

The Religious Factors in Settlement Patterns in Jerusalem in the Early Islamic Period

Jerusalem is better known to the Muslims by the names of Bait al-Maqdis (the holy house) or simply al-Quds (the holy); the latter is the most common name at the present (le Strange, 1890: 3). Al-Quds is one of the holiest three cities for Muslims following immediately Mecca and Medina. Its holiness is attributed to two principal reasons: The first stems from its being the first Qibla before Muslims were directed towards al-Ka'ba (sura II.144) and the second from the famous night journey of the prophet Muhammad between Mecca and Jerusalem. The description of this journey is clearly recorded in the Qur'an verse on Isra' to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, where it says: [Glorified be He who carried His servant by night from the invariable place of worship (Mecca) to the far distant place of worship (Jerusalem) the neighbourhood whereof we have blessed, that we might show him of our tokens! He only He, is the hearer, the seer]. According to historians, the journey was on the back of a wonderous animal, half horse, half man named al-Buraq (lightening). In addition to these two events many of the prophet's Ḥadiths indicate the holiness and the importance of this city for Muslims. The following Ḥadith attests to this fact: [You shall journey to but three Masjids (mosques), al-Masjid al-Ḥaram (at Mecca), al-Aqsa (at Jerusalem) and my Masjid (at Medina)]. (Mujir al-Din 1973: 231).

Moreover, The holy city is of many virtues, which are well recorded in historical sources, most important of which are al-Wasiṭi, al-Suyuṭi, Mujir al-Din and al-Maqdisi.

Jerusalem became an Islamic city in the first half of the seventh century A.D. when Muslims entered the holy city in 14 A.H./A.D. 638 during the reign of the second caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭab. According to historical sources the caliph 'Umar came personally and specially to take over the city from its patriarch at that time Sophronius, who refused to capitulate the city to any one except 'Umar. The sources also indicate that the caliph declared a special Ṣulḥ ('Ahd) to the Christians living in the city; its text developed in time to be known as the covenant of 'Umar. In this covenant the caliph guaranteed further religious freedom, safety of

churches and secured the lives, fortunes and properties of the people living in the city (Mujir al-Din Vol. 1, 1973: 254).

Despite the above mentioned secured covenant given to the Christian inhabitants of the holy city, many of them according to the historical sources left the city and were replaced by Muslim inhabitants (Bahat 1983: 48), who were according to the Encyclopaedia of Islam (1980: 324) mostly from Medina. This, as a matter of fact, indicates the start of the Islamic era in the holy city of Jerusalem.

Early Islamic Jerusalem

Through surveying historical sources and travellers' documents, it appears that the early Islamic Jerusalem (from the time of 'Umar until the end of the Fatimid period) is extremely difficult for studying. The reason for this difficulty is attributed to the lack of documented information in these sources. The available information about the city is mostly of general nature dealing mainly with its character, climate, plants, etc. However, none of the historical sources provides a detailed picture of the layout of the city, in order to find out to what extent the city had been changed from its pre-Islamic status and what sort of changes or modifications were done on the plan and the structure of the city during the early Islamic period.

The important historians and travellers of this period include Arculf, Maqdisi and Nasir Khusru. Arculf is the earliest, he visited Jerusalem in A.D. 670 and lived in city for about nine months. He reports nothing about the Islamic city of Jerusalem except for his short description of the square prayer house: "on the spot where the temple once stood near the eastern wall, the Saracens have now erected a square house of prayer, in rough manner, by raising beams and planks upon some remains of old ruins; this is their place of worship and it is said that it will hold about three thousand men" (Wright 1948: 1-2).

Al-Maqdisi, a native of Jerusalem (d. 380 A.H./A.D. 985), indicates the character of the holy city and describes in detail the Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock (Maqdisi 1906: 165-170). Nasir Khusru, a Persian traveller

visited Jerusalem in 438 A.H./A.D. 1035. He described the holy city in general indicating its beauty, buildings and markets in addition to a detailed description for the Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock (Khusru 1970: 20-37).

