

Bayt Al Maqdis: An Islamic Perspective

[A Muslim Scholar]

“Rest assured that Believers, Jews, Christians and Sabians – whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and performs good deeds - will be rewarded by their Lord; they will have nothing to fear or to regret.” Quran 2: 62

In this paper I will briefly reflect on Muslims’ understanding of the Jerusalemite Holy Land. For obvious reasons, there is a continuously proliferating material explaining the significance of the “Holy Land” in Jerusalem to Muslims. However, in this short paper I will pay more attention to the Abrahamic context, in which this significance is shaped and that understanding is unfolding. I hope this humble paper will help depoliticizing an unnecessarily highly politicized issue. I also hope that the reader will avoid any political reading to this theological and legal paper.

Islam: Last Revelation or Completeness of Revelation?

It is well-known that Islam makes the claim that it is the last revelation. Muslims expect no more prophets as Muhammad PBUH (peace be upon him) was the last prophet. This fact, however, is missing an important aspect. The revelation of Islam is not recognized in separation from the earlier revelations and the message of Islam is understood as a part and parcel of an overarching message that started from Prophet Adam and continued to Prophet Abraham and then on to the prophets of his children. There is no belief in Islam if a Muslim does not believe in the earlier prophets; and the Quran puts all prophets on equal foot. In Sura 2 Allah says:

“The Messenger believes in the Guidance revealed to him from his Lord and so do the Believers. They all believe in Allah, His angels, His books and His Messengers. They say: “We do not discriminate against anyone of His Messengers.” And they say: “We hear and we obey. Grant us Your forgiveness, O Lord; to You we shall all return.”¹

In this Ayah (verse) Allah lists all the basic articles of faith; one of them is the belief in His equal Messengers. Moreover, Quran sometimes uses “Islam” not to refer to the specific revelation of Muhammad, but rather to this one overarching message. In this sense Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and all the prophets of Israel are, from a Quranic perspective, prophets of “Islam”. In the same Surah one reads Allah saying:

“Who but a foolish man would renounce the faith of Abraham? We chose him in this worldly life, while in the Hereafter, he will be among the righteous. [130] When his Lord asked him: “Be a Muslim,” he answered: “I have become a Muslim to the Lord of the worlds.” [131] This was the legacy that Abraham left to his sons and so did Jacob, when he said: “O my sons! Allah has chosen for you this Deen (way of life), therefore, die not unless you are Muslims.”[132] Were you present when death approached Jacob? He asked his sons: “Who will you worship after me?” They replied: “We will worship the same One God Who is your

¹ Noble Quran, Sura 2, Ayah 285.

Lord and the Lord of your forefathers Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac, and to Him we all submit as Muslims." [133]²

Why are there so many revelations then? The Islamic answer to this question is that there are many revelations but, as the above Ayah shows, there is only a one faith. The difference between these revelations is the way this one faith is unfolded in terms of its ritual practice and legal system. In Surah 5 Allah asks both Jews and Christians to follow the path of Torah and Injil (New Testament) respectively. Allah says:

"Indeed We revealed the Torah to Moses, in which there is guidance and light: By its laws, all the Prophets, who submitted (to the will of Allah), judged the Jews and so did the Lord is and jurists of law. They were entrusted the protection of Allah's Book and they themselves were witnesses. Have no fear of people; fear Me, and do not sell My revelations for a petty price: [45] Then in the footsteps of those Prophets, We sent Jesus the son of Mary confirming the Torah revealed before his time, and gave him the Gospel wherein was guidance and light, corroborating what was revealed in the Torah; a guidance and an admonition to those who fear Allah. [46] Therefore, let the people who follow the Gospel judge by the Law which Allah has revealed therein; To you, O Muhammad, We have revealed this Book with the truth. It confirms whatever had been revealed in the scriptures which came before it and also to safeguard it. Therefore, judge between people according to Allah's revelations and do not yield to their vain desires, diverging from the truth which has come to you. We have ordained a law and a Way of life for each of you... therefore try to excel one another in good deeds. Ultimately you all shall return to Allah; then He will show you the truth of those matters in which you dispute. [48]"³

