

MUḤAMMAD'S NIGHT JOURNEY (*ISRĀ'*) TO AL-MASJID
AL-AQṢĀ. ASPECTS OF THE EARLIEST ORIGINS
OF THE ISLAMIC SANCTITY OF JERUSALEM¹

EL VIAJE NOCTURNO (*ISRĀ'*) DE MUḤAMMAD A
AL-MAS'YID AL-AQṢĀ. ASPECTOS DE LOS ORÍGENES
DE LA SANTIDAD ISLÁMICA DE JERUSALÉN

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This article tries to show that the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā (Q 17:1) stands for the earthly Jerusalem and not for a heavenly sanctuary as held by many modern scholars. The Jerusalem for which it stands is a Christian holy city, a "New Jerusalem" that replaced the one that had been destroyed because of the sinful Jews. Muḥammad's Qur'ānic night journey to that place is a vision like the one experienced already by Ezekiel. The earliest *tafsīr* sources are unanimous that the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā stands for Jerusalem (Bayt al-Maqdis). Only in some Shī'ī sources do we find the claim that al-Masjid al-Aqṣā is in heaven which means that the Prophet never came to Jerusalem. This claim reflects the Shī'ī anti-Umayyad attitude, and was designed to deprive Jerusalem of its special sacred status as a pilgrimage destination. The claim was inspired by traditions describing a night journey of Muḥammad from Mecca straight to heaven. These latter traditions originally belonged to the cycle of the stories about Muḥammad's first revelation, and had nothing to do with his night journey to Jerusalem.

Key words: *Isrā'*; Ḥadīth; al-Masjid al-Aqṣā; *Mi'rāj*; Muḥammad; Shī'a; *Tafsīr*; Jerusalem; New Jerusalem; Mecca.

Este artículo intenta demostrar que, al contrario de lo que mantienen varios estudiosos modernos, el término coránico al-Mas'yd al-Aqṣā denomina a la Jerusalén terrestre. La Jerusalén a la que se refiere es la ciudad santa cristiana, una "Nueva Jerusalén" que reemplazaba a aquella que había sido destruida por los pecados de los judíos. El viaje nocturno de Muḥammad a este lugar constituye una visión semejante a la que experimentó Ezequiel. Las fuentes de *tafsīr* más tempranas son unánimes en equiparar este Mas'yd al-Aqṣā del Corán con Jerusalén (Bayt al-Maqdis). Sólo algunas fuentes shī'ies mantienen que al-Mas'yd al-Aqṣā está en los cielos, lo que implica que Muḥammad nunca estuvo en Jerusalén. Esta interpretación refleja la actitud shī'í antiomeya, y tenía el objetivo de privar a Jerusalén de su carácter sagrado como centro de peregrinación. Esta interpretación se apoya en tradiciones que describen el viaje nocturno de Muḥammad desde la Meca directamente a los cielos. Estas tradiciones, más tardías, pertenecen al ciclo de historias en torno a la primera revelación de Muḥammad y no tienen nada que ver con su viaje nocturno a Jerusalén.

Palabras clave: *isrā'*; Hadiz; al-Mas'yd al-Aqṣā; *mi'rāj*; Muḥammad; *Šī'a*; *tafsīr*; Jerusalén; Nueva Jerusalén; Meca.

¹ The first core of this article was included in a broader paper presented in the 10th Colloquium *From Jāhiliyya to Islam*, Jerusalem, 2006. I am grateful to Michael Lecker and Lawrence Conrad for their comments on that paper. Michael Lecker read the present version as well and made useful comments.

1. Modern Scholarship

The theme of the night journey (*isrā'*) and ascension (*mi'rāj*) of the Prophet Muḥammad has been extensively studied by modern scholars from a variety of angles,² but it seems that the earliest stages of the literary history of the theme still await a thorough reexamination. This history begins in the Qur'ān, in the famous *isrā'* verse (Q 17:1) which mentions a night journey of the Qur'ānic prophet to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā. Modern scholars have usually been reluctant to accept the traditional Islamic view that the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā stands for Jerusalem. Many of them rather prefer to see in the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā an allusion to a heavenly sanctuary which is not necessarily related to Jerusalem. They think that the relationship between the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā and Jerusalem was created only after the Holy Land was brought into the fold of Islam.

The first among the Orientalists to suggest the heavenly significance of al-Masjid al-Aqṣā was B. Schrieke who believed also that the traditions about Muḥammad's night journey to Jerusalem came into being only as late as the Umayyad period.³

Schrieke believed that originally the terms *isrā'* (night journey) and *mi'rāj* (ascension), as used in early Islamic tradition, were inter-

² See a general survey of the relevant studies in Gilliot, C., "Coran 17, *isrā'*, 1 dans la recherche occidentale. De la critique des traditions au Coran comme texte", in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (ed.), *Le voyage initiatique en terre d'Islam: Ascensions célestes et itinéraires spirituels*, Louvain-Paris, 1996, 1-26.

³ Schrieke, B., "Die Himmelsreise Muhammeds", *Der Islam*, 6 (1916), 1-30. Schrieke's view seemed feasible to Horovitz ("Muhammeds Himmelfahrt", *Der Islam*, 9 (1918), 159-83, 162-3). Horovitz noted that there is nothing wrong with the assumption that Jerusalem occupied a special position already among the Muslims of Muḥammad's time, but assumed nevertheless that the relationship between the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā and Jerusalem dates back to 'Umar's times at the earliest ("Muhammeds Himmelfahrt", 167). See also *EP*², "Mi'rāj" by Schrieke-Horovitz, and see Wansbrough, J., *Quranic Studies*, Oxford, 1977, 69. The idea was recycled in the systematic study of the various traditions in Busse, H., "Jerusalem in the Story of Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension", *JSAI*, 14 (1991), 1-40. And see Hasson, I., "The Muslim View of Jerusalem: The Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*", in Joshua Prayer and Haggai Ben-Shammai (eds.), *The History of Jerusalem*, Jerusalem, 1996, 349-85, 358: "It appears that this significant event, that is, Muhammad's Nocturnal Journey... took shape and was linked to Jerusalem no earlier than when construction began on al-Aqṣā mosque near the Dome of the Rock". See also Peters, F. E., *Jerusalem: the Holy City in the Eyes of Chronicles, Visitors, Pilgrims, and Prophets from the days of Abraham to the Beginnings of Modern Times*, Princeton, 1985, 183-4; Van Ess, J., "Vision and Ascension: Sūrat al-Najm and its Relationship with Muḥammad's *mi'rāj*", *JQS*, 1 (1999), 47-62.

