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

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

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The present article offers a new reading of some key passages found in the Qur'an 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 Qur'anic evidence

1.1 Blessed land

The Qur'an defines the land of Israel as “the sacred land” (al-ard al-muqaddasa) (Qur'an 5:21), and especially as a land on which God’s blessing (baraka) has been bestowed. The land which God has blessed (al-ard al-barakat al-ma’adda) is the one to which Abraham and Lot escape (Qur'an 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 (Qur'an 7:137). Solomon rides the wind towards the same blessed land (Qur'an 21:81).

1.2 Sacred land

Apart from the land that derives its sacredness from God’s blessing, the Qur'an knows of other precincts whose sacredness is described differently, by means of the Arabic root h.-r-m which means forbidding or declaring something sacred. The Qur'an describes the Ka‘ba as al-hajj al-haram, i.e. “the sacred house” (Qur’an 5:2, 97), while the term al-marsh’ar al-haram, “the sacred place of worship” (Qur'an 2:198), stands for a station of the hajj near ‘Arafat.

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

The term haram 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 (Qurʾān 28:57; cf. 29:67; 16:112).

It follows that the Qurʾān 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. The only difference between the two regions is that one of them, namely Mecca, is also the area in which the Qurʾān was revealed (Qurʾān 42:7).

In other words, while the Holy Land is the blessed land of the prophets, Mecca is the sacred land of Muhammad.

1.3 The night journey

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

Glory be to Him who made His servant go at night from the sacred mosque (al-masjid al-haram) to the farthest mosque (al-masjid al-aqṣa) 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. Muhammad) to travel to al-Masjid al-Aqṣa along an axis of sanctity that links Arabia with the Holy Land.

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

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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'an 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 Muhammad'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).

This new city must be the al-Masjid al-Aqsa 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-Aqsa is a prophetic vision, just like similar visions known from the Bible and the apocalyptic literature. Nöldeke already suggested that Qur'an 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." 

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3 The 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. 126-80; Stroumsa, "Mystical Jerusalem," p. 351; Hütten-Cheke, pp. 25-81; cf. Elad, "Pilgrimage," p. 384. 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 Sepulcher," p. 92.

4 Nöldeke-Scawally, Geschichte des Qor ans, vol. 1, p. 388 n. 7; Neusner-Scawally, "Warenführer," pp. 382; Wansbrough, Quatrain studies, p. 68.

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'anic night journey to al-Masjid al-Aqsa alludes to such a journey to Jerusalem. The choice of this particular destination takes the Qur'anic 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.  

1.4 Abraham

Another way in which the Qur'ān brings into contact the two sacred regions is revealed in the figure of Abraham. 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. 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; 2:130). Abraham and Ishmael his son also "raised the foundations of the House" (Qur'ān 2:127).

Abraham’s Qur’ānic tryst with 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 Muhammad’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

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6 For a comprehensive analysis of the Qur’ānic text verse, see Rubin, “Muhammad’s Night Journey,” pp. 139-43.


8 Already in Genesis 12:8 Abraham journeys “by stages” southward ("towards the South").
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'an was revealed lent it some priority over the Holy Land. This advantage is stated explicitly in Qur'an 3:96 where it is asserted that the house (i.e. the Ka'ba) in Bakkah (commonly understood as Mecca) was “the first house appointed for the people.” In the following verse (Qur'an 3:97) the “standing place of Abraham” (masjīm Ibrāhīm) is mentioned, a term standing for the Ka'ba or its vicinity (see also Qur'an 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'anic verses which deal with the direction of prayer (qibla) (Qur'an 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” (ṣufahā'). 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'an 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'anic 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 Muhammad to embrace their own religion (Qur'an 2:130-21). On the other side stand the Muslims who are convinced that they are the only true heirs to Abraham (Qur'an 3:89). This is the reason why the Qur'an declares adherence to the religion of Abraham and rejects the demand of the
Jews and the Christians to follow their own religions (Qurʾān 2:135). The Qurʾān also affirms that Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a pure Muslim, a ḥaḍīth (Qurʾān 3:67). The Qurʾān insists that the rest of the prophets, too, were neither Jews nor Christians (Qurʾān 2:140).