Al Tabari quotes Qatada in his commentary on the Ayah 48 saying that

"the Torah has Sharia; the Gospel has Sharia; and the Quran has Sharia. In these Sharias Allah makes things differently prohibited and allowed to test His people; to know who obeys Him and who disobeys Him. The one religion that Allah accepts nothing but it is monotheism and devotion to Allah. That is the common message of all prophets."⁴

In fact that was Muhammad's PBUH understanding of himself and his mission. He understood Islam not only as an "episode", the last one, in a long chain of messages, but as an integral part of a larger structure. Islam, according to Muhammad, is a piece that completes a whole. Prophet Muhammad said,

"I and the prophets before me are like a man who built a home and made it wonderful and beautiful, except in a place of a one piece of adobe at its corner. People would go around it and get amazed of its beauty and say, "would not that adobe be put in its place?" I am this adobe; and I am the seal of prophets."⁵

Al Isra' and Al Qibla

It is in this context of unity and integration and not a context of conflict and competition that we must approach and understand the nature of the Holy Land in Jerusalem in Islam. In fact

² Noble Quran, Sura 2, Ayah 130: 133.

³ Noble Quran, Sura 5, Ayah 44: 48.

⁴ Al Tabari, Abu Ja'far, Interpretation of Quran, Surah 5, Ayah 48.

⁵ Al Bukhari, Chapter of Manaqeb, Hadith 3535.

Muslims root the significance of Al Aqsa Mosque in Islam, as the third important Mosque next to the Mosque of Mecca and that of Medina, in two reasons: the Isra' and the qibla. Let us briefly reflect on these two reasons to see how they should be reasons of unity not ones of divisiveness.

Isra' in Arabic means a night journey; and the event of Isra' is directly followed by Me'raj, which refers to his ascension to the Heavens. The narratives of the two events are so many and are full of details. There is also no consensus that they happened physically as some scholars, and even companions of the Prophet, including his wife Aisha, believe they were a sort of spiritual experience. In this paper we are interested in neither the details nor the physical/spiritual debate. We are interested in the centrality of Bayt Al Maqdis, Al Aqsa Mosque, and the key details that are correlated with it. The Me'raj had to go through Bayt Al Maqdis. In fact Ibn Kathier, after reciting all the narratives of Isra' and Me'raj, reaches an interesting conclusion. The passing by Bayt Al Maqdis happened twice, before Me'raj and after it⁶.

In this itinerary Muhammad PBUH had gone through Bayt Al Maqdis to Heaven, where he received the commandment of five daily prayers; and then he made it back to Mecca through Bayt Al Maqdis, where he led all the prophets in praying. Muhammad PBUH departed from Mecca, the place of Al Bayt Al Haram that was built by Abraham and his son Ishmael PBUT, to Jerusalem, the place of Bayt Al Maqdis that was built and served by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all their prophet children PBUT. The night journey symbolizes unity, or rather reunion, of the two houses of Abraham, the house of Ishmael and the house of Isaac. From Jerusalem Muhammad PBUH went right to Heaven where he received the commandment of prayer. The commandment was originally fifty daily prayers, which went gradually down to five by the frequent advice of Prophet Moses PBUH to go back and ask Allah to ease it for Muslims.

Once again we see the Divine commandment of prayer is settled down through Muhammad Moses PBUT negotiation. Muslims pray five prayers and not fifty because of Moses' PBUH advice, another remarkable aspect of unity.⁷ Once Muhammad had received the commandment of prayer he came back to Jerusalem, accompanied by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the prophets of Israel, or the prophets of Islam, according to Quran, to pray together in the Holy Land. That was another moving, inspiring and impressive scene of unity where all the prophets come together to pray a one prayer in the Holy Land. After this prayer it was the time for Muhammad to go back to Mecca.