changeable and both referred to a journey to heaven, not to Jerusalem.⁴

The view that the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā may not stand for Jerusalem but rather for a celestial sanctuary has survived to the present day, in various articles of the recently published *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*.⁵ From here the way is very short to claiming (as many do) that the Islamic sacredness of Jerusalem has no basis in the Qur'ān, nor in the earliest Islamic traditions.

A minority of contemporary scholars do hold that the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā stands for Jerusalem,⁶ but they have not produced a methodological analysis of the earliest available texts. In what follows I shall reexamine the relevant Qur'ānic and non-Qur'ānic materials and try to find out whether the relationship between the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā and the earthly Jerusalem is indeed post Qur'ānic, and whether the heavenly interpretation of al-Masjid al-Aqṣā—as opposed to the terrestrial one—is indeed a feasible exegetical option.

Let us begin with the Qur'ānic verse which refers to Muḥammad's night journey.

2. The Qur'ānic *isrā'* verse

The well-known night journey (*isrā'*) of the Qur'ānic prophet to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā is mentioned in Q 17:1 which reads:

Glory be to him who made his servant go at night from the sacred mosque (al-Masjid al-Ḥaram) to the farthest mosque (al-Masjid al-Aqṣā) of which we have blessed the precincts, so that we may show him some of our signs; surely he is the hearing, the seeing.

In this verse God takes the Qur'ānic prophet at night from one *masjid* to another, which creates an axis of sanctity linking the two sites. The location of the first one—al-Masjid al-Ḥaram—is un-

⁴ Schrieke, "Die Himmelsreise", 14.

⁵ E.g. Johnson, N. J., "Aqṣā Mosque", *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (hereafter *EQ*), Jane Dammen McAuliffe (G. ed.), Brill, 2006, I, 125: "...the farthest (*al-aqṣā*) place of prayer' might have been in heaven, in Jerusalem, or perhaps in a location near Mecca." See also Bloom, J. M., "Mosque", *EQ*, III, 427 and Sells, M., "Ascension", *EQ*, I, 177.

⁶ E.g. Neuwirth A., "Jerusalem and the Genesis of Islamic Scripture", in L.I. Levine (ed.), *Jerusalem: Its Sanctity and Centrality to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, New York, 1999, 315-25, 318-20.

doubtedly Mecca, in view of numerous other Qur'ānic verses in which the same mosque is mentioned. It is the well-known great mosque that contains the Ka'ba,⁷ although in the present verse it may just refer to Mecca as a sacred wholeness. Al-Masjid al-Aqṣā, however, is only mentioned in the *isrā'* verse, which requires a closer examination of the vocabulary of this verse.

2.1. *Aqṣā*

In the Qur'ān, the term *aqṣā* is always a description of a location on earth. Thus in Q 28:20 and 36:20 the expression *aqṣā al-madīna* denotes the remotest part of the city. The feminine form *quṣwā* is also terrestrial. It occurs in Q 8:42 in the expression: *al-'udwa al-quṣwā*, "the farthest bank", as opposed to *al-'udwa al-dunyā*, "the nearest bank". Both banks are upon earth, and form part of the topography of the battlefield of Badr.

The expression *al-'udwa al-quṣwā* recurs in extra-Qur'ānic texts, in a report about a lesser pilgrimage (*'umra*) performed by Muḥammad.⁸ The report delineates Muḥammad's route, and states that he prayed in a mosque on the "farthest bank" of a valley near al-Ji'rāna. The mosque itself is described as the "farthest mosque" (*al-masjid al-aqṣā*), in contrast to a "nearest mosque" (*al-masjid al-adnā*) in which Muḥammad did not pray. Here, too, *aqṣā* is definitely a description of a mosque upon earth, although it is clear that the mosque itself is not necessarily identical with the one mentioned in Q 17:1.⁹

A similar terrestrial usage of the term *al-aqṣā*, again with reference to a place of worship, is to be found in some poetic verses attributed to Abū Ṭālib, Muḥammad's paternal uncle. The verses contain a list of several holy places in the vicinity of Mecca, one of them being *al-mash'ar al-aqṣā*, "the farthest place of worship."¹⁰ This is usually

⁷ Wensinck, A. J., *EP*, "al- Masjid al-Harām".

⁸ Al-Wāqidi, Muḥammad b. 'Umar, *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, Marsden Jones (ed.), London, 1966, III, 958-9; al-Azraqī, Abū l-Walīd, *Akhbār Makka*, in F. Wüstenfeld (ed.), *Die Chroniken der Stadt Mekka*, Göttingen, 1858, 430 (repr. Beirut, n.d.).

⁹ A. Guillaume ("Where was al-Masjid al-Aqṣā", *Al-Andalus*, 18 (1953), 323-36) tried to identify this particular mosque with the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā. Cf. Paret, R., "Die ferne Gebetsstätte in Sure 17, 1", *Der Islam*, 34 (1959), 150-2.

