. 349–85.
- Horovitz, Josef. "Muhammeds Himmelfahrt," *Der Islam* 9 (1918): 159–83.
- Al-Huwwārī, Hūd b. Muḥakkam. *Tafsīr kitāb Allāh al-'azīz*. Belḥāj Sharīfī, ed. 4 vols. Beirut, 1990.
- Ibn Abī Shayba, 'Abdallāh b. Muḥammad. *Al-Muṣannaf fī 'l-aḥādīth wa-'l-āthār*. 'Abd al-Khāliq al-Afghānī, ed. 15 vols. Bombay, 1979–83.

- Ibn Hishām, ‘Abd al-Malik. *Al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā, Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī and ‘Abd al-Ḥāfiẓ Shalabī, eds. 4 vols. Repr. Beirut, 1971.
- Ibn Māja, Muḥammad b. Yazīd. *Al-Sunan*. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Bāqī, ed. 2 vols. Cairo, 1952.
- Ibn Sa‘d, Muḥammad. *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt*. 8 vols. Beirut, 1960.
- Ibn Shabba, Abū Zayd ‘Umar. *Tārīkh al-Madīna al-munawwara*. Fa-hīm Muḥammad Shaltūt, ed. 4 vols. Mecca, 1979.
- Kanz* = ‘Alā’ al-Dīn al-Muttaqī b. Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Hindī. *Kanz al-‘ummāl fī sunan al-aqwāl wa-l-af‘āl*. Ṣafwat al-Saqqā and Bakrī Ḥayyānī, ed. 16 vols. Beirut, 1979.
- Kennedy, Hugh. *The Prophet and the age of the caliphates: the Islamic Near East from the sixth to the eleventh century*. London and New York, 1994.
- Kister, M.J. “Sanctity joint and divided: on holy places in the Islamic tradition.” *JSAI* 20 (1996): 18–65.
- . “‘You shall only set out for three mosques’: a study of an early tradition.” *Le Muséon* 82 (1969): 173–96 [repr. in *idem. Studies in Jāhiliyya and early Islam* Variorum CS 123. London, 1980, XIII].
- Lecker, Michael. “Biographical notes on Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī.” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 41 (1996): 21–63 [repr. in *idem. Jews and Arabs in pre- and early Islamic Arabia*. Variorum Collected Studies Series. Aldershot, 1998].
- . *Muslims, Jews and Pagans: studies on early Islamic Medina*, Leiden, 1995.
- Majma‘ al-zawā‘id* = al-Haythamī, Nūr al-Dīn. *Majma‘ al-zawā‘id wa-manba‘ al-fawā‘id*. 10 vols. Repr. Beirut, 1987.
- Mālik/Zurqānī = al-Zurqānī, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Bāqī. *Sharḥ Muwaṭṭa‘ al-imām Mālik*. Ibrāhīm ‘Aṭwa ‘Iwaḍ, ed. Cairo 1961.
- Al-Minhājī, Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Shihāb al-Dīn. *Iṭḥāf al-akhiṣṣā bi-faḍā’il al-masjid al-aqṣā*. Aḥmad Ramaḍān Aḥmad, ed. 2 vols. Cairo, 1982.

- Muqātil b. Sulaymān. *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*. ʿAbdallāh Maḥmūd Shihāta, ed. 5 vols. Cairo, 1979.
- Nöldeke-Schwally = Nöldeke, Th., *Geschichte des Qurans*, zweite Auflage, bearbeitet von F. Schwally (Hildesheim–New York, 1970).
- Peters, F.E. *The Hajj: the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy places*. Princeton, 1994.
- . *Jerusalem: the Holy City in the eyes of chronicles, visitors, pilgrims, and prophets from the days of Abraham to the beginnings of modern times*. Princeton, New Jersey, 1985.
- . *Muhammad and the origins of Islam*. Albany, 1994.
- Rubin, Uri. “Ḥanīfiyya and Kaba—an inquiry into the Arabian pre-Islamic background of Dīn Ibrāhīm.” *JSAI* 13 (1990): 85–112. Reprinted in Peters, ed. *The Arabs and Arabia on the eve of Islam*, pp. 267–94.
- . “The Kaba: aspects of its ritual functions.” *JSAI* 8 (1986): 97–131. Reprinted in Peters, ed. *The Arabs and Arabia on the eve of Islam*, pp. 313–47.
- . “Muḥammad’s night journey (*isrāʾ*) to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā: aspects of the earliest origins of the Islamic sanctity of Jerusalem.” *Al-Qanṭara* 29 (2008): 147–65.
- Rubin, Zeʿev. “The church of the Holy Sepulchre and the conflict between the seas of Caesarea and Jerusalem.” In L.I. Levine, ed. *The Jerusalem Cathedra* 2 (Jerusalem, 1982): 79–105.
- Al-Shāmī, Muḥammad b. Yūsuf. *Subul al-hudā wa-l-rashād fī sīrat khayri ʾl-ʾibād*. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Wāḥid, ed. 11 vols. Cairo, 1990.
- Stroumsa, Guy G. “Mystical Jerusalems.” In L. I. Levine, ed. *Jerusalem: its sanctity and centrality to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. (New York, 1999), pp. 349–70.
- Al-Ṭabarānī, Sulaymān b. Aḥmad. *Al-Muʿjam al-kabīr*. Ḥamdī ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Salāfī, ed. 25 vols. Baghdad, 1980–85.
- Al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad b. Jarīr. *Jāmiʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*. 30 vols. Būlāq, 1323/1905, repr. Beirut, 1972.
- . *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*. M.J. de Goeje et al, eds. 15 vols. Leiden, 1879–1901.

Von Grunebaum, G.E. *Muhammadan festivals*. London, 1976.

Wansbrough, John. *Quranic studies*. Oxford, 1977.

Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad at Medina*. Oxford, 1956.

Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī. *Muʿjam al-buldān*. 5 vols. Beirut, 1957.