The moving from Jerusalem to Mecca evokes the second reason, in which the significance of Bayt Al Maqdis is rooted, namely the shifting of Al Qibla, the direction of prayer, from Jerusalem to Mecca. Muslims call Al Aqsa Mosque "the first Qibla". Muhammad PBUH used to pray to Al Ka'aba while in Mecca. Moving to Medina he prayed to Jerusalem for nearly 17 months until Allah commanded him to pray to Mecca again. Interestingly, Ibn Kathier writes,

⁶ Ibn Kathier, Tafseer Al Quran Al 'Azeem, Surah Al Isra', Ayah 1.

⁷ In fact prayer in Arabic is *salah*; and *selah* is connection. Prayer is a connection between the believer and Allah; and it was commanded through the connection between the two houses of Abraham

“The Messenger of Allah PBUH was commanded to pray to the Rock of Bayt Al Maqdis. Therefore he used to pray in Mecca between the two corners so that he is looking to Ka’aba and the Rock together. However, that became impossible when he migrated to Medina and he had to choose a one of them (the Ka’aba or the Rock). He prayed to the Rock for months until Allah commanded him to head for Al Ka’aba.”⁸

The Quran comments on this shift by saying:

“And everyone has a direction to which he turns his whole attention. Then vie with one another in good works. Wherever you may be ALLAH will bring you all together. Surely, ALLAH has the power to do all that HE wills. [148] And from wheresoever thou comest forth, turn thy face towards the Sacred Mosque; for that is indeed the truth from thy Lord. And ALLAH is not unmindful of what you do. [149]”⁹

Muhammad PBUH, then, had united the two directions together, the one to Ka’aba and the one to Jerusalem until he moved north to Medina and he had to choose a one of them. According to Qortobi it was his *ijtihad* or judgment to join the Jews of Medina and pray to Jerusalem¹⁰. He was missing Ka’aba nevertheless but as he received no revelation about Qibla he had to follow the earlier revelation of the Jews. After seventeen months Allah commanded him to turn back to Ka’aba. This shift of direction in prayer does not reflect a shift from the One we all pray to. Allah is everywhere and what matters is only the good work. The shift does not reflect a rupture from the earlier revelations; all what Allah wants from this commandment is to test Muslims’ obedience. Allah says:

“And WE did not appoint the Qiblah which thou didst follow; except that WE might know him who follows the Messenger of ALLAH from him who turns upon his heels. And this is indeed hard except for those whom ALLAH has guided.”¹¹

Al Isra’ and Al Qibla again

There are two relevant and interesting notions worth to mention here. First, the shifting of Qibla is a collective echo of Isra’. In Isra’ and Me’raj Muhammad PBUH went from Mecca to Heaven through Jerusalem. He arrived back to Jerusalem to pray with all the earlier prophets and then headed to Mecca again. This experience is collectively echoed by Muslims who prayed to Ka’aba in Mecca, moved to Medina to pray to Jerusalem and finally headed back to Ka’aba. In this context the shifting of direction is neither a diversion nor a rupture; it is resumption. Muhammad went to Heaven not away from but *through* Jerusalem, and came back again from Heaven to Mecca through Jerusalem. Muslims likewise prayed to Allah through Jerusalem; and it is through Jerusalem that they turned back to Mecca. Muhammad PBUH, Muslims and Islam began from the Judeo-Christian Abrahamic tradition to resume a centuries-long spiritual journey. The shifting from Jerusalem to Mecca is not a departure; it is a one more step forward in that long journey.

⁸ Ibn Kathier, Tafseer Al Quran Al ‘Azeem, Surah Baqarah, Ayah 142.

⁹ Noble Quran, Surah 2, Ayah 148, 149.

¹⁰ Al Qortobi, Ahkam Al Quran, Surah 2, Ayah 144.

¹¹ Noble Quran, Surah 2, Ayah 143.

