

INTRODUCTION

It is a truism often repeated that Jerusalem is a Holy City for all three faiths but, in looking at the stories of the Prophets associated with it, I intend to look afresh at the significance of Jerusalem to Muslims. The Qur'an says that Islam is the religion of all mankind, and it is my contention that Jerusalem is the key to understanding why this statement is true.

On 28 September 2000 Ariel Sharon visited the *Haram Sharif* in Jerusalem, accompanied by hundreds of soldiers. His message was that the place would be eternally Jewish, and that the City would never again be divided. The intrusion triggered the Al-Aqsa *Intifada*, by far the bloodiest episode in the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians. In February 2001 Sharon was elected Prime Minister. The man who had been held chiefly responsible for the massacre at Sabra and Chatilla refugee camps in Lebanon in 1982 proceeded to crack down on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He received some nervous censure from the international community for his policy of political assassinations and disproportionate response. However, many Israelis regarded him, in the midst of suicide bombing attacks, as being *not hard enough* (though his policy of an eternally unified and Jewish Jerusalem was one that was fine even with many quite left-wing, 'land for peace' Israelis). And all this after peace had seemed so near.

There have been attempts since then to restart the peace process, but each time it seems that hope is quickly destroyed by the violent acts of one side or the other. However, this book is not ultimately about such failures. I take no pleasure

in the seeming pessimism of my politics, but this book presumes the nature of that 'hope' to be illusory, being based on a secular, non-religious approach to the whole profound matter of the Holy Land. From the secular point of view, all allegedly ultimate truth is relative, and 'deep causes' are numbers and names: 1982, or '67, '48 or even 1917; Begin, Ben Gurion, Balfour. Seeing a solution in the form of two states, and particularly a redivided Jerusalem and all that means, is, on this logic, understandable and even imaginable. Yet it would depend on Jewish Israelis accepting the notion that they have something approaching equal rights with the Palestinians, and would require of Palestinians, particularly refugees, that they renounce hopes that have sustained them for over fifty years: hopes of a return to what once was, a return that, as it becomes more unlikely through human offices, assumes ever greater religious significance.

This pairing of improbabilities makes such a solution extremely unlikely. The majority of religious Jews believe that their Chosenness implies greater rights to the Land; and, while the majority of secular Jews may have discarded most of their religion, many have not discarded the idea of privileged ownership of the land that their religious co-religionists claim. This provides, in a way, a fossilised part of their identity that is impervious to secular argument. Security concerns, whether legitimate or exaggerated, serve only to mask or worsen the feeling that they have been singled out uniquely for persecution.

A mixed secular and religious cast of mind operates for Palestinians too. The inspiration to struggle and sacrifice is often religious, while the *aspiration* has been national. There is a rigidity to this thinking that finds great difficulty in seeing beyond the Israeli Jewish / Palestinian Muslim zero sum game, in which only one side can win.

As this image of Chosenness, on both sides, thus forms something of a 'given', something that cannot simply be wished away or removed by external intervention, it is clear that one must go deeper and, if we wish to transcend the

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enormous problem that it builds up around its symbol, the city of Jerusalem, we must dive really deep, and way, way back, even to the extent of remembering God and accepting that reality is His Will. Consequently, whether we are Muslim, Christian or Jew, we will have to let something go. In the emblematic judgement of Solomon, which we will ponder in more detail later, the point, on one level, is that one cannot divide a child if it is to live, and that real love is expressed by the one who lets go of her claim so that the child can survive. Some commentators insist that one cannot apply this to the Holy Land—the Land will not die if there are two separate states. But this is justice on the purely human level. To explain Israel, to solve Israel (and I believe that Israel is a problem to be solved, and a soluble one at that), one must accept that God is One and that his truth is ultimately not relative but unitary, and that a deeper level of justice exists that is ultimately not contradictory, but transcendent, because so many people have suffered deeply, and they will not know peace if this is not true. The fact that Muslims and Jews (and, in a way, Christians) believe in One God should ease the task; but who is the mother of the baby, so to speak?