¹⁰ Ibn Hishām, 'Abd al-Malik, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā, Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī and 'Abd al-Ḥāfiẓ Shalabī (eds.), Beirut, 1997, I, 293.

explained as referring to 'Arafāt.¹¹ This site is situated outside the *haram* of Mecca, at the eastern end of the pilgrimage route. The pilgrims do not go beyond that place, and in pre-Islamic times some of them (the *Ḥums*) reportedly did not even go as far as 'Arafāt.¹²

In conclusion, there is nothing in the Qur'ān to indicate that *aqṣā* in the *isrā'* verse stands for a site in heaven. *Aqṣā* seems to mean rather that the site thus described is situated at the farthest end of the terrestrial course of the night journey.

2.2. Asrā

The nocturnal transfer of the Prophet to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā is described as *asrā'*: "[God] made him go at night". This verb occurs five more times in the Qur'ān, all of which in passages describing biblical history. Three of them (Q 20:77; 26:52; 44:23) describe the nocturnal exodus of Moses with the Children of Israel from Egypt. In the remaining two places (Q 11:81; 15:65) the verb describes the nocturnal flight of Lot with his family from his city.

The destination of Moses' exodus is evidently a land upon earth, the Holy Land, and Lot's flight is also entirely within the boundaries of the same land. Nothing seems to indicate that the verb *asrā'* in Q 17:1 should allude to a journey to different destination.¹³

¹¹ Al-Suhaylī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Abdallāh, *al-Rawḍ al-unuf*, 'Abd al-Ra'ūf Sa'd (ed.), Cairo, 1971, II, 25.

¹² Watt, W.M., *EP*, "Ḥums".

¹³ It may be noted that in modern times, the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā was sometimes identified as Medina and Muḥammad's night journey was identified as his *hijra*. It was argued that the verb *asrā'* is used elsewhere in the Qur'ān to describe the nocturnal flights of Lot and Moses, and therefore *isrā'* is the technical word used for the departure of prophets from among the wicked community which will not heed their message. See Jeffery, A., "The Suppressed Qur'ān Commentary of Muḥammad Abū Zayd", *Der Islam*, 20 (1932), 301-8, 305-6. But the nocturnal flights of Lot and Moses are not from among the wicked but rather from the calamity sent by God upon the wicked. Their flight is therefore different from Muḥammad's *hijra*. Nevertheless, al-Masjid al-Aqṣā was connected to Medina already in some Islamic *faḍā'il* traditions claiming that one of the names of Medina is al-Masjid al-Aqṣā. See al-Samhūdī, Nūr al-Dīn 'Alī b. Aḥmad, *Wafā' al-wafā bi-akhbār dār al-Muṣṭafā*, Muḥammad Muḥyī l-Dīn 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (ed.), Beirut, 1984, I, 23; Kister, M. J., "Sanctity Joint and Divided: On Holy Places in the Islamic Tradition", *JSAL*, 20 (1996), 18-65, 20.

2.3. *Bāraknā*

Al-Masjid al-Aqṣā is located in a region which God blessed (*bāraknā ḥawlahu*). Such a description is reserved in the Qur'ān for localities in the holy land. Whenever the Qur'ān refers to this land as a destination of an exodus or other kinds of travel, it always describes it as a region which has been blessed by God (*bāraknā ḥawlahā* or *fihā*).¹⁴ There is nothing to indicate that the blessed region which is the destination of the journey in our verse should not be located within the boundaries of the same land.¹⁵

In conclusion, nothing in the Qur'ānic *isrā'* verse seems decisively heavenly and much of it seems rather to lead to the conclusion that the verse deals with a night journey to a terrestrial *masjid* situated in the holy land.

2.4. *Biblical and Apocalyptic Literature*

The Qur'ānic night journey to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā seems to be a vision experienced by the Qur'ānic prophet, much in accordance with similar visions known already from Pre-Islamic apocalyptic literature. The Book of Enoch already mentions a vision of a travel to a "blessed place" i.e. Jerusalem, which is situated in the "center of the earth."¹⁶ The idea of a journey in vision to Jerusalem is also known from the Old Testament. Nöldeke¹⁷ already suggested that Q 17:1 reflects Ezekiel 8:3 where Ezekiel experiences in Babylon a vision in which he was taken by a lock of his hair and a wind lifted him up between earth and heaven to one of the gates of the Temple in Jerusalem. In the following verse it is stated that Ezekiel saw there the glory of the God of Israel.

Whether or not this passage was really the direct source of the Qur'ānic *isrā'* verse is irrelevant. What is relevant is the fact that the

¹⁴ Q 7:137 (journey of the Children of Israel); 21:71 (Abraham and Lot), 81 (Solomon); 34:18 (people of Saba').

¹⁵ See also Paret, R., *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, Stuttgart, 1971, on Q 17:1.

¹⁶ 1 Enoch 26:1. Cf. Alexander, P.S., "Jerusalem as the *Omphalos* of the World: On the History of a Geographical Concept", in L. I. Levine (ed.), *Jerusalem*, 104-19, 109.

¹⁷ Nöldeke, Th., *Geschichte des Qorans*, zweite Auflage, bearbeitet von F. Schwally, Hildesheim-New York, 1970, I, 134 n.º 7. See also Horovitz, "Muhammeds Himmelfahrt", 162 and Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 68.

idea of Jerusalem as a destination of a visionary journey is pre-Islamic. Islam did not have to wait until the actual Islamic takeover of Jerusalem in order to envision its own prophet experiencing a vision in which he is taken there at night. Everything seems to indicate that already the Qur'ānic *isrā'* verse alludes to such a journey to Jerusalem.

The choice of this particular destination takes the Qur'ānic prophet on a visionary pilgrimage along the Mecca-Jerusalem axis of sanctity. He is taken to the very heart of the holy land, and this creates a visual contact between the prophet and the sacred locality of the biblical prophets and links him to their prophetic heritage and makes him a prophet like them.

3. The Pre-Islamic Jerusalem

In order to clarify which Jerusalem is represented in the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā one has to look at the image of this city as revealed in texts composed in late-antiquity.