Second, the shifting of Qibla was a downplaying of the significance of the physical place, to which we pray and an emphasis on the One to whom we pray. Allah says:

“And WE did not appoint the Qiblah which thou didst follow; except that WE might know him who follows the Messenger of ALLAH from him who turns upon his heels. And this is indeed hard except for those whom ALLAH has guided. And ALLAH would never let your faith go in vain; surely, ALLAH is compassionate and Merciful to the people.”¹²

The shifting from Jerusalem to Mecca is not to privilege Mecca over Jerusalem but to downplay both of them and emphasize the fact that we direct our prayers not to a specific place but to Allah Himself. The Ayah above says “who follows the Messenger of Allah”, but the meaning is “who follows Allah”. Apparently, it is obedience to the Messenger; in truth it is obedience to Allah. This using of the “Messenger” is to structurally parallel the apparent prayer to Jerusalem or Mecca, when in truth it is to Allah. The sacred is the Divine, only Him, not a physical place or a human being; not Jerusalem or Muhammad PBUH. The Ayah also says “Allah would never let your *faith* go in vain”. Al Tabari, Ibn Kathier, Al Qortobi, Al Sa’adi and almost all those who wrote exegeses of the Quran interpreted *faith* as *prayer*; Allah would never let your prayer go in vain.¹³

The Sacred and the Historical

The just mentioned notion deserves some careful attention, especially when we handle the “holy land”, a term that has two parts; one referring to the sacred; the second to the historical. Allah does not reveal Himself through the people of Islam; nor does He reveal Himself through a specific religious institution. Unlike Moses and Jesus PBUH Muhammad PBUH did not bring miracles in the sort of cleaving the sea or endowing the blind his eyesight. The only miracle of Islam is the words of Quran, which were not miraculously handed in tablets or scrolls, but had to come through Muhammad PBUH and within specific and relevant historical contexts. In its beginning Islam vigorously, and sometimes bitterly, wrestled against any sort of engaging the sacred with the physical world and its material objects. More than twenty years after the prophethood of Islam the Prophet was asked by some of his companions to get a holy tree, on its branches they would hang their ribbons for blessing. Muhammad PBUH got startled and cried out, “Allah-u-Akbar” that is Allah is so great that His holiness could be approached through a tree.¹⁴ In many pieces of hadith Muhammad PBUH insistently rejected and prohibited any form of portrayal or drawing for a religious purpose. He would not tolerate them in his house even for mundane reasons.

In pilgrimage Muslims go around Al Ka’aba in circles that start by either touching the Black Stone or pointing at it by hand. Nevertheless, it is well known that the aimed is Allah not His home. Caliph Omar while conducting his pilgrimage approached the Stone and declared,

¹² Noble Quran, Surah 2, Ayah 143.

¹³ “Ibn Abbas said, “When the Prophet PBUH was directed towards Al Ka’aba people said, “O the Messenger of Allah, how is it about those who had died in the days when we were praying to Bayt Al Maqdis?” Then Allah revealed “Allah would never let your faith go in vain.” Al Termedhi, Tafseer Al Quran, H□adith 3227.

¹⁴ Al Termedhi and Musnad Abu Ya’ala.

“I do know you are but a helpless stone! If I did not see the Prophet PBUH touching you, I would not!”¹⁵

The Prophet PBUH however had already stated that the inviolability of a single Muslim is greater than that of Ka’aba. He had even talked to his wife Aisha saying,

“O Aisha! If it were not that your people had just been polytheists I would have demolished Al Ka’aba down to earth (and rebuilt it) and made two doors to it, one eastern and one western, and would have extended it six arms.”¹⁶

Here the Prophet treats Al Ka’aba as a this-worldly building that could be demolished down and rebuilt up again. It could be modified and renewed. The Prophet PBUH however is quite aware of the contextual culture he is changing and he would not rush into provocative acts before its proper time. He had to wait until the people who had correlated specific sanctity to this building before converting to Islam would satisfactorily absorb the principles of the new religion.

Religious communities have frequently been obsessed with the space and time dimensions and borders of the sacred, be they the exact tomb place of a saint or a prophet, the right spot, in which the Divine revealed His glory, or the precise date, at which the ancestor community of believers were graced a divine gift or witnessed a terrific miracle. They found the abstract encounter with the sacred difficult and trying. For convenience, the sacred, the non historical, has to be historically defined. Muslim communities are no different. In their dealing with the Jerusalemite Holy Land they have raised a number of questions to historically situate and define the land and the events related to it in Islamic history. Temporally, the Night Journey from Mecca to Jerusalem was seen as a physical event that happened by the body of Muhammad PBUH in the real time of that night. The early vivid debate of whether Al Isra’ happened by the soul or the body of Muhammad has gradually faded up and it is almost a consensus now that Al Isra’ was a physical event. Spatially, three physical landmarks were developed: the Noble Sanctuary, Al Aqsa Mosque and the Rock. Now the sacred can be squarely situated in history, can be temporally and spatially defined and can conveniently be encountered.

