

Al-Aqsa: A Muslim's viewⁱ

(Keynote by Sari Nusseibeh at the Marking the Sacred: The Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem -7/June 2017, Providence College, Rhode Island).

Most people know or have heard of the famous *aya* or verse in the Qur'an which introduces *surat al-Isra'* (the chapter on the night journey): Exalted be He Who sent forth His servant by night from the *masjid al-haram* (the sacred mosque) to the *masjid al-aqsa* (the furthest mosque), whose environs We have blessed..”.

The first *masjid*, commonly known as ‘the sacred’ on account of the modifier ‘*alharam*’, clearly refers to the *Ka'ba* –but the question arises whether it was so –i.e., *a* or *the* sacred Muslim site- at the time of or before the miraculous night journey. Given the *sura* is categorized as a *meccan sura* –i.e., belonging to the earlier period before the prophet moved to *Medina*, and before, therefore, he returned to divest the *Ka'ba* of its pagan gods- one may assume it was *still*, at that time, a pagan rather than a Muslim site of worship, and we would be justified in asking ourselves by what rationale it was *then* referred to as the *sacred* *masjid*. Here, then, we find ourselves confronted with one puzzle. Could we take *masjid* simply to mean a place of worship where worshippers would prostrate before

their deity or deities, whatever the nature of these? Along those lines, would the term *al-haraam* then here perhaps have meant the *sinful* or *forbidden* (rather than *sacred*) place of worship? This term carries the two meanings. At this point, given unanimous consensus, to claim this would be tantamount to be being sacrilegious: it would make out that verse to be saying that the prophet was transported from the sinful or shameful masjid in Mecca to the blessed one in Jerusalem –a shocking statement for modern Muslim ears! Even so, it is a question worth contemplating. A way around this interpretation would be to say –as indeed it is said- that *al-ka'ba* had a pre-Muhammedan *Islamic* significance – as the site said to have first been built by Abraham himself. I shall come back to this historic explanation below.

The need to decipher the meanings of terms in that *aya* continues: moving on in the text, there is a widespread misperception today that *al-masjid al-aqsa* –the destination of the prophet- was the southernmost mosque in the area now referred to as “the Noble Sanctuary” (or the *Haram al-Sharif*). *Haram* –or sanctuary- by the way does not have the ambiguity of meaning the word *haraam* does, and by itself it just means ‘enclosure’ or ‘campus’; the southernmost mosque in this enclosure is now commonly referred to as *al-Aqsa* mosque –the

term mentioned in the *aya*. But we are told that the earliest construction of this mosque –*al-Aqsa*- took place *following* the visit of the Caliph Umar to Jerusalem – that is, *following* the death of the prophet. We thus inevitably find ourselves confronted with yet another puzzle- this time to do with exact location: the Qur’anic reference to *al-aqsa* mosque couldn’t have been to the southernmost mosque. *This hadn’t yet come into existence!* Associating the wide-spread perceptions even Muslims have of *this* mosque with the Qur’anic reference clearly then has no basis.

We thereby have two puzzles to contend with, both gaping at us from the text of this very well-known, brief and oft-recited *aya*.

The prophet’s night journey from Mecca, tradition tells us, was the preamble to the ascension of the prophet to the heavens, there to be brought into the presence of God. Of the few miracles associated with the prophet in the Qur’an – including the one in battles and even the revelation itself- this one truly stands out: it tells of the closest encounter the *messenger* has with *the source* of revelation, God Himself. Another *sura* in the Qur’an –*surat al-najm*- possibly explains this. It juxtaposes God’s revelation to Muhammad in Mecca through the

mediation of the angel Gabriel who descends unto him from the heavens, with seeing him once again as the prophet ascends to the Paradise of final abode, where he comes to behold some of God's more encompassing signs. Interpreted *internally*, that is, in terms of the text itself, the meaningful picture one gets is this: the descent of angels from the heavens –even to help in battles- can take place anywhere on earth, also in Mecca; whereas the ascent to the divine presence seems by the nature of the narrative to have had to take place from *al-Aqsa* (literally, the *furthest* mosque), in the land God has *blessed*. It is this that stands as the earthly gateway to the divine. It is this that explains Islam's original direction of prayer, its *qibla*. But what, or where exactly, is *this* mosque?

