

Children of Abraham Conference:

WHAT MAKES JERUSALEM A “HOLY” CITY  
FOR THREE FAITHS?

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*How lonely sits the city that was full of people!*

*How like a widow she has become...*

*She weeps bitterly in the night,*

*Tears on her cheeks...*

*She has none to comfort her.*

Lamentations I:1,2

There is much to lament about Jerusalem. As one observer has written, Jerusalem’s sadness is that so many people love her to death. It is often said that the blessing and the bane of the Holy City is that she is a city “holy to three faiths.” My thesis in this paper is that the conflicting “holinesses” that have been the city’s affliction for centuries could also be a source of healing.

“Holy to three faiths?” At one level this is surely true. One thinks immediately of the Western Wall, the Haram-al Sharif (Temple Mount) and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as well as many other Jewish, Christian and Muslim “holy sites.” But “holy to three faiths” also raises a number of more basic questions pertinent to the Jewish-Christian-Muslim “tri-ologue.”

Does the meaning of “holiness” per se, and therefore of the holiness of Jerusalem, vary from one tradition to another? How, when and why did Jrslm *become* holy to Jews? To Christians? To Muslims? Was there a time,

or were there times, when the city was not holy to any of them? Has the resonance of “holiness” changed for any or all of them? If the meaning of its holiness has evolved in the past, could the meaning of the holiness of Jerusalem be changing now? If so how? Further, could all three traditions even *work with each other* to deepen and expand the meaning of the city’s holiness?

To address these questions, I will use a historical approach, showing that the meaning of Jerusalem as a “holy city” is multivalent and mutable. The city has often been in the past holy to more than these three faiths, and at times (including now) has successfully served as a holy city for more than one faith. The holiness of the city has waxed and waned over the centuries due in some measure to the historical circumstances of the then current relationships among the three Abrahamic traditions. The meaning of Jerusalem’s holiness is neither fixed nor static. It is responsive to human influences, and it could change again.

A. Some people think (wish?) that the name of Jerusalem means something like “city of peace.” It does not. It is derived from the name of the pre-Israelite Syrian deity “Shalem.” The name means “founded by Shalem,” and since the founding of cities was regarded in the ancient Middle East as religious actions, Jerusalem was a “holy city” from its inception, although not within any of the three Abrahamic traditions that later made it holy.

The Bible says little about how David came to occupy Jrslm, but he wanted the city to be called “City of David” (cf. Constantinople and Ho Chi Minh City). However, the residents still referred to it by its previous name, Jerusalem. According to the biblical account, David purchased the central religious site of the city, the “thrashing floor” from the Jebusites. He then

apparently allowed the Jebusite priests who had previously occupied the site to remain and to continue to use it for cultic purposes, alongside the worship of YHWH which he introduced. Jrslm was not, under David, therefore a city marked by an exclusive monotheism. His successor, Solomon, also allowed, even welcomed other cultic practices in Jrslm, many of them imported along with his wives, most notably Jezebel. The prophets, at least some of them railed against this practice, but the fact that they railed demonstrates that it was going on.

*It is vital to notice that from its first days as a “Jewish city” under David, Jrslm was “holy” to at least two religions.*

The Jewish YHWH cultus was a de-centralized one with centers in various places in Canaan. But eventually, as much for political as for religious purposes (the two can hardly be distinguished), the cultus was centered in the temple of Jrslm, and other centers were outlawed.

During the exile of the Jewish elites in Babylon (the non-elites were left behind) Jerusalem (or its poetic equivalent “Zion”) became a symbol not just of a city but of a whole way of life that had been lost and that the exiles – like exiles ever since – romanticized and longed to regain. When under the Persian ruler Cyrus, the Jews were allowed to “return” (though obviously few if any of the original deportees remained alive), the city walls and the temple were rebuilt under Ezra. A strong temple-centered priestly religion closely integrated with the political ruling class was set up. When, centuries later, the Romans conquered Jrslm, they ruled through the priestly class, centered in the Jrslm temple, which became their collaborators. This largely puppet regime evoked a variety of protests from the Jewish people, ranging from the armed rebellion of the Zealots to the desert withdrawal of the Essenes (who gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls) to the “Jesus Movement” a non-

violent but also non-withdrawalist group centered first in Galilee, whose leader was executed by the Romans when he brought his protest to Jrslm.