The extant evidence of the scarcity of information is the new discoveries during the recent excavations which took place in the old city of Jerusalem. In the process of these excavations, archaeologists discovered few buildings which date back to the Umayyad period. The discoveries include a palace in the southwest corner of the Haram enclosure from the outside, two paved streets and early Islamic houses discovered in the Jewish Quarter and Mount Zion. None of these discoveries is mentioned in any of the historical sources. Nonetheless, the discoveries would probably indicate that many other structures were built in Jerusalem during the early Islamic period and played an important role in changing the layout of the city, but they were not recorded in the historical documents.

The question as to what extent Jerusalem had been changed in the early Islamic period still stands. Mainly because if other places in the old city are excavated, additional new discoveries providing more information about the layout of the city may be found. According to scholars, the city underwent gradual change in its character but remained basically Byzantine Christian in design (Mazar 1975: 260). However, the extant remains and the new discoveries around the Haram enclosure give indication that there was a significant change in the layout of the Christian city concentrated mainly in the eastern part of the city. This change can also be seen from the religious division of the city during this period — a division not imposed on the inhabitants of the city, but came about naturally as each religious community wished to live in one area separate from the members of the other faith (Bahat 1983: 52-53).

The Religious Factors

It is believed that Jerusalem was influenced by Islamic systems as soon as Muslims settled in the city, and there is no doubt that life was built on religious bases. In fact, many religious factors can be indicated in the holy city during the early Islamic period. Physical evidence of the religious factors is of two types: Architectural and ritual. The architectural evidence consists of religious building constructed in the early Islamic period, including mosques, khanqas, domes, cemeteries, minarets and mihrabs.

Mosques: The most important religious factors in the Islamic religion. Muslims used to build them wherever they settled and they can be seen in any town or village in the Islamic world. The location of a mosque was usually in the centre of the town and often beside Dar al-Imara. The function of the mosque according to scholars is a place of assembly for religious, social and political meetings. In Jerusalem, it is recorded that Muslims erected a mosque soon after they entered the city, it was established as mentioned above by the caliph 'Umar (Wright 1948: 1-2),

and was known later as al-Aqsa Mosque (the distant place).

Al-Aqsa Mosque was built by the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid ibn 'Abd al-Malik in A.D. 705, and is of great significance for Muslims, being second only to the mosques of Mecca and Medina, and the destination of Muhammad's night journey recorded in the Qur'an. Indeed, it is one of the holiest places of Islam. The Mosque was destroyed by earthquakes several times and underwent many restorations, during which some modification were carried out on its plan.

The other mosque which is related to this period in Jerusalem is 'Umar's Mosque. It was built, according to an inscription found in the Russian Hospice, near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in A.D. 935, at the spot where the Caliph performed his prayers when arriving in Jerusalem (Bahat 1983: 53).

Khanqas: Another sort of religious Islamic buildings. The word khanqa, according to the Encyclopaedia of Islam, is a composite word of Persian origin meaning a building usually reserved for Muslim mystics belonging to a dervish order. Important evidence of the early khanqas in Jerusalem was recorded by al-Maqdisi. According to him, the khanqas in Jerusalem belonged exclusively to the theological ascetic sect of Karramiyya, which flourished in Khurasan, and a group of them was living in Jerusalem (Encyclopedia of Islam 1980: 65; al-Maqdisi 1906: 182).

Domes: Many domes were built in Jerusalem in the early Islamic period, mostly to commemorate religious phenomena and reflect the Islamic character. The most significant of these domes is the Dome of the Rock. It was built by the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, who allocated the taxes of Egypt for seven years to finance its construction. The Dome covers the Holy Rock from which Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven on his night journey. The building underwent many restorations that maintained the original plan and design.

Another significant dome is the Dome of the Chain located on the eastern side of the Dome of the Rock, built also by 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan. It is similar in its design to the Dome of the Rock and was built to serve as a prototype to the great Dome or a store-chamber where money was deposited. Other smaller domes stand on the platform of the great Dome of the Rock. Two of them are located northwest of the Şakhra (the Rock) and commemorate the occurrence of the Prophet's night journey. These are the Prophet's Dome (Qubbat an-Nabi) marking the spot where he prayed while in the area, and the Dome of the Ascention (Qubbat al-Mi'raj) from where the Prophet ascended to heaven. In addition there is the Dome of Gabriel (Qubbat Jibril), commemorating the night of the ascention (al-Mi'raj), as the steed Buraq was tied up at this spot until the Prophet was ready to mount (le Strange 1890: 71-76).