3.1. *New Jerusalem*

The relevant late-antiquity texts show that Jerusalem was perceived as a holy city, a "New Jerusalem" that replaced the one that had been destroyed because of the sinful Jews. The expression "New Jerusalem" is a New-Testament term (Revelation 3:12; 21:2) that was applied by Eusebius, the biographer of Constantine I (d. 337 AD), to the earthly Jerusalem. This exegetical maneuver was designed to praise the acts of this emperor who built in Jerusalem the monumental Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The Temple Mount was left in ruins to commemorate the Israelite sin and punishment. This was the time when, according to the texts, Jerusalem began to turn into a major pilgrimage site.¹⁸

¹⁸ For the texts of Eusebius and others, as well as for relevant studies see Peters, *Jerusalem*, 132-40; Stroumsa, G. G., "Mystical Jerusalems", in L. I. Levine (ed.), *Jerusalem*, 349-70, 351; Bitton-Ashkelony, B., *Encountering the Sacred: the Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley, 2005, 22-24; 78. Cf. Elad, A., "Pilgrims and Pilgrimage to Jerusalem During the Early Muslim Period", in L. I. Levine (ed.), *Jerusa-*

This concept of Jerusalem, the new city that has replaced the sinful Israelite city that had been destroyed by God, is the one that seems to be represented in the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā.

This observation is corroborated by the context in which the Qur'ānic *isrā'* verse is embedded. Modern scholars usually treat this verse as isolated, with no direct relationship to the following verses,¹⁹ but this attitude seems to be wrong.

It is not a coincidence that the Qur'ān should mention al-Masjid al-Aqṣā in close juxtaposition with the destruction of the Israelite Temple. The latter event is mentioned explicitly in verse 7 of the same *sūra*, which forms part of a passage (vv. 2-8) dealing with the Torah that was given to Moses and with the sins of the Children of Israel as well as with their punishment.

The Temple is called *al-masjid*, and the Qur'ān declares that God caused people to bring grief to the Israelites and made these people enter the *masjid* (the Temple House) as they entered it the first time, and they destroyed whatever they captured.²⁰

By calling the Israelite Temple a "mosque", the Qur'ān has separated the sins of the Israelites which brought destruction to the Temple Mount, from the site itself, which remains a sacred Islamic sanctuary despite the sins of its inhabitants. In other words, in verse 7 the Qur'ān has appropriated the sanctity of the Temple Mount while divorcing it from the sinful Israelites. Christian thinkers of late antiquity similarly drew a line between the Christian "New Jerusalem" and its Jewish past which was marked by its punitive destruction.²¹

Separation of sinful people from their religious assets is characteristic of the Qur'ān which separates the Torah from the sinful Israelites who distorted it, and the prophets from the same sinful people who persecuted them. The Torah is perceived as a version of God's Book

lem, 300-14, 304. Eusebius's attitude to the earthly Jerusalem in its supposed relationship to the idea of the New Jerusalem was however quite ambiguous, mainly because he was bishop of Caesarea. See Rubin, Z., "The Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Conflict Between the Sees of Caesarea and Jerusalem," in L. I. Levine (ed.), *The Jerusalem Cathedral* 2, Jerusalem, 1982, 79-105, 92.

¹⁹ According to Nöldeke (*Geschichte des Qorans*, I, 136), some verses were omitted between vv. 1 and 2.

²⁰ Cf. Busse, H., "The Destruction of the Temple and its Reconstruction in the Light of Muslim Exegesis of Sūra 17:2-8", *JSAI*, 20 (1996), 1-17.

²¹ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 74-75, 119.

(the Qur'ān),²² just as the prophets are considered Muslims.²³ The Temple House is likewise separated from the Israelites and has become in verse 7 an Islamic *masjid*.

Even after the destruction of the temporal Temple House, the *masjid* as a sacred locality has not disappeared; it has survived the Israelite Temple, and this post-Israelite sanctuary is the one referred to in the *isrā'* verse. Here it is not a specific building but rather the entire city as a holy unity which has survived the old and sinful city. This abstract sense of the sanctuary is inherent in the Arabic word *masjid*, "a place of worship".

In short, the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā seems to reflect an Islamized version of the earthly —yet divinely purified— Jerusalem, as envisioned in Christian texts of late-antiquity.

3.2. *Byzantine-Persian Jerusalem*

The *isrā'* verse is not the only evidence of the Qur'ānic interest in the holy land of late antiquity. It is reflected also in Q 30:1-3 which —according to the prevalent interpretation— deals with the well-known struggle between Persia and Byzantium. In 614 AD (eight years before Muḥammad's *hijra*), the Byzantine Jerusalem fell to the Persians, but in 628 (four years before the death of Muḥammad) the latter already had to surrender their conquests to Heraclius. During their control of Jerusalem the Persians are said to have entrusted the city to the Jews, till 617 when they reinstated a Christian administration. The Qur'ān, according to the accepted interpretation, expresses solidarity with the Byzantines and rejoices at their final victory over the Persians. This comes out in vv. 4-5: "On that day (i.e. when the Byzantines defeat the Persians) the believers will rejoice in God's help."²⁴

Beyond the exegetical problem whether the Qur'ān really refers to the Byzantine-Persian clash,²⁵ the fact remains that these events pro-

²² Adang, C., "Torah", *EQ*, V, 300-311.

²³ E.g. Rubin, U., "Prophets and Prophethood", *EQ*, IV, 289-307.

²⁴ Bonner, M., "Byzantines", *EQ*, I, 265-6. See further, Peters, *Jerusalem*, 170-5; Kaegi, W.E., *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium*, Cambridge, 2003, 78-80, 96, 205-8.