In conclusion, the Qurʾānic 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 Qurʾānic qibla verses are included in a Sūra that is regarded as Medinan, i.e. later than the Meccan Sūra in which the iswāf verse appears (Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān, but also in the earliest available extra-Qurʾānic Islamic texts about Muhammad 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 Muhammad'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 Muhammad's biography (ṣaḥḥa), including Ibn Ḥisham's (d. 218/833) book which is based on Ibn Ḥisham's (d. 150/768) Sūra. In these traditions, Muhammad, when still in Mecca, at the earliest stages of his prophetic career, keeps a combined qibla which is aligned with the Kaʿba as well as with Syria (al-Sham). On one occasion we learn about his combined qibla from a tradition about Abū Jahl, Muhammad'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 Muhammad's manner of prayer. It is stated that while he was in Mecca, the Prophet faced Syria in

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9In other words, the traditional chronology of the Qurʾān corresponds to the history of the axis: with the transition from Meccan to Medinan passages, the local Arabian pole gains predominance over the Syrian one.
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pra y er, 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 Muhammad.²⁰

Muhammad 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'an delineates through the person of Abraham and through Muhammad's night journey.

The same details about Muhammad's combined qibla are provided in another story relating the circumstances which caused 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb to stop harasseing Muhammad 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 tawaf (circumambulation) around it. Suddenly he saw Muhammad standing in prayer opposite the southern wall of the shrine. 'Umar explains that whenever Muhammad prayed he faced Syria (ṣitqala ta-Shām), positioning the Ka'ba between himself and Syria. 'Umar goes on to relate that he decided to listen to Muhammad 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 Muhammad's qibla, facing him, there being nothing between them but the covering of the Ka'ba. From there 'Umar could hear Muhammad reciting the Qur'an, and as he heard this, his heart was softened and Islam entered him.²¹

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'an itself. Muhammad'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-Baladhurī (d. 279/892)

report that the mosque built in Qubat (in Medina) before Muhammad's arrival had a qibla facing Jerusalem (B_yaw al-Maqdis). When Muhammad arrived in Medina he prayed in that mosque without changing its structure. The same is stated in a report of al-Wa_qid (d. 207/822) according to which Muhammad built his own mosque in a sanctuary established already before his arrival in Medina by Asad b. Zarqa, and its qibla was aligned with B_yaw al-Maqdis. Muhammad's own mosque also faced the same direction. On a more general level, several traditions say that the A_mir, the Arab Muslims of Medina, had prayed towards Jerusalem two or three years before Muhammad's arrival in their town.

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 Muhammad's Companions, al-Bara' b. Ma'rur. The story forms part of a report about a delegation of Medinan believers who set out to Mecca to discuss with Muhammad (at al-Aqaba) the terms of his arrival in Medina. Ben Ishaq relates that when the delegation was already on its way to Mecca, one of the believers, al-Bara' b. Ma'rur, 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-Sham), and they did not wish to act differently. But al-Bara' 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-Bara' 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. Muhammad said to him: "You already had a good qibla, if only you had kept to it." So al-Bara' 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. It is also reported that al-Bara' demanded that when he died,
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 Muhammad's *hijra*. While some believers like al-Baraa' 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 Muhammad'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 Mujahid (d. 104/722) on the authority of Ibn 'Abbâs, as recorded by Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845), says that while in Mecca, Muhammad 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 Ishaq (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-Waqi'î. It is related on the authority of the Companion Abu Sa'd al-Khadr who says that he once asked 'Abdallah b. Salâm, the Jewish convert to Islam, about the significance of the footprints seen on the stone known as Maqâm Ebrâhim (located in front of the Ka'ba). Ibn Salâm 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 Muhammad 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

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Medina, God decided to turn the Prophet towards His qibla which He preferred for Himself and for His prophets. So, as long as Muhammad remained in Medina he prayed in alignment with the qibla (mzzab) of the Ka'ba, and when he afterwards came to Mecca (after its takeover in 8/630), he faced the Maqam in prayer.

In the pre-hijra history of the qibla as described in this tradition, the Ka'ba and Jerusalem are still two legal qiblas, but now each is observed by different persons. Abraham's and Ishmael's qibla is the Ka'ba, while Muhammad's is Jerusalem. After the hijra, the qibla of Jerusalem is eliminated, and the Ka'ba 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 Ka'ba, was that of the prophets.

This polemical rift provides the circumstantial background to the Qur'anic 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 Qur'anic 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 Muhammad shifted the qibla from Syria to the Ka'ba (in the month of Rajab, 17 months after Muhammad'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 Muhammad astray from his religion. The tradition concludes with the statement that at this point God revealed the Qur'anic verses that denounce "the fools" who have condemned the believers for abandoning their former qibla (Qur'an 2:142).