The holiness of the Holy Land has therefore both a temporal and spatial dimensions. In this paper we will not get engaged into the temporal aspect; we will restrict ourselves to only its spatial dimension. To articulate, however, this dimension we will need first to review the three physical sites that landmark the holiness of the Holy Land. To start with let us take the Rock, on which the Mosque of the Rock is erected. Why do Muslims revere and sanctify that Rock? The only faint trace we could find to answer this question is found in a very incredible Hadith, one that any scholar will refrain from citing it. In this claimed Hadith it is said that Archangel Gabriel, arriving to Jerusalem with Prophet Muhammad PBUH, perforated the Rock to tie Al Boraq, the mystic riding animal that carried the Prophet over to Jerusalem.¹⁷ Both Al Termedhi and Al Bazzar who had narrated this Hadith put so much suspicion on its credibility. Obviously it was something that had been invented to make sense, in Islamic terms, of an undeniably important feature of the “Holy Land”. In some folk tales, however, it

¹⁵ Al Bukhari, Book of Pilgrimage, 1605.

¹⁶ Muslim, Book of Pilgrimage, 3308.

¹⁷ Musnad Al Bazzar and Sonan Al Termedhi.

is said that the Ascension to Heaven had started by the stepping of Muhammad PBUH on the Rock. This is even less credible, if at all. Interestingly, the historical debate about who was the son to be sacrificed by Abraham PBUH and the exchanging of arguments for Ishmael and Isaac that one can find in earlier exegeses like Al Qortobbi have also faded out with a consensus nowadays among Muslims that it was “of course” Ishmael. In this procession a view of the Rock as the place, at which Abraham was going to sacrifice his son Isaac has no place in today’s Muslims’ narrative.

It is worthy to review here how Caliph Omar, the most famous Companion of the Prophet PBUH treated the Rock. Imam Ahmed Ibn Hanbal narrated a conversation between Omar and Ka’ab El Ahbar, a convert Jew who lived during the days of the Prophet but had not converted until his death. In this conversation that goes on the Temple Mount Omar consults Ka’ab about the best place to build a mosque over the Mount, Ka’ab suggested that mosque would fit the best behind the Rock. “...so that all Jerusalem would be before you.” Omar declined. He replied, “You correspond to Judaism!”¹⁸

In other words, the Rock has nothing to do with Islam; its reverence is only a correspondence to Judaism. Ibn Kathier in his exegesis of the Surah of Isra’ eloquently comments on this behavior of Omar. He wrote,

“He (Omar) neither exalted it, by praying and it is before him, as Ka’ab, who belonged to people exalting it that they had made it their qibla, had suggested, nor did he humiliate it as the Christians had done by turning it into a place of garbage because it is the qibla of the Jews.”¹⁹

Omar made his decision to pray “where the Prophet PBUH prayed”. Nonetheless, if he knew where the Prophet PBUH had prayed then why did he consult Ka’ab? Omar did not know where exactly the Prophet PBUH had prayed. He consulted Ka’ab not in spite but because of his Jewishness. He was the one who had the appropriate knowledge of the features of the place. Ka’ab expectedly suggested having a mosque that gathers the two qiblas together. In fact, technically, Ka’ab did not “convert”, as he needed not to abandon Judaism, in which Islam is rooted; Ka’ab just extended his faith to include Islam. On the other hand, Omar decided to have a mosque with a distinct qibla to Al Ka’aba and therefore he went southward leaving the Rock behind him. This is also not unexpected from Omar who wanted to publicly declare that Islam, the new religion, did already depart from Judaism and Christianity and has progressed into its distinct path.