²⁵ El-Cheikh, N. M., "Surat Al-Rum: A Study of the Exegetical Literature", *JAOS*, 118 (1998), 356-64.

voked a wave of apocalyptic writings in which Jerusalem played a central role.²⁶ There were Jewish eschatological expectations as well.²⁷

Furthermore, the above events took place during Muḥammad's lifetime, and therefore they may perhaps shed some more light on the textual significance of the *isrā'* verse. Assuming that the rapid changes in the situation in Jerusalem reflected also on the hopes and fears of Jews and Christians within Arabia,²⁸ one may infer that the *isrā'* verse shares perhaps some of these feelings, and translates them into an Islamic messianic longing for Jerusalem. It is therefore not surprising that the first Muslim troops that appeared in southern Palestine seemed to Heraclius or to his advisors as some special sect of Jews.²⁹ Perhaps the confusion was the result of the fact that the Arabs too gave the impression of an army driven by messianic zeal.

3.3. *Islamic Holy Land*

Apart from the specific events in Jerusalem, the mere sacredness of the holy land has been appropriated by the Qur'ān. This comes out in one of the above mentioned verses about the exodus of Abraham and Lot to the holy land, i.e. Q 21:71. This verse reads: "And We delivered him [i.e. Abraham] as well as Lot unto the land which We had blessed for all beings (*li l-'ālamīn*)."

The function of *li l-'ālamīn* is primarily to maintain the rhyme of the entire passage, but it nevertheless produces the unmistakable idea that the Holy Land³⁰ is sacred to everyone, i.e. to Muslims as well as to any other believer.

²⁶ Stemberger, G., "Jerusalem in the Early Seventh Century: Hopes and Aspirations of Christians and Jews", in L. I. Levine (ed.), *Jerusalem*, 260-72, 260.

²⁷ Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 79.

²⁸ Cf. Kister, M. J., "Al-Ḥira: Some Notes on its Relations with Arabia", *Arabica*, 15 (1968), 143-69, 143-4 (repr. in Peters (ed.), *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, 81-107).

²⁹ Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 230.

³⁰ While some exegetes endorse the obvious idea that the destination of the flight of Abraham and Lot is the Holy Land (Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 'Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shihāta (ed.), Cairo, 1979, III, 87), others (and later) maintain that it is Mecca (E.g. al-Qurṭubī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad, *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, Cairo, 1967, XI, 305).

4. Al-Masjid al-Aqṣā in *Tafsīr*

The earliest available Muslim *tafsīr* sources, from Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) on, are absolutely agreed that the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā stands for a sanctuary in Jerusalem. This is one of those not so frequent cases in which just one interpretation is suggested for a given Qur'ānic passage, in all the early commentaries including al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). The only point on which these exegetes disagree is whether Muḥammad visited Jerusalem in spirit or in his body as well.³¹

The exegetes support the relationship of the *isrā'* verse to Jerusalem by a series of extra-Qur'ānic traditions describing Muḥammad's night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem. The traditions appear also in the earliest available biographies (*sīra*) of Muḥammad, like that of Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/768).³²

While the Qur'ānic idea of the *isrā'* is abstract and does not go beyond the visional contact of the Qur'ānic prophet with the cradle of prophethood in the Holy Land, in the traditions the idea undergoes a process of localization. These traditions tell the story of the night journey from the point of view of people who are already aware of the Jerusalem that since 17/638 has come under Islamic control, and accordingly, the city is called by its most common Islamic name: Bayt al-Maqdis.³³

There is no need to delve into the details of these well-known traditions, but one point is however significant. In some of the versions, Muḥammad's course is entirely horizontal: Mecca-Jerusalem-Mecca.³⁴ It is a circular course of a visionary pilgrimage, just like the course of pilgrims going from Mecca to 'Arafāt (*al-mash'ar al-aqṣā*) and back to Mecca again.³⁵

³¹ See already Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra*, II, 39-40.

³² *Ibidem*, II, 36-44.

³³ Ibn Ishāq (Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra*, II, 37) defines the destination as Bayt al-Maqdis, of ʿĪlyā'.

³⁴ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra*, II, 36-44.

³⁵ G. R. Hawting ("The Ḥajj in the Second Civil War", in Ian Richard Netton (ed.), *Golden Roads: Migration, Pilgrimage and Travels in Medieval and Modern Islam*, Wiltshire, 1993, 31-42, *pas.*) elaborates on Wellhausen's theory that 'Arafāt and Mecca were originally independent of one another, but the fact remains that Meccans going on pilgrimage to 'Arafāt proceeded along a circular course beginning and ending in Mecca. Besides, the status of 'Arafāt as *aqṣā* can only make sense from a Meccan point of view.

In these circular versions, the process of localization pertains more to the point of departure in Mecca than to the destination in Jerusalem. The Meccan localities that appear as the starting point of the journey are the house of Umm Hāni',³⁶ or a sacred area near the Ka'ba, namely al-Ḥijr.³⁷ The latter is a place of visions experienced during sleep. The best-known example is the dream of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Muḥammad's grandfather, in which he was entrusted with the task of digging the well of Zamzam. He had the dream while sleeping in the Ḥijr.³⁸ Later sources contain more stories of visions experienced during sleep in the Ḥijr.³⁹ The fact that the *isrā'* also starts here preserves its basic significance: a prophetic vision.

As for Jerusalem, the earliest *isrā'* versions do not specify any particular destination within the city, and only say that the Prophet arrived in Bayt al-Maqdis, i.e. Jerusalem. The image of the city in these versions consists of a fusion of earthly, heavenly and eschatological aspects. The heavenly aspect is represented in the presence of the prophets in the earthly Bayt al-Maqdis, as if the city is an extension of their heavenly abode. The prophets pray there under the leadership of Muḥammad. The eschatological element is represented in the image

³⁶ E.g. Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra*, II, 43.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, *al-Sīra*, II, 38. For this term see Hawting, G. R., "The Origins of the Muslim Sanctuary at Mecca", in G. H. A. Juynboll (ed.), *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, Carbondale, 1982, 23-47, 33-34; Rubin, U., "The Ka'ba: Aspects of its Ritual Functions", *JSAI*, 8 (1986), 97-131, 104-13 (repr. in Peters (ed.), *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, 313-47).