After the initial success, then defeat of the Jewish rebellion against Roman rule in 68-70 CE, the temple (except for the Western Wall) was razed, the city itself destroyed. The Jews were deported from the city, thus creating a huge diaspora. But in prayer and song, for 1900 years, many still longed to “return:”(“Next year in Jerusalem!”) Meanwhile, the city became holy in yet another sense, as a venue where the gods of the Roman pantheon were honored. In 130 CE, the Roman emperor Hadrian renamed it “Aelia Capitolina” after himself (his middle name was Aelius) and the temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline hill in Rome. Shrines to the other gods, in true Roman fashion, were to be built throughout the city. Both Jews and Christians at this point began to construct visions of a “heavenly Jerusalem” which could not be destroyed. (See the Jewish apocryphal book of Enoch and Revelation XXI in the New Testament.

B. The early Christians despised Jerusalem. Far from “holy,” they saw it as the pit of death and destruction where Jesus had been crucified. They avoided it as much as they could. The bishop of nearby Caesarea was acknowledged to be more important. It was only in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, with the “conversion” of Constantine that the city came under “Christian” rule. Then Constantine’s mother Helen made her famous pilgrimage to the “Terra Sacra” and returned with the first in what developed into one of the most profitable souvenir dodges in history: the “true cross.” An ugly legend claims that she discovered it where the wicked Jews had buried it only by threatening an old Jew with an unpleasant death.

Now Jrslm became a holy city again, and this time of just one religion, Byzantine Christianity. The local bishop, Makarios obtained Constantine's permission to tear down the Temple of Aphrodite so as to uncover the tomb of Jesus, which he claimed was buried under it. This ended the last trace of Roman holiness. The 4<sup>th</sup> century Christian historian Eusebius excitedly describes the overturning of the "lifeless idols" in this "shrine of darkness." But even he does not change his attitude toward Jrslm itself. He still called it Aelia.

Also, Jrslm had to compete with Byzantium, which as the seat of the Christian emperor claimed preeminent holiness, and with Rome, which as the seat of the pope was also lodging its claim. Still, after Helen, the trickle of pilgrims to Jrslm (and to other parts of the "Terra Sacra") became a flood. The seeds of the crusades can be found in the armed guards who accompanied pilgrims, in search of blessing and relics (and adventure), along the difficult route.

During the era of Byzantine Christian rule, Jews continued to be banned from Jerusalem, but they were admitted once a year – on the Ninth of Av – to mourn at the western wall for the destroyed temple. This was, however, hardly a generous gesture. The Christians authorities of Jrslm wanted the Jews to play an unintended role in a cruel theological drama. As the Jews wailed, the Christians watched, and were told that their sorrow was a result of God's punishment on them for refusing to recognize their messiah. By the 600's, far from despising Jerusalem, Christians now viewed it as the holiest of cities, and the tomb of Christ as the navel of the cosmos and the very source of salvation. Sophronius became patriarch of Jrslm in 633 CE. He crafted the following tribute:

*O light-giving tomb, thou art the ocean stream of eternal life and the true river of Lethe. I would lie at full length and kiss that stone, the sacred center of the world, wherein the tree was fixed which did away with the curse of Adam's tree...Hail to thee Zion, splendid sun of the world for whom I long and groan by day and night.*

But changes were on the way. In 637 Arab armies under Omar reached Jrslm. Muslim rule in the city lasted, except for the Crusader Kingdom (1099-1187) and a few minor interruptions until General Allenby led the British forces through the Jaffa Gate on 11 December 1917. Gathering the notables, Allenby promised that he would protect the holy places and preserve religious freedom for all three faiths. In seeming contradiction, however, British newspapers announced that he had completed the work of the crusaders, and that the Holy City was now a “Christmas present” and “back in Christian hands.”