What is the religious significance of Israel? Who is right? The answers are not immediately obvious, and it seems that even the question was obscure until very recently. However, we need to believe that it is God's Will that Jews have been allowed to return to the land, at enormous sacrifice to themselves, and that they have the opportunity to do what their ancestors did not do, and to do what they were expelled for not doing in 70 CE and before in 586 BCE, which is to submit to God. For that, they would literally have to stop being 'Israel' because Israel was how Jacob was named when he 'struggled with God'. The difference between now and 70 CE, from a Muslim point of view, is that this time Jews (and all of us) have a uniquely clear and authentic message from an authentic messenger, these being respectively, the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad. The

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solution, as the graffiti indicates, is Islam, which means submission to God. As a solution, this seems far more likely to succeed than any current peace process, not least because it seems to be not only what God says in the Qur'an, but what the Bible actually says too.

The Bible itself, upon which much of this book draws, is an extraordinary collection of material, from the sacred to the profane, at times sketchy, at times over-detailed, profound, contradictory, illuminating, perplexing, misleading. What it has, and probably what until recently kept it as the core book of Western culture, is a return, again and again, to the notion of One God, and to the idea that humanity is on a journey back to that One God. In older, and some might say simpler, times, the enormous mass of material that did not support this perceived straight and narrow path was perhaps considered in private with *angst*, but in public at least, it was attributed to God's unknowable side. Today we live among few sacred cows, and the faults of the Bible have become known to educated people. Consequently, former biblical heroes are studied in microscopic detail, their moral failings psychologised and their stories dissected by grammarians, redaction critics or comparative ethnologists. Whether this is done in order to understand, or to dismiss, or to appreciate these people as fully rounded human beings, or because, in the light of post-modernism, it is simply interesting and amusing, the underlying assumption is that there is no alternative method.

As Muslims we believe that such a method exists. In their telling of the stories of these same figures, from Adam down the many generations, the Qur'an and Hadith offer a different primary source and a very different approach. The 'voice' is another voice and, because Islam means submission, it is in the nature of the Islamic approach to our sacred texts that we accept what we read as the literal word of God in the case of the Qur'an, and the literal word of His last Prophet, in the case of the authentic Hadith. This literalism is something that very few Jews or Christians still share. Most

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see the Bible as having been written by many specifically human, non-prophetic hands, many years after the events described. In the case of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, for example, the form of the story each tells reflects the political reality of the different contexts in which they were written. The same is true of the Hebrew Bible. By contrast, the parameters of biography in the Islamic sources are defined and, apart from some nuances in interpretation, are not really the subject of speculation and deconstruction.

Yet it is not true that there is no divergence within Islamic interpretation. For the purpose of our argument we can say that there are two schools, one that subscribes to the doctrine of absolute prophetic infallibility and the other that acknowledges that the Prophets, all save the last, committed some transgression, through which they learnt and we can learn. It is, after all, through the weakest point in the earth's surface that the growing plant seeks the light.

It seems likely that the prophetic infallibility school has achieved an unspoken supremacy because of the nature of the Biblical text. If we look, as we will shortly, at what the Bible says about the lives of David and Solomon, we find scandal upon scandal. The prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel offer contradiction upon contradiction. The life of Jesus gives us more contradiction and, in the end, a deep uncertainty. What we are given is neither clear personal example nor message, nor a 'fully rounded human being' that we can relate to as a being like ourselves. It is as if the weakest points have allowed the stories, or the personalities which they describe, to become choked with metaphorical weeds that leave the message or the *exempla*, not in light, but in deep, deep shadow.