³⁸ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra*, I, 151. See Hawting, G. R., "The Disappearance and Rediscovery of Zamzam and the 'Well of the Ka'ba'", *BSOAS*, 43 (1980), 44-54.

³⁹ The ancient ancestor of the Quraysh, al-Naḍr b. Kināna, while asleep in the Ḥijr, had a dream of a green tree that was growing out of his back, till it reached the clouds of the sky. Its branches were "light within light" and people with luminous faces were hanging on the branches from his back up to the sky. The dream symbolized the glory of his future descendants (al-Khargūshī, Abū Sa'd 'Abd al-Malik b. Abī 'Uthmān, *Sharaf al-muṣṭafā*, Nabīl al-Ghamrī (ed.), Mecca, 2003, I, 325-6 (n.º 82). 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Muḥammad's grandfather, also slept in the Ḥijr and saw in his dream a luminous chain emerging from his back having four parts, one reaching the eastern end of the earth, another reaching its western end, another reaching the clouds of the sky, and another reaching beyond the Pleiades. Then the chain turned swiftly into a green tree and the prophets Noah and Abraham appeared before him. The dream foretold the emergence of Muḥammad from his loins: al-Mas'ūdī (Ps.-), 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, *Ithbāt al-waṣīyya li l-imām 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib*, Beirut, 1998, 115-6; Khargūshī, *Sharaf*, I, 338 (n.º 85). See also Rubin, U., "Pre-Existence and Light: Aspects of the Concept of Nūr Muḥammad", *IOS*, 5 (1975), 62-119, 64; *idem*, "Ka'ba", 112-3.

of the Dajjāl (anti-Christ) whom Muḥammad sees in Bayt al-Maqdis, together with some sinners suffering in hell.⁴⁰

This fusion seems to reflect the Jewish rabbinic view of Jerusalem as the Navel of the Earth. Christians of the seventh century were also aware of it.⁴¹ As such it is conceived as the terrestrial midpoint that corresponds to the heavenly Jerusalem which is the celestial midpoint. In a downwards direction it also corresponds to Gehenna, the center of the underworld.⁴²

A closer link is established between the earthly and the heavenly Jerusalem in those Islamic versions which add the ascension (*mi'rāj*) to the story of the night journey. The ascension has its own literary history (see more below) which starts perhaps with the opening passages of Sūra 53. It has eventually found its way into various versions of the night journey, in which Muḥammad arrives in Bayt al-Maqdis from Mecca, but instead of returning to Mecca along the circular course, he ascends from Jerusalem, and meets the prophets in the seven heavens. One such version is recorded in Ibn Ishāq.⁴³ This is a clear step towards adding a decisive component of Islamic sanctity to Jerusalem, which counterbalances its Christian status as the starting point of the ascension of Jesus. The latter was believed to have ascended heaven from the Mount of Olives, where his footprints used to be worshipped by Christian believers.⁴⁴

It is significant that the earliest traditions do not mention a specific mosque in Jerusalem called al-Masjid al-Aqṣā, which accords with the Qur'ānic abstract significance of the term.

Outside the realm of *tafsīr*, a significant act of localization is attributed by al-Ya'qūbī (d. 283/897) to the Umayyad caliph 'Abd

⁴⁰ Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, II, 518-9.

⁴¹ E.g. Arculf. See Peters, *Jerusalem*, 203.

⁴² Alexander, "Jerusalem as the *Omphalos* of the World", 115.

⁴³ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra*, II, 44-50. The tradition is transmitted on the authority of the Anṣārī Companion Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī (d. 65/685). Ibn Ishāq has failed to record the first part of the tradition which describes Muḥammad's journey from Mecca to Jerusalem. For the complete version see 'Abd al-Razzāq, Abū Bakr b. Hammām al-Ṣan'ānī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Muṣṭafā Muslim Muḥammad (ed.), Riyad, 1989, I, 365-70. See also al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad b. Jarīr, *Tahdhīb al-Āthār: Musnad Ibn 'Abbās*, Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir (ed.), I, Cairo, 1982, 427-31 (n.º 725).

⁴⁴ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 81-3. See also Horowitz, "Muhammads Himmelfahrt", 167-8, who observes with reference to the report of Arculf, that the footprints of Jesus were worshipped in the seventh century on the Mount of Olives. For Arculf's report see further Peters, *Jerusalem*, 206-7.

al-Malik (d. 86/705). Al-Ya'qūbī tells us that 'Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock (on the Temple Mount) and stated that the mosque of Bayt al-Maqdis would from then on be a sanctuary for the believers instead of the Sacred Mosque [in Mecca], and the Rock on which Muḥammad reportedly had put his foot when ascending heaven would replace the Ka'ba for them.⁴⁵ There is no need to go into the much discussed problem of the authenticity of this report,⁴⁶ which in any case documents the Umayyad localization of Muḥammad's night journey and ascension on the Rock of the Temple Mount.

The same 'Abd al-Malik is also said to have built the specific mosque called al-Masjid al-Aqṣā,⁴⁷ but we cannot be sure that this caliph was indeed the first to apply the Qur'ānic term al-Masjid al-Aqṣā to a concrete mosque on the Temple Mount.

Most significant is 'Abd al-Malik's reported idea regarding the footprints of Muḥammad on the Rock. This appears to be an Islamic answer to the Christian idea of the footprints of Jesus on the Mount of Olives.⁴⁸ This suggests anti-Christian motives behind 'Abd al-Malik's enterprise on the Temple Mount. Such motives come out mainly in the Qur'ānic anti-Christian verses which were inscribed in the Dome.⁴⁹

In the Islamic traditions, Muḥammad's ascension from Jerusalem takes him to *al-bayt al-ma'mūr* —an allusion to Q. 52:4, i.e. the heavenly Ka'ba. The Prophet sees it in the seventh heaven, with Abraham sitting at its door.⁵⁰ This means that Jerusalem, as the Syrian end of the Mecca-Jerusalem axis of sanctity, has become the gate to the upper Ka'ba.