Let us now extract ourselves from text to historical narratives for a bit, where we find there is concurrence over the perception that the ascension itself took place from the 'Holy Rock' at the elevated center of the *Haram* compound, that is, *not from* what is now often referred to as *al-Aqsa* or southernmost mosque. So, even though we are told a wooden version of this southernmost mosque was initially constructed *before* the construction of the Umayyad Dome of the Rock—arguably therefore giving it and the space it occupies a prior religious significance- this historical fact, if it be one; as well as the fact that formal ritual prayers take place

in this mosque rather than in the Dome mosque, have both not erased the belief amongst Muslims that it was from the Holy Rock itself, or thereabouts, that ascension took place.

But indeed, as we know, *there was no 'furthest' mosque on or surrounding that Rock at the time of the night journey either*: the elevated area in that Sanctuary is said to have been left largely untended since the destruction of the second Temple some six hundred years earlier. So where, or what, was the furthest mosque to which the prophet was spirited from Mecca? Is it conceivable that – given the miraculous nature of the night journey- this was a *virtual* reconstruction of the destroyed Temple itself rather than a *physical* mosque, a vision the prophet was given to behold as he sets foot on the Mount?

The question begs forbearance. An immediate protest could be that if this was indeed the case then the divine text would have spoken of a *temple* –a *haykal*, or *ma'bad* –or even more specifically of *haykal sulayman* rather than of a *masjid*. However, the term it uses is *masjid* –very much a mosque. But how 'mosque-ish' –i.e., *Muslim*-really is a mosque? As we saw, this question also arose earlier, when we pondered the meaning of *al-masjid al-haraam*. Returning to text in search of

an answer, a few *ayas* following the night journey one and in that same context we find that the Qur'an –once again- uses the term *masjid* (rather than any other term) specifically to refer to *the Jewish Temple*, now as one which has been twice destroyed. It stands to reason to assume therefore that the 'furthest mosque' mentioned in the first *aya* –*al-Aqsa*- couldn't but have been the Temple itself, in some trans-temporal form: let us say, a virtual representation of it as being made to be perceived by the prophet. It is the furthest mosque *in relation* to the Meccan mosque –not, pointedly, to the Dome of the Rock. Recalling our earlier doubts we now see that this term –*masjid*- could be and perhaps was used generically in this context, simply to mean a place of worship.

Identifying the term '*al-Masjid al-Aqsa*' with "the Second Temple" is what -in this day and age- would require a large dose of forbearance, especially among Muslims. Could these two terms –thought to be not only mutually exclusive but even religious contraries, be synonymous? What exactly would that mean, let alone imply?

This textual deduction making out the temple to be the furthest mosque, and the Israelites the peg around which the relevant *sura* revolves, is arguably further

attested to both by the opening *ayas* following the first one, and by the *ayas* the *sura* closes off with: following the first *aya*, the Qur'an turns directly to the Israelites, first through the mention of Moses as the receiver of 'the Book', and soon after to the forewarning to the Israelites in 'the Book' that they shall be dispersed twice in the lands, and their temple twice destroyed, but that they shall also achieve greatness, their lot eventually dependent on whether they do good or not –a message I would suggest especially now is worth being heeded by them!

The closing *ayas* turn back to Moses, this time referring to the nine miracles he shows the Pharaoh, the Pharaoh's army's pursuit of the Israelites out of Egypt, interrupted by their drowning in the crossing of the Red Sea. The Israelites are then told now to live in the land and that they shall all be brought back together in the closing of days. Those of them that have already received knowledge would know that this Qur'an is God's and would prostrate in awe and prayers as soon as they heard it being recited. Call Him *Allah* or *al-Rahman* (pointedly, a term with Hebraic roots associated with God's compassion, the mother's womb and the promise of seed); or by whatever good name –the Qur'an tells them- He *is* the Lord of the heavens and earth. In another *sura*, by the very name *al-Rahman*, the Qur'an widens its address and reiterates time and again the challenge to both humans and spirits to find one sign that doesn't show there is but one *Rabb* -one

God. Is this message meant to be heeded by those Jews who rejected Muhammad's embrace of the Abrahamic faith?

Textually, then, there is good reason to believe that the prophet's *isra'* or night journey leading him to the divine presence is one that leads him precisely to the Jewish Temple, as the earthly gateway to the heavens, and is precisely an act of embracement of the Israelites, their history and their religion. Indeed, one can legitimately wonder whether the very name of the *sura* is not itself phonetically or etymologically indicative of this association –*isra'* only needing *el* as a suffix to make the picture plainer –as one to do with the pilgrimage to God. In the Islamic traditions –not surprisingly then- we find that this *sura* was indeed *also* called *surat bani Isra'il* –sons of Israel- at the time of the prophet's companions, with more than one *hadith* to support it, explaining that *bani isra'il* –the Israelites- were said by the prophet to have been the earliest believers of the Book, containing much of what has also been revealed to him.

