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Citation:

Raj, R (2020) Motivation for Muslim Travellers to the Holy City of Jerusalem. International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage, 8 (6). ISSN 2009-7379 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21427/D7VC7D>

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2020

## Motivation for Muslim Travellers to the Holy City of Jerusalem

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### Recommended Citation

Raj, Razaq (2020) "Motivation for Muslim Travellers to the Holy City of Jerusalem," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 8: Iss. 6, Article 2.

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol8/iss6/2>

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# Motivation for Muslim Travellers to the Holy City of Jerusalem

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This paper discusses and explores empirical and personal insights into religious tourism and pilgrimage, exploring it from a Muslim pilgrims' perspective, reflecting on characterisations and motivations and discussing the sacred Journey of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from the Holy Mosque (Makkah) to Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Travel is important for Muslims. Indeed, it was during the journey of Miraj that Allah ordered Muslims to pray the five daily prayers.

The concept of Islam is not merely praising Allah (SWT). Islam also means to serve society according to the directions of Allah (SWT) and the teachings of his final Prophet, Muhammad (PBUH). Islam strongly prohibits divisiveness of community or society in terms of sociological groups, racism and sectarianism. Thus, the main purpose of Muslim visitors when visiting pilgrimage sites is holistic, to enhance their knowledge, find pleasure, love and to offer dedication. Muslim visitor's motivation for pilgrimage to sites such as Al Aqsa Mosque is to offer prayers and visit the holy site.

This paper will begin with a brief discussion on the Islamic approach to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and explain the principles on which Islamic values for society are based according to the teachings Allah (SWT) and the perfect examples of his Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The paper will also explore the journey of Miraj and will offer discussion on pilgrimage engagement in religious rituals at the holy city of Jerusalem.

**Key Words:** Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Islamic values, democracy, Muslim society, fundamentalism

## Introduction

Islam is a religion of peace and guidance for both the individual and society and a complete way of life that provides a distinct outlook for human existence. The messenger of Allah (SWT), Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), has provided the human being with a clear and perfect code for life; a code which teaches Muslims to live according to the laws of the land in peace and harmony with others in society, to be patient, steadfast, tolerant, show kindness and educate themselves. In fact, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) made it essential for everyone to educate themselves and others in society throughout their whole life. In the twelfth year of his prophethood, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was taken on night journey from Makkah to Jerusalem and onward to heaven (Miraj, Rise). Allah stated in chapter 17:1, Qur'an:

*Almighty Allah had said: Glorified (and Exalted) be He (Allah) (above all that evil they associate with Him), Who took His slave*

*Muhammad for a journey by night from AL Masjid al Haram [at Makkah] to the farthest mosque [in Jerusalem], the neighbourhood whereof We have blessed, order that We might show him (Muhammad) of Our Ayat (proofs, evidences, lessons, signs, etc.). Verily, He is the All Hearer, the All Seer (Ibn Kathir).*

Hence, the concept of Islam is not merely an exercise in praising Allah (SWT), Islam is also means of serving society according to the directions of Allah (SWT) and the teachings of his final Prophet, Muhammad (PBUH). Islam seeks peace and harmony and strongly prohibits the divisiveness of community or society in terms of sociological groups, racism or sectarianism.

This research will assess the Islamic approach to the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and explain the principles on which Islamic values for society are based according to the teachings of Allah (SWT) and the perfect examples of his Prophet Muhammad

(PBUH). The paper will also explore the journey of Miraj and will offer discussions on how pilgrims engage in religious rituals at the holy city of Jerusalem. The following sections provides a review of the past literature and explain significant miracles related to the journey of Miraj.

## Literature Review

Religious pilgrimage has been a fundamental element of society and has a complex relationship with holy sites and religion. Studies of religious tourism typically focus on pilgrimage to holy sites (Griffin & Raj, 2017; Blackwell, 2007; Stausberg, 2012; Vukonić, 1996). Raj and Morpeth (2007) ponder religion as a dynamic and ancient concept, ranging from older established faiths to more modern ones. As one of the ancient Abrahamic faiths, Muslims have travelled on pilgrimage to seek the same rewards as other faiths, because of a certain divine grace (barakah) which they consider is associated with the very act of travelling. The Qur'an and Prophetic traditions are replete with exhortations to travel in search of knowledge, 'even as far as China', as indeed are legal manuals which highlight the obligation to travel for knowledge, particularly in cases when certain disciplines cannot be sourced locally. The outcome of such religious imperatives is to be found in centuries of Muslim travel, over many thousands and millions of miles, in search of a single narration or tradition. Sometimes such expeditions would produce travelogues which have become classics, such as *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr* (Wright & De Goeje, 2009) and *The Travels of Ibn Battuta* (Mackintosh-Smith, 2003).