Had the conversation between the second Caliph and Ka’ab ended Omar immediately took off his robe and started to collect into it the garbage that had accumulated for long years in this revered place. Soon everyone joined him and then they prayed at the very place known now as Al Aqsa Mosque. Here it is clear that the detailed geography of the place was not important in terms of which spot was holy, which spot was holier or holiest and which spot was less holy or not holy at all. Omar and the rest of Muslims knew this is the place where Prophet Abraham and his successor prophets PBUT had frequented to prayed and worship God. It is a revered place worthy to be cleansed off and to resume its respect and function

¹⁸ Mosnad Ahmed Ibn Hanbal.

¹⁹ Ibn Kathier, Tafseer Al Quran Al ‘Azeem, Surah Al Isra’, Ayah 1.

by setting on prayer again on its land. The specific and precise place of Abraham's, David's or Solomon's Temple is no important as far as Muslims were concerned. The Prophet once said,

“The (whole) earth was made to me (and Muslims) a mosque and ablution; wherever it is the time of prayer you can pray.”²⁰

Omar arbitrarily chose a place to pray in and the place he chose was good: on the Temple Mount, looking to the Ka'aba and close enough to, and yet far enough from, the Jewish Rock. What was left behind on the Temple Mount would later be known as the Noble Sanctuary. How could the Noble Sanctuary be a noble sanctuary? How could the dimensions of the Noble Sanctuary get determined? There is no immediate answer to those two questions. From an Islamic legal point of view there are two recognized sanctuaries, one in Mecca, the second in Medina. Being “sanctuaries” they have maintained specific regulations that distinguish them from the rest of lands. For instance an animal or a bird could not be killed in these lands. Is this the case for the Noble Sanctuary? The answer is simply no! That does not deprive the land from its glory, a glory that could textually be traced to the call of Moses PBUH, as recited in Quran, to Ben Israel to “enter the Holy Land”.

Does that mean Moses' Holy Land is the Noble Sanctuary? Well, Al Qortobbi had recited some opinions of the earliest Muslim scholars: the Holy Land could be the Levantine (Qatada), Mount Tour and the area around it (Mujahid), Jericho (Ibn Abbas, As-Saddi and Ibn Zayd), or Damascus, Palestine and some of Jordan (Az-Zajaj). Qortobbi finally prefers the Levantine as it would be “more inclusive”.²¹ Ibn Kathier however, after reciting all these opinions and adding a one more opinion that it could be Egypt, an opinion he thought of as quite strange, preferred to define the Holy Land as “Beit Al Maqdis”²², a term that can refer to either Jerusalem or the Temple Mount.

The shift from the Levantine of Qatada, who belonged to the Muslims' second generation, to Beit Al Maqdis of Ibn Kathier, who lived in the eighth Islamic century, is a movement to localize, besiege and control an irregular fluid and spreading *holy*. It is a movement to legalize the inherently spiritual, to naturalize the unnatural, to map, border and canonize the essentially mystic. It is a movement to handle and conveniently encounter that *holy*. That brings us to the two intertwined questions of what is “holy” and how to approach it?

Muslim and non Muslim translators of the word *moqaddas* used to use the English word *holy*. However, in no place in Islamic scholarship one would find *moqaddas* in the way *holy* is used in Robertson Smith's book *The Religion of the Semites*, as a dwelling of the divine into a specific part of the physical world. The meaning of the sacred is that which is set apart.

Muslim scholars understood and explained the word *moqaddas* in the Quran exegeses as *motahhar* or pure (Al Sa'adi, Al Qortobbi). In that sense Beit Al Maqdes is a place in which people could purify themselves from their sins. Al Qortobbi also recited Mujahid explaining *moqaddas* as *mubarak* or blessed. *Moqaddas* is distinguished but is certainly not set apart

²⁰ Al Bukhari, Book of Prayer, Hadith 438.

²¹ Al Qortobi, *Ahkam Al Quran*, Surah 5, Ayah 21.