⁴⁵ Al-Ya'qūbī, Aḥmad b. Abī Ya'qūb, *al-Ta'rīkh*, Beirut, 1960, II, 261.

⁴⁶ E.g. Peters, *Jerusalem*, 197-9; Elad, A., *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage*, Leiden, 1999, 158-63; Robinson, Ch. F., *'Abd al-Malik*, Oxford, 2005, 3-9, 24.

⁴⁷ Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem*, 36.

⁴⁸ For a general overview of the theme of Muḥammad's footprints see Wheeler, B. M., *Mecca and Eden: Rituals, Relics, and Territory in Islam*, Chicago, 2006, 78-79.

⁴⁹ More on the evidence of the verses in relation to 'Abd al-Malik's anti-Christian measures see Robinson, *'Abd al-Malik*, 77-79.

⁵⁰ E.g. Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra*, II, 48-9.

5. Al-Masjid al-Aqṣā in Heaven

5.1. *Shī'ī Exegesis*

In spite of the various images of Jerusalem, all the above versions are agreed that Muḥammad reached this place during a horizontal journey to a locality upon earth. In other words, all these versions are agreed that the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā is identical to the Bayt al-Maqdis known to each and every Muslim.

Deviation from the exegetical consensus regarding the relationship of the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā and Bayt al-Maqdis is first encountered in the *Shī'ī Tafsīr* of al-'Ayyāshī (third century AH).⁵¹ In his exegesis of Q 17:1 he records the following tradition: The sixth *imām* Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) is said to have been visited by a man who asked him which were the most important mosques. The *imām* said that they were the Sacred Mosque (in Mecca) and the Mosque of the Prophet (in Medina). Then the man asked what about al-Masjid al-Aqṣā, and the *imām* answered: "That one is in heaven. The Prophet was taken to it at night". The man went on saying that people claimed that it was Bayt al-Maqdis (*innahu Baytu l-Maqdis*), to which the *imām* retorted: "The mosque of Kūfa is better".

A similar attitude was reportedly shared by the fifth *imām* Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Bāqir (d. 114/732). While sitting near the Ka'ba, he is said to have recited the *isrā'* verse three times and then stated that Muḥammad was taken at night straight into heaven and not to Bayt al-Maqdis, as claimed by the people. He added that the space between the Ka'ba and heaven was a *ḥaram*, i.e. sacred area.⁵²

That these traditions reflect the *Shī'ī* anti-Umayyad emotions has already been observed,⁵³ but their exact exegetical context has not yet been fully clarified, nor the fact that the *Shī'īs* were actually the first to transform the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā into a heavenly sanctuary.

⁵¹ Al-'Ayyāshī, Muḥammad b. Mas'ūd, *al-Tafsīr*; Hāshim al-Rasūlī al-Maḥallātī (ed.), Beirut, 1991, II, 302. See also Kister, M. J., "'You Shall Only Set Out for Three Mosques': a Study of an Early Tradition", *Le Muséon*, 82 (1969), 173-96, 190 (repr. in *idem*, *Studies in Jāhiliyya and Early Islam*, Variorum CS 123, London, 1980, XIII).

⁵² Al-Fayḍ al-Kāshānī, Muḥammad Muḥsin, *Tafsīr al-Ṣāfi*, Ḥusayn al-A'lamī (ed.), Beirut, 1982, III, 166 (from al-Qummī).

⁵³ Hasson, "The Muslim View", 355; Livne-Kafri, O., "The Early *Šī'a* and Jerusalem", *Arabica*, 48 (2001), 112-20, 115.

The Shī'īs attempted to play down the sacredness of the Umayyad Jerusalem which rested mainly on the association of the Temple Mount (mainly the Dome of the Rock) with Muḥammad's night journey and ascension. The above traditions about the imāms are designed to minimize the sanctity of Jerusalem by detaching the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā from the Temple Mount, thus asserting that the Prophet never came to that city, but rather ascended to the heavenly Aqṣā mosque without ever stopping in Bayt al-Maqdis. Apart from depriving Jerusalem of its major attraction for pilgrims, the above traditions offer alternative pilgrimage attractions like the holy city of Kūfa, as well as Mecca.

5.2. *Ascension from Mecca to Heaven*

The Shī'ī claim that al-Masjid al-Aqṣā is in heaven and not in Jerusalem seems to have been inspired by the fact that apart from a night journey of Muḥammad from Mecca to Jerusalem (including his ascension from Jerusalem to heaven), Islamic tradition knows also of Muḥammad's ascension from Mecca straight to heaven. The latter event is described in traditions which were discussed by several Orientalists. Some of them, like Schrieke (see above) claimed that the traditions reflect the original version of the story of Muḥammad's night journey.

But it seems that Muḥammad's direct ascension from Mecca belongs to a different stratum which originally had nothing to do with the event of the *isrā'* to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā.⁵⁴ It belongs rather to the theme of the beginning of Muḥammad's prophetic experience, which involves a ritual of purification as well as ascension to the heavenly spheres. Accordingly, some versions describing Muḥammad's direct ascension from Mecca date the ascension to Muḥammad's first revelation,⁵⁵ which is several years before the traditional dating of the

⁵⁴ See already Bevan, A. A., "Mohammed's Ascension to Heaven", in Karl Marti (ed.), *Studien zur semitischen Philologie und Religionsgeschichte: Julius Wellhausen zum siebzigsten Geburtstag am 17. Mai 1914, gewidmet von Freunden und Schülern*, Giessen, 1914, 51-61, 53.

⁵⁵ One of the versions dating Muḥammad's direct ascension to his first revelation is transmitted from the Baṣran Companion Anas b. Mālik by the Baṣran Successor Maymūn b. Siyāh. The ascension from Mecca to heaven is preceded by an act of purification and is said to have occurred when Muḥammad was about to receive his first revelation (*lammā kāna ḥīnu nubbi'a*). The tradition describes Muḥammad's journey through the seven heavens, where he meets the prophets. Then he receives the prescription of the

isrā'.⁵⁶ Needless to say, in his direct ascension from Mecca, Muḥammad does not reach any heavenly sanctuary called al-Masjid al-Aqṣā nor Bayt al-Maqdis.