Much of this, I would say, reflects the very human nature of the Bible. The Bible doesn't simply tell us about the Prophets. Rather, it tells us about the nature and concerns of the Bible's authors and the times in which they wrote. At its worst this can lead to what seems like self-justification, complacency and special pleading on behalf of

the Chosen People, as if the authors wanted, at the same time, to chide the people for their sins, convince them that their chosenness was an innate birthright and evoke the hallowed name of the forefathers to emphasise these points. This sets up a tension that is never really resolved in the biblical texts. In the Islamic sources this tension, at this level, does not exist. The moral limits are defined, and keeping to them is stressed as our responsibility, and the Prophets are examples. The same message can be found in the Bible, but heavy pruning is needed throughout.

This leads us to the profoundest point of comparison between the Holy Books. Muslims see God as the One, the Eternal, and the purpose of life as being to praise and worship and please Him. It is a relationship that is expressed in the name Islam. The Prophets all came to teach this to people, or, rather, to bring them back to this Adamic relationship. The Qur'an and the Hadith are thus God-centred. It is this, perhaps more than anything else, that has been lost in the writing of the Bible by human hands. What we have in the Biblical text is a multiplicity of bad relationships with God, or perhaps just one long, bad one. The best that can be said for it is that it develops.

It has been said that there is one way of doing the right thing, but infinite ways of doing the wrong, and the Bible often seems like a history of doing the wrong thing. Why else would it be so long? (The Qur'an is much shorter, and in terms of the story it tells, it is slim indeed.) In its length and sometimes salacious detail the Bible almost plays to the myth of naughty individuality so dearly held in the materialist West. This modern myth holds that intimate and carefully analysed details of deviation are more valuable, interesting and important than the idea that there is a God, and that there is a way truly and joyfully to serve Him.

What the Bible reflects is precisely this lack of faithfulness and its consequences, whether in the king or the people at large. As we shall see, it is a lack of faithfulness that is often described in terms of sexual infidelity or even

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prostitution. The biblical relationship seems to be characterised by the archetype of Jacob's struggle with the angel, after which he was named *Isra'el*, 'he who struggles against God'. The Bible, therefore, seems very human-centred, or in the New Testament, Jesus-centred, but very seldom is it God-centred. This goes back long before Jacob to the very beginning itself. For example, after Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit we immediately find the Creator of heaven and earth walking in the garden in the cool of day calling to them to find out where they are. Commentators, too, see God in terms of humans, rather than humans in terms of God. Of Abraham, Thomas Cahill says in *The Gifts of the Jews*: 'Life was a wheel, and there was no escape. You were born fated. Nothing new was supposed to happen. But this one little desert tribe decided not to see life that way.' In Islam such a conceptualisation would be unthinkable. It would be like saying that Muhammad had noticed that the Arabs needed a bit more attention in general, and a Prophet in particular, and so decided to do something about it.

This approach seems to have removed God, or *Allah/El*, from the centre of history; it is strangely symptomatic of the current secular global world-view that raises individuality above everything. Somehow, the solution to that problem is still to be sought in God, and for Westerners, God is learnt about from the Bible. In the Bible there are Prophets, and at least a few of them go to Jerusalem. This is why Jerusalem is important. It is the place where the sacred and the profane meet. It is the great amphitheatre where the struggle is played out.

This study is concerned with this city and with nine Prophets—Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jesus and Muhammad—who were connected with it in different ways. I will discuss in passing some of the differences between the Islamic and the Jewish or Christian understanding of their lives and teachings, but my aim is to show how they all point to the same straight

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path to God, to *Allah*. In the end, this will lead us beyond Jerusalem, to the point where Muhammad ‘decided to do something about’ the non-Jewish world not having a Prophet, or, as Muslims believe, to the point where God called upon a Prophet who would bring a message to all humanity, rather than merely to his own people. This happened in Mecca in Arabia, but the Prophet Muhammad’s most sublime moment occurred on the Night Journey, as his journey to Jerusalem and ascension to the heavens from there is known. Thus, I do not intend to leave Jerusalem to the interpretations of the Jews and Christians. Rather I intend to move beyond the dictum that Jerusalem, *al-Quds*, the Holy, is central to the three faiths, and see it, not as the centre, but as the door to the faith, *bab al-din*.