Minarets: The minaret is an important architectural element which gives the mosque its distinguished character. It is not known whether al-Aqsa had minarets at its first

stage. However, Sauvaire in his analysis and description of the al-Aqsa Mosque indicates that the mosque had four minarets since the time of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan — three of them on the western side and one on the northern side. He also indicates that the minarets which we see now are reconstructed on the ancient foundations (Sauvaire 1876: 125-126).

Mihrabs (prayer niches): An architectural feature and a principal part of the structure of a mosque. The mihrab is usually placed in the Qibla wall of the mosque, its main function being to indicate the direction of Mecca in prayer. Nasir Khusru, in his description of the al-Aqsa Mosque, indicates many mihrabs, three of them inside the mosque: Mihrab 'Umar, Mihrab Mu'awiya and the central main Mihrab. In the area outside the mosque, he says that there were many beautiful mihrabs occupied by groups of people (Khusru 1970: 23-24). There are in addition the beautiful mihrab in the cave beneath the Holy Rock, and Mihrab Dawood (David's Mihrab) in the wall of Bait al-Maqdis (al-Istakhri 1870: 57; Ibn Hawqal 1870: 141).

Cemeteries: Jerusalem has several Islamic cemeteries. The most important of which is that located behind the eastern wall near the Golden Gate. Two of the Prophet's companions are buried in this cemetery: Shaddad ibn 'Aws (al-Suyuti 1984, II: 29) and Thu al-Aṣabe' al-Tamimi (Dabbagh 1988, III: 100).

The second important cemetery in Jerusalem is Mamilla, which is the largest cemetery located on the western side of the city. Many important people were buried in this cemetery (Sauvaire 1876: 198).

The ritual religious factors on the other hand are mainly related to Muslim ceremonies and practices — these include the prayer (*ṣalāh*), the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*), feasts, animal sacrifice, Ramaḍan, etc.

Aṣ-Ṣalah: The most important religious ritual for Muslim and a fundamental part in the Islamic religion. Muslims practice it five times a day in addition to Ṣalat aj-Jum'a. According to Khusru the Ṣalah used to take place in the Mosque every Friday (khusru 1970: 23).

Visiting the holy places: Because of its sanctity people used to come to visit the holy places of Jerusalem. The religious value of Jerusalem is very clear in the Qur'an as it was the first Qibla and housed the third mosque in importance. In the Ḥadith the Prophet limited the visit to three mosques, the third being the al-Aqsa Mosque. According to Khusru, people unable to go to Mecca in the pilgrimage time, came to al-Quds to visit the al-Aqsa Mosque and make their sacrifices there. In some years the number of these people reached about 20,000 (Khusru 1970: 19-20).

Feasts: There are two main feasts for Muslims. Al-Adḥa (the feast of the sacrifice) which comes in the Ḥajj (pilgrimage) time and al-Fiṭer (the feast of breaking the

fast) which comes after Ramaḍan. Both feasts have special ceremonies, such as special prayers, sacrifice, and Muslims visiting each other for blessing.

Animal sacrifice: A well-known practice by Muslims, done during the Ḥajj time and al-Adḥa feast or as offering to God. That of the Ḥajj time is well recorded by the Persian traveller Khusru (Khusru 1970: 20).

Al-Adhān (call to prayer): A Muslim religious rite, calling people for prayer. A special person named al-Mu'adhen calls five times a day, from a high place such as the minaret.

From what preceded we conclude that Muslims settled in Jerusalem from the time of 'Umar and came mostly from Medina. In addition, it appears that the gradual change took place in the layout of the Christian city in the early Islamic period, mainly in the eastern part. Evidence of that change can be seen in the standing remains and buildings recently discovered around the Ḥaram enclosure. As mentioned above, the religious factors marking Muslim settlement in the city took two forms. The first was architectural and was manifested in new building styles and features which are peculiarly Muslim. The second was ritual and reflected practices and ceremonials related to the basic pillars and teachings of the Muslim faith.

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