What I have done so far is to elicit *from the text* itself the spiritual continuum between the Israelite Temple and the prophet's miraculous journey to the Noble Sanctuary. This spiritual continuum between Judaism and Islam is well-known and

further avowed for in countless places in the Qur'an. Indeed, it is well-known that Islam sees itself as the natural inheritor or offspring of both Judaism and Christianity. Tradition tells of the prophets' congregation in prayer on the occasion of the *isra'* –bringing all the prophets, from Adam to Jesus, the *Word* of God, together. Muhammad's spiritual embrace of his Abrahamic forebears couldn't be clearer.

Now, however, it may be possible to distinguish –however obscure such a distinction may seem- between religion and politics, or ideas and how these are played out in practice: such a distinction can be used to explain, for example, the varied ways in which Muslims in respective eras and regions viewed the meaning and significance of the Noble Sanctuary –and thereby the mosques built on it.

Starting with what was most likely a conscious and celebratory reconstruction of the Temple –now named 'the Dome of the Rock'- in the Umayyad period asserting Jewish-Muslim continuity as this was viewed by the prophet –perhaps even fulfilling Biblical references to the effect that the Temple shall be rebuilt- this focus oscillated through varying degrees of importance and interest given to the place through the consecutive Caliphate eras, and has ended today with a total denial especially by Palestinian Muslims of this association –clearly but also

understandably for political reasons. For reasons of the same kind, but from the opposite end, we often come across arguments that the Jerusalem mosque holds only secondary or tertiary significance in Islam, or that it is *third* holiest. In support of their argument an expression from a late tradition that has gained currency is quoted that the *Aqsa* mosque (increasingly becoming identified nowadays as the southernmost mosque) is “the first *qibla*, and the *third* holy mosque”.

People who quote this last expression intending to downgrade Jerusalem’s place in Islam in contrast with its place in Judaism or Christianity (or even in contrast with the two mosques in Mecca and Medina), normally stress its latter part –that Jerusalem has *third* place in order of religious importance and priority. Well, seeing that the expression is simply an excerpt from a sermon given by the Jerusalem mosque’s sheikh on the occasion of the recapture of Jerusalem by Salaheddinⁱⁱ, it is hardly a full-proof standard by which to assign holy values to Muslim mosques or sites. Be that as it may, the grammar of the sentence does not in any case necessarily support the intended interpretation. The term ‘third’ here can simply signify a numerical rather than a graded order. Even so, by now amongst Muslims, for whatever reason –including the best reason of all, namely,

geo-historic contingency- this is how the order of priority and importance has also come to be viewed. But common beliefs aside, how can we understand, and grade, the holiness of a site? Returning to that excerpt from the sheikh's sermon, surely it is the expression's *first* part that should call for attention. The expression, after all, covers two separate aspects, one retrospective –thus accounting for sites that became sacred in real-time, so to speak (the *qibla* the prophet later turned to, as well as his place of burial); but the other is significantly spiritual, having to do with meaning, with Islam's message. As already explained, it is surely *because* of how the prophet viewed his religion's association with Jerusalem that he made it the *qiblah* during the first (sixteen) months of his mission. After all, this spiritual association constituted the kernel of his message – his being the spiritual descendant of the Hebrew prophets, and Jerusalem's being –as the Qur'an pointedly singles out in that Qur'anic verse- *the blessed land*, the earthly gateway from where the prophet could be and was brought up to the heavens. Clearly, then, it is not a settled matter to argue that Jerusalem has a lesser divine status than Mecca and Medina in Islam: all three are sacred, for different reasons, and from different perspectives.