C. When the earliest Muslims prayed according to the instructions of the Prophet, at first they faced Jrslm. It was their first *qiblah* since the Prophet honored the previous revelations that had been centered there. Shortly thereafter Mecca supplanted Jerusalem as the primary *qiblah*, but Jrslm continues to be given importance because of the Prophet's “Night Journey” (*al-isra*) during which he met Abraham, Moses and Jesus (the previous prophets) after ascending (*al mi' raj*) from the temple mount. The stone from which he ascended is preserved under the golden Dome of the Rock, which has become a postcard trademark of Jrslm.

With some exceptions, Jews fared better in Jrslm under Muslim rule than they did under Christian rule. Most of the Christians in the city were of Arab descent and belonged to the Syrian Orthodox wing. They harbored little affection for Western (Roman Catholic) Christians, and when the

crusader armies, about 60,000 soldiers accompanied by countless wives and pilgrims, attacked the city in 1099, the Orthodox Christians joined the Muslims in defending it against “the Franks.” The defense was to no avail, and the crusaders sacked the city, killing almost all its 30,000 inhabitants – Muslims, Christians and Jews, including women and children. As soon as they took control the crusaders promulgated a law banning Jews and Muslims from the holy city. Also, because they suspected local Christians of complicity with Islam, they were banned as well. In a significant indication of the intra-Christian tension, the crusaders changed the name of the Anastasis (Resurrection) church into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, reflecting the Western emphasis on the crucifixion and the Eastern emphasis on Resurrection in the different theologies of the two branches.

During four centuries of Ottoman rule and three decades of British mandate, Jrslm was open to all faiths. During the pre-state period, however, the key leaders of Zionism were not enamored of Jrslm. Theodor Herzl only visited it once, quite briefly, and thought it old, dirty and decrepit. His vision for the capital of the *Judenstaat* was of a gleaming new world city where science and learning would thrive. Ben Gurion did not warm to Jrslm either. His ideal was Tel Aviv, a modern and very European metropolis. Jrslm stood for what was to be discarded as a “new Jew” was born. The western section of Jrslm became a part of the newly created state of Israel in 1948. In 1967, the Israelis captured the other half, including the old walled city. It was only after this that Jrslm acquired the political-symbolic importance it now holds for some Israelis as the “eternal and undivided” capital of Israel. But it is important to recognize that despite the urging of some zealots to dismantle the Dome of the Rock, cooler heads prevailed, and the Israelis wisely preserved it and promised to continue the equal rights approach.

Today the Haram-al-Sharif is administered by the Muslim Waaf under Israeli supervision. No Christians now make any claims to political sovereignty over the city. Both the Vatican and the World Council of Churches say they want the final status of the city to be determined by negotiations among the parties.

Thus, Jews consider Jrslm holy in part because it was the site of the ancient temple, which was built there because of the belief that Abraham's binding of Isaac took place there. Catholics consider it holy as the site of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. Some evangelical Protestants consider it holy not principally for what *once happened* there but or what they expect *will happen* there, namely the return of Christ, the climactic battle of Armageddon and the final judgment (as grotesquely documented in the popular *Left Behind* series of novels). Muslims consider it holy because it was the first *qiblah*, the holy site of the forerunner religions it recognizes, and the "far mosque" of the Prophet's Night Journey. Thus "holy" has overlapping but distinguishable meanings, and the history of Jrslm shows that although it is considered holy by three faiths, what "holiness" means varies both among the three and also among wings within each of them. History also shows that while the city has been the site of horrendous violence, for significant periods, the three faiths have been able to live together in relative harmony. What does this history suggest for the next phase of the Holy City's history?

I suggest that, precisely because Jerusalem is "holy to three faiths," a just final status for Jerusalem will require innovative thinking on both the theological and the political level.