The conflict over the legacy of the prophets also arises from the Tafsir of Muqtil b. Sulayman (d. 150/767). He reports that Muhammad put to the Jews that they knew that the Ka'ba was referred to in the Torah as a qibla, but had expunged the evidence.

\[\text{Azraq, } A\text{khb\acute{a}, p. 273 (from I-Waqid).}\]

\[\text{Muqtil, } T\text{afsir, vol. 1, p. } 144-6.\text{ On the debate on which was the prophets' qibla — Mecca or Jerusalem — see also Husseini, "Qur\text{\'an 2:114 and Jerusalem," p. } 237; Kister, "Sanctity," p. 53.}\]

\[\text{Ibn Hisham, } S\text{ra, vol. 2, p. 398-b.}\]

\[\text{Muqtil, } T\text{afsir, vol. 1, p. 148 (on 2:142).}\]
ordered to turn their "mosques" towards al-Masjid al-Haram.\footnote{Muqatil, Tafsir, vol. 2, p. 296.}

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\footnote{Kahle, "Sanctity," p. 101; Elad, Jerusalem, p. 38; idem, "Status," p. 51.} and describes a dialogue between the caliph 'Umar b. al-Khattab and Ka'b al-Ahbar, 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 'Abd al-Rahman b. Sa'd (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'b 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'b remained his only qibla.

He stated that this was how Muhammad himself had prayed during his night journey.\footnote{Abu Ubayd, Anwaar, no. 438; See also Al-Maawali, Hifdh al-abhbab, vol. 1, pp. 296-317; Kanz, vol. 9, no. 1215 (from Abu Ubayd).}

In the version of Abu 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 Mecca and that of Muhammad, should merge.\footnote{Abu Ubayd, Anwaar, no. 438; See also Al-Maawali, Hifdh al-abhbab, vol. 1, pp. 296-317; Kanz, vol. 9, no. 1215 (from Abu Ubayd).}

In al-Tabarî's version, the caliph rejects Ka'b's Jewish-oriented advice...
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and says, “We were not ordered [to face] the Rock, but [to face] the Ka’ba.”

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 Muhammad’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 Ḥajjān Muhammad b. Ṣarrūn (d. 110/728). He declares that people used to avoid facing either of the two qiblas while relieving themselves (لا يركبون في صلة ولا يرجعون إلى أولى (لا يركبون في صلة ولا يرجعون إلى أولى). 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.

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.

Muslim hadith scholars explained that the versions about the two qiblas were brought into existence by the ongoing respect (هُبْنِ) accorded to Jerusalem which had once been an Islamic qibla. Jerusalem, and mainly the site called al-Masjid al-Aqsa, indeed retained its old status as a qibla. This is indicated in a report about the

26Tāfarīkh, Series I, p. 2493.
28See the version of the Companion Maqil b. Abī Maqil al-Basbūlī from the Prophet (transmitted from Maqil b. Abī Maqil al-Basbūlī, a nephew of the Basbūlī), in Ibn Abī Shayba, vol. 1, pp. 158, 159; Ahmad, Musnad, vol. 4, p. 238, vol. 6, p. 416; Ibn Majah, vol. 1, no. 319 [177]; Abū Dāwūd, vol. 1, p. 3 [44]. See also the version of Nāṣir indirectly from the Prophet: Ahmad, Musnad, vol. 5, p. 430. The version of Abū Ayyūb: Ahmad, Musnad, vol. 5, p. 435. Here it is stated that the restriction was especially hard to follow when one was using the lavatories in Egypt (الحوائج في مصر), probably because they were facing east, i.e. towards Mecca as well as Jerusalem. For the meaning of the term qibla, see Mālik/Zurqānī, vol. 2, p. 155.
29Mūsā al-Dāwūd, Sunan, vol. 1, pp. 2-3 [144].
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acetic (ṣahid) Abū ʿAbd al-Awāṣ who renounced worldly life and dedicated himself to reading the Qurʾān in Jerusalem. Yaqtī 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 ḫalq (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 Muhammad’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-yajmaʿ a ḥayna ‘l-qiblatayni), because Jerusalem was the destination of the hijra of most prophets, and in this manner all sorts of virtues were combined for Muhammad. 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 Qurʾān 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 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 Fest) and his followers held that Muhammad adopted the Kaʿba 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
as the above-mentioned texts are concerned, the Ka'ba was an Islamic qibla from the very first stages of Muhammad's activity in Mecca, long before his so-called "break with the Jews." 35

As for Jerusalem, some modern scholars have contended that its sanctity has no substantial roots in Muhammad's Islam. It is not mentioned in the Qur'an; the Qur'anic al-Masjid al-Aqsa 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


35 Cf. Rubin, "Janghīya and Ka'ba."
36E.g. Hasson, "The Muslim view of Jerusalem," passim. Some traditions do mention the tactical purpose of Muhammad's prayer towards Jerusalem (e.g. Tabarrur, Ta'if, vol. 2, p. 4 [on Qur'ān 2:122]), but they seem to serve an apologetic need: to explain away Muhammad's problematic adherence to a Jewish practice.
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