Early Muslim traditions which try to justify the shift of the *qibla* from Jerusalem to Mecca in religious terms refer to a supposed *hadith* where it is stated that the construction of Mecca's *al-Ka'ba* preceded that of Jerusalem's mosque by forty years! In itself, this is a revelatory tradition, where temporal precedence is sought to justify the shift to *al-Ka'ba* while at the same time affirming that this is being done in full view of the religious significance of the Temple for Islam! The forty years referred to, let it be noted after all, were those between the construction of the *ka'ba* and the Temple, and this tradition simply tries to find a way therefore to get round the original perception of the Temple's significance. Historians will surely have much to tell us about the political circumstances surrounding the building of the two mosques in the Noble Sanctuary, the southernmost asserting the Meccan *qibla*, and the elevated Rock's exceptionally designed and self-contained House of Prayer, a unique structure without a *qibla*. Viewing the two mosques in the beautiful Sanctuary today –one at the southernmost edge of with a *qibla* facing south and one in the center of the Sanctuary without a *qibla*, but as a *qibla* unto itself, so to speak- an onlooker might wonder how to synthesize the value in Islam of the religion's birthplace with that of its spiritual message and outlook.

But –aside from politics- how does the Qur’an itself explain the shift?

Significantly, not at all by giving *al-Ka’ba* a holy priority –historical or otherwise, although the temporal precedence, and Abraham’s role in its construction is mentioned in different *ayas* : but rather than taking off from this point as a clear ground for why the *ka’ba* is therefore a natural *qibla* that the prophet can switch to, the Qur’an addresses the prophet –presumably at the time when contingent circumstances make him begin to re-consider the *qibla* that he began his mission with- by first telling him that he seems to be having second thoughts on the matter, and being undecided; then by reassuring him that God could be addressed in whatever direction he performed his prayers –wherever he decided his *qiblah* to be; and finally by saying that God has chosen for him a *qibla* that *he* can find acceptable or satisfactory (*tardaha*) –this being *al-Ka’ba*! Here we are led to realize that the choice is a pragmatic rather than a ‘natural’ one –that the determining factor is what *he* -the prophet- has come to find suitable at a particular point in time in the course of his mission. Significantly, he is not told that the Ka’ba is *holier* than the Jerusalem mosque, and thereby deserving to be the prophet’s *qibla*. Two political circumstances may be proposed as being relevant here –the prophet’s calculation that he could reinforce his mission and win over Meccan tribes to his side by re-instating Mecca’s pre-existing central role

in the region; and, secondly, his growing 'discovery' that Jewish tribes, especially in Medina where he first sought refuge, have not –as he at first thought they would do- claim him as their Messiah. Indeed, as we know, whether in Medinah or elsewhere, he met with Jewish opposition rather than Jewish support. Here, then, is a clear case of the distinction between ideas and the political contingencies that eventually shape them. Political contingencies determined Mecca to be the *qibla* in place of what, from a spiritual point of view, held more significance.

With Mecca now becoming the focal point, earlier traditions and rituals begin to be woven around it: it is here, and specifically with the intended sacrifice of Ishmael rather than of Isaac as the supreme sign of Abraham's *submission* –his *Islam*- to God, the Jewish narrative is applied. It is here that Hagar is left with her new-born, Abraham's first-born- to search for water to quench her thirst. But beyond all these stories, what does the Qur'anic guidance of Muhammad to effect this major shift of the *qibla* tell us? Surely, it is first meant to reaffirm that Islam was principally conceptualized as the latest manifestation of the Abrahamic religion; that the spiritual affiliation with Judaism and Jerusalem was perceived in such a light that it was later embodied in the construction of the Dome of the

Rock in the place the Temple had been; but that –most significantly perhaps, and beyond political contingencies- that God is not to be thought of as having a specific location, for God is in all places one wishes to turn to for prayer.

These observations –confusing as they may seem- lead one to the following speculation: that while specific sites clearly and verifiably come to command a special value in peoples’ hearts in consequence of a human experience or event, it would be wrong to mistake this reverence for a divine status that those sites intrinsically possess to the exclusion of any other location in the universe. After all, God Himself does not have a locus. This seems, at least for me, to be Islam’s universalist message. However, this should not be thought to devalue from a site’s historically reverential status, as peoples’ hearts are all what human beings are about, and to tamper with or destroy such sites with reverential value would be an affront to the most precious of human sentiments. The twice-destruction of the Temple was nothing if not an extremely cruel example of such an aggression, the deep sorrow this caused cascading down to us like the blood from a deep wound in the heart pouring down through crevices of the long centuries.

But here we take a brief moment to consider the Muslim shrines, and the present.