*First, the theological level:* Islam generously provides an ample place for Judaism and Christianity as other "religions of the book," and now some

Muslim scholars would like to enlarge this category to include any religion that has sacred texts. This provision is not just a dead letter. In many American inter-faith organizations the local Muslim community often supplies a disproportionate share of the support and leadership for these groups. Muslims in America want to be part of our pluralistic religious culture.

It is not only unfortunate, it is tragic that in the tense years that have followed the attacks on the World Trade Center, the minority of Muslims who reject this inclusivist tradition have come to the fore, or at least been given the most publicity. Some scholars now even speak of a “war for the soul of Islam.” I cannot be sure if they are right, but as a Christian I know about the kind of internal battles within a tradition that can breed animosity and hatred. I can only hope that somehow the generous and open tradition within Islam comes more to the fore. At least there is ample scriptural warrant for it in the Qur’an, while there are fewer such resources in the Bible, which brims with exclusivist language.

For the remainder of this century we, or our children and grandchildren, will undoubtedly live in a period where the two largest religions in the world, Christians, with some two billion adherents worldwide, and Muslims, with about one billion, must learn to come to terms with each other. The required reconciliation will need to take place on many levels: historical, political and cultural. But it will also necessitate some thorough re-thinking of inherited theological positions of both sides. Both communities have much work to do in the next decades to avoid a spiral of violence, a “clash” that is wholly unnecessary and fully avoidable.

As a Christian and a theologian, I think one of my tradition’s most formidable challenges is to think anew about how the Prophet Mohamet,

who has been pilloried and defamed by Christians for centuries (see Dante's *Inferno*) might find a place in our religious worldview. I know that task is formidable, but it is not impossible. An example from Christianity's relationship with another tradition helps. Half century ago, the vast majority of Christians held the conviction that Christianity had *displaced* or "*superceded*" Judaism. In the past fifty years that belief has been officially disowned by the Roman Catholic Church and by most of the Protestant churches, including many evangelicals, as well. A whole new and promising era in Jewish-Christian relations has begun. Could the same kind of things happen in relations between Christians and Muslims?

I am convinced that it could, and the future of Jerusalem could be a key. Muslims already honor Jesus, but so far Christians have no language with which to honor the Prophet. This may be because churches have often been nervous about recognizing what might be called "post-canonical" prophets, those who have appeared after the closing of the biblical canon. But if "supercessionism," which seemed so firmly ensconced in the churches could be re-thought and discarded by so many in such a relatively short time, might the prejudice against post-canonical prophets also be re-thought as well? If it could, this would create a religious "space" for the Prophet in Christian thinking.

There are some precedents to work with. Christians not only recognized and accepted the Hebrew prophets, but many also designated figures like Socrates and Plato as prophetic precursors of Jesus. They did this by suggesting that the same eternal *logos* that appeared in Jesus had also inspired these Greek philosophers. But if God could use great teachers outside the church *before* Christ, would that not also be possible *after* Christ.? Mahatma Gandhi has come extremely close to being recognized as a

Christian saint. His image appears in more than one stained glass window in Christian chapels. It would be a marvelous signal if some future pope canonized him officially. This may not be just a utopian fantasy. But even if it did happen, it might be much harder to make a case for the Prophet Mohamet.

Still, sainthood is not the only category that might give a status in Christian thought analogous to the position Jesus has in the Muslim spiritual tradition. In fact, Muslims might not like the use of “saint” at all for him. So why not “prophet” In thinking about this issue I believe Christians in western countries, in which until quite recently Islam seemed remote and ominous, have much to learn from the experience of Christians who lived for centuries within the Islamic world, especially before the more recent eruptions of animosities arising mainly from political conflicts. In those areas Christians did often ponder the religious status of the Prophet of Islam, and one Syrian Christian bishop suggested that, if not a prophet in the sense of Isaiah or Jeremiah, then Mohamet did “walk in the way of the prophets.”