²² Ibn Kathier, *Tafseer Al Quran Al 'Azeem*, Surah 5, Ayah 21.

either. It is mubarak or blessed, a potentially mystic character, attributed to the everyday objects and activities and yet manifested naturally through worldly structures. This is an important definition as it reflects on the legal consequences of the *Holy Land*.

Muslims east and west believe 'Arafat Mountain is moqaddas or mubarak and they usually use the two words interchangeably. Yet, no Muslim ever would think of bringing in a rock of this mountain and putting in his/her home as a source of blessing. Nor would any Muslim believe in a divine nature of the Mountain. Nevertheless, every Muslim still dreams of doing pilgrimage that its apex and most important ritual is the stepping on 'Arafat Mountain and praying to Allah in this blessed place.

The meaning of blessing, in Arabic *Baraka*, can be a divine grace, not dwelling, occupying a specific time²³ or a space.²⁴ Moreover, Baraka is not a static character attributed to static objects or specific humans. It, first, gets up and down, could be doubled and is liable to reduction. Besides, and more important, it is created through the active human action. In regular economic transaction the Baraka can get increased or reduced according to the way the two parties involved conduct their business.²⁵ Baraka here depends on the intention and conduct of the trading parties. It is rooted in the human action and that makes a dramatic and vital difference between it and the concept of holiness or sacredness. The holiness is a divine revelation through the natural world irrelevant to the human activity. The Baraka, on the other hand, is manifested only through the human activity. That human activity could be praying, fasting or reciting the Quran; and it could be an agricultural, trading or professional activity. If a certain place is blessed, endowed with Baraka, that Baraka would be manifested only through the activity conducted in this place. Besides, that Baraka will fluctuate up and down according to this specific activity.

This understanding of Baraka as a grace from God that permeates in different strengths the entire physical world and the human activity, which could increase or get reduced and is essentially relevant to the human action, is the only understanding possible to recognize the meaning of the Holy Land; from now on I shall call it the Blessed Land. It is the very meaning, which Omar understood during his conversation with Ka'ab. The only way to revere Beit Al Maqdis is not by precisely mapping the lost borders of its holiness, but in fact by resuming the very human action that blessed this land: the prayers of the blessed prophets. The Blessed Land is blessed because of the prayers of the faithful, through which they exalt and glorify the Divine. The Blessed Land is being blessed by setting out prayers, peace, justice, mercy, compassion, cooperation and forgiveness. Would a Jewish

²³ Um 'Atiya reported that everyone would be encouraged to get out of his/her home and witness the prayer of the 'Eid, even the menstruating women, who legally are not required to pray. Um 'Atiya would comment that those women would share the public their chanting and blessings "seeking the Baraka of this day and its purity" Al Bukhari, Hadith 971.

²⁴ For example the Prophet PBUH prayed, "O Allah! Give Medina a double what you have given Mecca of Baraka." (Al Bukhari, Hadith 1885.) That does not render Medina *holy* in a sense that it becomes sacred but means that this Baraka radiates in all the physical objects and human activities within Medina. The Prophet in another occasion made this blessing to Medina. He said, "O Allah! Put Baraka in our Medina, in our fruits, in our grains and in our seeds." (Al Bukhari, Hadith 3401) That does not certainly make any of these mundane objects holy; that makes them more fruitful and make Medina a better living place to stay in

²⁵ The Prophet PBUH said, "If they were honest and clear there will be Baraka in their trade. If they were dishonest and unclear the Baraka of their trade will be wiped out." Al Bukhari, Hadith 2079.

synagogue erected on the Temple Mount or the Noble Sanctuary make the Blessed Land less blessed? It will certainly add to its blessing because it will invite more voices that exalt and glorify the One God, to whom we all pray. The Blessed Land is larger than the Noble Sanctuary and it already accommodates mosques, churches and synagogues. Had Omar found a synagogue above the Mount he would never remove it but would treat it in the same respect and sensibility he treated the Holy Sepulcher Church. Though Omar had not found a Jewish temple there he respected and distanced himself and Muslims from what he considered as Jewish. The blessing of the Blessed Land will go through the good doing not through the competition for a claimed political authority and sovereignty over the *holy*!