It bears remembering those shrines were not built in the immediate aftermath of the ruining of the Second Temple, as if to reenact the cruelty of its destruction and then replacement by colonialist Roman shrines. They were built on a land that had been neglected and empty for the preceding six hundred years. Indeed, they were built to celebrate the Temple, to bring it once more to life, in what was conceived as a spiritual embrace, a reaffirmation of the monotheistic message of God through His various prophets. It was not a Muslim act against a Jewish shrine. Quite the contrary, it was a Muslim embrace and celebration of that destroyed shrine, and the religion that stood behind it, the religion's God being one and the same, by whatever name we call Him.

The conclusions we should draw from the above are clear: tampering with the Muslim shrines today by a political power assuming religious legitimacy would reenact that primary travesty in reverse, besides effacing what has become over 1500 years a precious heritage of human civilization. It would also sadly express a total misconception of what those shrines originally stood for: a genuine effort to redeem a past injustice, and to reinforce what was considered to be God's one and true message to Abraham, now through the revelation to Muhammad. It

bears saying again that Muhammad did not set out to replace the Jewish religion, or to replace a Jewish shrine; on the contrary he set out to reaffirm that religion and to reinstate the religious significance of that holy site.

But if Jews should come to recognize these facts, so, also, Muslims should come to recognize them. Recognizing them should mean seeing these sites as a celebration of Jewish Muslim continuity, and becoming sensitized to Jewish history on that mount. Politics today –indeed with the birth of the Zionist movement- has cumulatively worked against such sensitization, and has eroded what beliefs or memories Muslims had with regard to that site, eventually making them now deny any link between it and the Jewish Temple. In turn, this denial has only succeeded in aggravating Jewish sensitivities, strengthening the call among some of them to *prove*, by erasing or replacing or tampering with that religious landmark, the historic existence of the Temple. As we saw, however, Jews are not in need of any empirical proof: paradoxically, perhaps, the Noble Sanctuary that today stands on that site is itself all the physical proof they need. But the compulsion to rebuild the temple involves a rejection of that proof, and a rejection of Islam's act to celebrate the end of an injustice to the Jewish faith that had extended over six hundred years. Sadly, then, today's religious visions of that

site are separated by a solid wall. For as long as it stands, it is hard to see how Jerusalem can be or become a light unto the nations. For that to happen, visions have to become aligned with one another –those of the Temple, of *al-Aqsa*, and of the Dome of the Rock.

The solid wall referred to is not only a metaphorical one. It also happens to be a physical structure that has been a focus of contention and turbulence ever since the 30s of the last century. Not surprisingly, even this came to carry *three* names, the Western Wall, the Wailing Wall, and the al-Buraq Wall. Besides the last being the name of my third son (third not meaning here in order of love or importance), it is also the name of the prophet's winged mule that supposedly carried him from Mecca. According to tradition, the prophet tied this mythical creature to that wall as he proceeded to the mount. Hence the wall's Muslim name. Hence, also, its reverential status as perceived from the eastern side. Here, then, just as there is a need to align the visions of the Temple, the Aqsa, and the Dome, so the need exists to align the visions of the Western, Wailing and Buraq wall. In the attempt to align conflicting visions here perhaps one last puzzle then needs to be pondered: did the wall acquire its Muslim significance in consequence of the act of tying the mule to that wall, or was the mule tied to that wall in consequence of

that wall's pre-existing sanctified status? Which came first? And is the answer one that might sow dissension, or is it one that aligns visions with one another? This is a puzzle –a question- I leave not only for those of the Muslim faith, but also for those of the Jewish faith –for both whom there is but one God; wherefore, this must be the God of both.

ⁱ The argument developed in this presentation is what one might consider to be “a minority view”, countered by a strong *sunni* tradition –upheld by major figures such as Ibn Taymiyyah- claiming that Jerusalem's mosques are just that, and not at all on a par with the major sites in Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, even Jerusalem's site as the initial direction of prayer is contested in some accounts. What is provided in what follows is primarily an *analytic* or hermeneutic reading and understanding of some Qur'anic passages, and not a scholarly survey of all the accounts found in the writings of early historians and exegetists. (Such a survey can be found in a series of 14 highly controversial articles –some corroborating the analysis in this presentation- by Salman Masalha in the online self-publishing journal *shifāf al-Sharq al-awsaṭ*, beginning April 2nd 2009, but also found in the writer's blog at <https://salmaghari.blogspot.com/2009/03/blog-post.html>).

ⁱⁱ The statement is attributed to Abu'l Ma'ali Muhyiddin Ibn Zaki, the sheikh of *al-Aqsa*, in his first sermon there following Salaheddin's retrieval of Jerusalem.