There have been periods in western Christian history when Islam, with its elegant simplicity, clear rules of living; straightforward doctrines and opulent fund of stories, poems and legends have had an undeniable appeal. No one who has read the Sufi poet Rumi or visited the al-Hambra in Granada or the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem can have missed the power of this attractiveness. But for me today the main question posed by Islam is how can Christians understand and appreciate its religious significance so that we can all live together on the one earth we share. The fact that Muslims and Christians lived together in relative harmony both in al-Andalus and in Jerusalem can be part of the religious reconstruction that is needed.

*Second, the political level:* Echoing the cry of Lamentations, Jerusalem has by and large been “abandoned” by the various negotiators who for such a long time have tried to find a solution to the larger Israeli-Palestinian conflict. True, they have often spoken of “the Jerusalem question” as a key issue. But with occasional exceptions, they have preferred to tackle first the challenges of security, borders, settlements, and refugees. They have usually chosen to postpone discussing Jerusalem until progress has been made on these questions and some confidence has been built up.

But this “Jerusalem last” strategy has obviously not succeeded. The Israeli-Palestinian standoff now seems no closer to a solution than it was a decade ago. It is time to try something new. Why not *start* the negotiations with Jerusalem? If the city is indeed the key, or even *a* key, issue, why not move its future to the top of the agenda, instead of putting it off? Jerusalem may or may not be one of the toughest knots in the tangled web. But if a satisfactory compromise could be found on it, answers to the other issues might follow.

It is within the realm of possibility that such a compromise on Jerusalem could be worked out. Contrary to popular impressions, when negotiators have occasionally broached the future status of Jerusalem, they have come at least as close to agreement as they have on the other questions, sometimes even closer. Both sides want Jerusalem to be their capital, but surveys show that most Israelis have no desire to rule the Palestinian parts of the city, and most Palestinians are prepared to compromise as well. It is true that Yasir Arafat did not accept the arrangement offered at Camp David for some kind of administrative control over Arab sections, but a few months later, even after the beginning of the second intifada, the diplomats at Taba in Egypt announced that they were closer than ever to major agreements. But then Barak was defeated, Clinton left office, and negotiations in effect ceased.

It now appears, however, that genuine negotiations could begin again soon. It is often said that what is needed to break the current deadlock over Jerusalem are “new ideas.” But since no new ideas seem to have worked so far, it may be time to look again at some old ones. Before 1948, for example, while the UN was still discussing the nature of the partition, some countries strongly favored a three way division of Palestine – an Arab section, a Jewish one and an internationally administered area in and around Jerusalem. Others proposed that the historic Old City, with its traditional Jewish, Muslim and Christian quarters, which is also the area where the Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Dome of the Rock are located, could be administered by a consortium of religious authorities under UN supervision. The solution that was eventually worked out for Vatican City is sometimes recalled.

These are all “old ideas,” not bad ones, but for various reasons, none of these previous schemes quite fits the situation today. Still, they do suggest hints of a possible way to proceed. If Jerusalem is the symbolic key issue, then the Old City is the symbolic key to Jerusalem, and the holy places are the symbolic key to the Old City. An overall solution must start with the Temple Mount and work outward.

Such a solution is possible. As recently as 2001 a secular Israeli scholar offered an idea that attracted considerable attention from both sides, at least at first, but is now rarely mentioned. He proposed that the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary/Western Wall should be placed “under the sovereignty of God.” No national flags would be flown. It would then be administered by Muslim and Jewish religious authorities, with the cooperation of Israeli and Palestinian governments. The area has in fact been

administered in this way since 1967, more successfully than one might imagine given the upheavals that have marked the period. But the question of sovereignty over the area remains undecided.

So why not place the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary/Western Wall under the sovereignty of God? Admittedly, to modern ears this suggestion sounds a bit crazy, a genuine non-starter. But all three traditions claim to worship the same God, and given the present logjam we need some ideas that may first appear quaint or bizarre to break through the failure of the more modern and “rational” strategies that have simply not worked. Also, the idea makes even more sense when we remember that disputes over the Temple Mount have everything to do with religion.