However, due to the fact that Muḥammad's night journey to Jerusalem also contained a scene of ascension that took place from Jerusalem, his direct ascension from Mecca to heaven was soon absorbed into the framework of the *isrā'*. But this development is not yet known to Ibn Ishāq, nor to Muqātil or 'Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827), and only emerges in somewhat later *tafsīr* sources.⁵⁷ In some *ḥadīth* collections as well the originally independent traditions describing Muḥammad's direct ascension from Mecca were eventually recorded under the heading of the *isrā'*, as if the two events took place during one and the same night.⁵⁸ Such a combination eventually made it possible for the Shī'īs to go one step further and claim that al-Masjid al-Aqṣā was in heaven, not in Jerusalem.

fifty prayers which become five, etc. See al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad b. Jarīr, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa l-mulūk*, M. J. De Goeje *et al.* (eds.), Leiden, 1879-1901, I, 1157-59 (repr. Cairo, Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (ed.), 1987, II, 307-309). See also *idem*, *Tahdhīb*, 420-22 (n.º 720).

⁵⁶ Muqātil (*Tafsīr*; II, 513) says that Muḥammad's night journey to Bayt al-Maqdis took place one year before the *hijra*. According to Ibn Sa'd (*Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt*, Beirut, 1960, I, 214), the *isrā'* to Bayt al-Maqdis took place on the night of 17 Rabī' al-Awwal, one year before the *hijra*.

⁵⁷ In the *Tafsīr* of Q 17:1 it is not until we get to Hūd b. Muḥakkam (d. ca. 280/893) whose *Tafsīr* is based on that of Yahyā b. Salām (d. 200/816) that we first encounter a tradition taking Muḥammad straight from Mecca to heaven. Here, the heavenly Ka'ba is said to have been positioned right above the earthly Ka'ba. See Hūd b. Muḥakkam al-Huwwārī, *Tafsīr kitāb Allāh al-'Azīz*, Belḥāj Sharīfī (ed.), Beirut, 1990, II, 397-8.

⁵⁸ E.g. al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismā'il, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Cairo, 1958, I, 97-8 (*Kitāb al-ṣalāt* [8]). Bukhārī has recorded here a version of Anas b. Mālik describing Muḥammad's ascension from Mecca to heaven, including the prescription of daily prayers. Neither place nor time are provided here for the ascension, but the heading (*tarjama*) under which Bukhārī chose to record it says: "how prayer was prescribed in the *isrā'*." See also Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, V, 66-69 (*Kitāb* 63 [*Manāqib*], *Bāb* 42 [*Bāb al-mi'rāj*]). Here the direct ascension from Mecca is said to have occurred in the night on which Muḥammad experienced the *isrā'* (*laylata usriya bihi*). See also *idem*, IX, 182-4 (*Kitāb* 97, *Bāb* 37); Ṭabarī, *Tahdhīb*, 414-19 (n.º 719); Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, Cairo, 1313/1895, IV, 208-10 (repr. Beirut, n.d.). There is also a combined version transmitted from Anas by Sharīk b. 'Abdallāh b. Abī Namir (Medinan d. 144/761), in which the direct ascension from Mecca is dated to Muḥammad's first revelation (*qabla an yūḥā ilayhi*) as well as to the night of the *isrā'* (*laylata usriya bi l-nabiyy*). See Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 232 (*Kitāb* 61, *Bāb* 24).

6. Summary and Conclusions

The above materials have shown that the interpretation linking the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā with Jerusalem corresponds to the evidence of the vocabulary of the Qur'ān itself and therefore can be considered pre-Umayyad. The Qur'ānic night journey to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā is a prophetic vision anticipated already in the Old Testament and the post-biblical apocalyptic literature. The fact that the night journey is mentioned in close juxtaposition with the destruction of the Israelite Temple (*al-masjid*) seems to indicate that al-Masjid al-Aqṣā stands for a sacred locality that survived the punitive destruction of the Temple, much in accordance with the late-antiquity Christian idea that identified the earthly Jerusalem with the "New Jerusalem". The journey of the Qur'ānic prophet to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā is actually a pilgrimage to the cradle of prophethood.

The argument that the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā is in heaven and not in the earthly Jerusalem first appears in Shī'ī exegesis signaling an anti-Umayyad reaction. The Shī'ī employment of the argument which detaches the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā from Jerusalem was designed to deprive the Umayyad Jerusalem of its sacred status.

However, the traditions about Muḥammad's night journey to Jerusalem were never suppressed. They were exploited by the Umayyads, and continued to be quoted in the *tafsīr* collections that were compiled through the ages, in the exegesis of Q 17:1. Here the exegetes also recorded traditions in praise of Jerusalem culled from specific *faḍā'il* compilations.⁵⁹

The persistence of the idea that Muḥammad was taken to Jerusalem corresponds to the consensus witnessed in the earliest available *tafsīr* sources concerning the interpretation of the Qur'ānic al-Masjid al-Aqṣā.⁶⁰ It follows that the exegetical consensus of the earliest Qur'ān exegetes regarding a given Qur'ānic passage sometimes deserves greater credit than Orientalists since Schrieke have been prepared to grant it.

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⁵⁹ A wide range of traditions is provided by al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) in his *al-Durr al-manthūr fī l-tafsīr bi l-ma'thūr*, Cairo, 1314/1869, IV, 136-62 (repr. Beirut, n.d.).

⁶⁰ For other Qur'ānic passages which some exegetes—but not all—have linked to Jerusalem, see el-Khatib, Abdallah, "Jerusalem in the Qur'ān", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 28 (2001), 25-53.