True, it is commonly thought that religion has only made the Jerusalem question more intractable. But I do not share this view. There are of course religious die-hards on both sides. But *sovereignty*, as opposed to *access*, is a fundamentally political issue. The Muslims and the Jews who have injected religion into a political struggle represent only a fraction of either side. They are opposed both by religious moderates and by secular Israelis and Palestinians who together constitute the majority. Religious leaders and scholars – Jewish, Christian and Muslim – have often been ahead of political leaders in voicing a willingness to share the city. A few years ago 400 American rabbis issued a statement calling for just such a sharing of Jerusalem. Christian and Muslim leaders have frequently expressed a similar willingness. They all worship the same God, and they realize that, despite Jerusalem’s reputation for bloodshed, there have been long periods in which adherents of the three faiths have shared the city amicably.

New ideas often lie concealed in old ones, so the history of Jerusalem can be instructive. As we have seen, when King David bought the area in Jerusalem from the Jebusite ruler in 1000 B.C.E., and founded his sanctuary there, he allowed the previous residents to continue their worship along with his. When Caliph Omar and his Muslim army conquered the city in 637 he allowed the Christians to continue to worship, and invited the Jews to return. Saladin, who recaptured the city from the crusaders in 1187, welcomed Christian pilgrims and Jews to the city, if they entered peaceably. One of General Allenby's first acts was to assemble the leaders of the three religions and assure them that he would guarantee access to all holy sites.

Sacred spaces can be shared. All three faiths honor the Tomb of the Patriarchs. Muslims and Christian pilgrims visit the "milk cave" outside Jerusalem where Joseph and Mary are believed to have stopped with the infant Jesus on their way as refugees to Egypt. Holy cities can also be shared. If the "key issue" is Jerusalem, let us move it to the head of the agenda instead of relegating it to an appendix. And let us enlist religious leaders, who were largely left out of the Oslo and other previous negotiations, in envisioning its future. We might be surprised to find that it is not so insoluble after all. If the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary can be shared under God's sovereignty, then the sharing of the rest of the Old City – which already has its separate quarters – would follow.

The blessing and curse of Jerusalem is that, like no other city on earth, three major faiths, and people from virtually every nation on the globe, have feeling of kinship and veneration for it. They also have a legitimate claim to access to the site associated with their faiths. Like no other city Jerusalem does, in some sense "belong to the whole world." Suppose the idea of

placing the old city under the “sovereignty of God” (or something like it) could be worked out, how would the actual implementation function?

Some have suggested the central “old city” of Jerusalem already “belongs to the world” spiritually, it should be declared a world heritage site and administered and policed by the UN in cooperation with an inter-faith council composed of representatives of Syrian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Protestant (Evangelical and Ecumenical), all three branches of Judaism, Shia and Sunni Islam. This arrangement would, of course, include everything inside the walls of the old city, including the Haram al-Sharif (Temple Mount), Western Wall and all the religious and pilgrimage sites. Within reasonable limits (stated services and prayer times, etc.), people of all faiths should be allowed to visit all sites.

The rest of the city would be divided into eastern and western sections (border to be negotiated), with the western recognized by the international community as an integral part of Israel, and the eastern section a part of a Palestinian state. Both could serve as capitals of their respective states, and the international community would recognize both as the capitals. Governing councils should be established both for the two sides and for the city as a whole. They could be constituted by neighborhood councils. The border between the two sections should be as “porous” as possible, and supervised by either joint Israeli-Palestinian teams and/or international units. This is an arrangement polls suggest that most Jerusalemites (both Israeli and Palestinian) would welcome. Such an agreement on Jerusalem would then generate some of the trust and good will that seem lacking today. Building on that momentum, we might find new ways to move ahead on many of the larger issues as well. If that happens, then Jerusalem would be not just a “Christmas present for the British people,” but a gift for the whole

world that would last all year long, and for years to come. Then the appropriate biblical passage for the holy city might not be Lamentations but these words from the prophet Isaiah:

*“Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, Says your God      Speak tenderly to  
Jerusalem, and cry to her That her warfare is ended.*

*END*