While some researchers have explored pilgrims' personal experiences (i.e. Collins-Kreiner, 2018; Griffin & Raj, 2017; Holloway, 1989; Lavery, 1987; Nolan & Nolan, 1992; Raj, 2012; Towner, 1994), in the current literature there is comparatively limited research undertaken to explore and discuss the motivation of religious tourists' visitation to holy sites from a Muslim perspective.

As early as 1976, MacCannell (1976:43) highlighted 'sightseeing' as a key personal experience of ritual for the religious tourist, who has the capacity to develop both internal experiences and the sacredness of religious worship. He recognised that:

*Traditional religious institutions are everywhere accommodating the movements of tourists. In 'The Holy Land,' the tour has followed in the path of the religious pilgrimage and is replacing it. Throughout the world, churches, cathedrals, mosques, and temples are*

*being converted from religious to touristic functions'.*

However, Raj and Morpeth (2007) in further investigating the motivations for religious tourism observe a common belief that religious pilgrims to holy places develop their own individual and personal experiences. Collins-Kreiner (2018:11) in discussing religious tourism in the Holy Land suggests that:

*most of the visitors who visited the Holy Land were motivated primarily by religious beliefs, which led them to their sacred journey. They were motivated by the strength of their faith and religio-spiritual world of images and perceptions of the Holy Land, which also formed their expectations of the tour.*

Leading religious tourism academics have focused on the motivations and behaviours of the tourists' personal experiences. Many researchers highlight that in some instances there is a spiritual dimension to motivations for religious tourism and pilgrimage to holy sites, with the second category identified as tourists seeking escapist recreational leisure experiences in artificial 'pleasure environments'. Whether the motivation is related to the spirituality of the local environment or the heritage and recreational value of the site, Griffin and Raj recognise that overall, religious tourism encompasses

*a variety of activities and practices [which] take place at a variety of sites, comprising of rituals, pilgrimage and tourism, based on sacred and profane motivations (2017:5).*

There is range of historical examples of Muslim travellers visiting religious sites in Jerusalem and within the accounts, are many faith-motivated visits to Al Aqsa Mosque and other sacred sites to partake in and share the beauty of the Holy Land. The records of people who go to Jerusalem for pilgrimage are unanimous in the view that nothing can quite prepare them for the sheer beauty of the experience and the overwhelming feeling of humility that overcomes them during the pilgrimage to Al Aqsa Mosque. This paper discusses the motivation for Muslim travel to Al Aqsa Mosque re-enacting the spiritual journey of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from Makkah to Jerusalem.

## Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) Journey of Night (Miraj)

The journey of night (Miraj) happened on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of Rajab, the seventh month in the Islamic calendar in the year 621. The Miraj journey took place in the

twelfth year of his prophethood, when Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was taken on a night journey from Makkah to Jerusalem and onward to heaven (Miraj, Rise).

The Night journey starts with the appearance of the angel Jibrīl (Gabriel) in the Grand Mosque of al Haram (Makkah) with a flying horse. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) then made the miraculous journey from Makkah to Jerusalem. The significant part of this journey was that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stopped in Jerusalem and undertook prayer for all the earlier prophets. During his stay in Jerusalem, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) met all the prophets who came before in him, according to Islamic belief approximately 124,000 prophets in all, came to their people at different time. The Quran mention 25 prophets' names, including Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon and Jesus. Table 1 provides the 25 names that are mentioned in the Quran with their equivalent Judeo-Christian name.

It is fundamental part of the Islamic faith to believe in all 124,000 Prophets of God. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is accepted as the last prophet of God and the first revelation of the Quran was received by him in the year 610 and he kept receiving revelations for the rest of his life.

After performing prayer at Al Aqsa mosque, the noble Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) then ascended to the heavens with Gabriel on his journey of Miraj. The second part of the journey was a physical journey ascending through the seven heavenly realms until he reached paradise. The noble Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was shown the Heavens by the Angel Jibrīl (Gabriel). He reached the stage of Sidra-tul-Muntaha in the seventh heaven - this is the last point of heaven and the beginning of the abode of God (Allah, SWT) where no one else is able to reach. Angel Jibrīl (Gabriel) stopped at this point and said o' Prophet of Allah, I cannot go any further forward. The noble Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) talked to God Almighty. The Miraj validates the rank and the status of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), because on that night he accomplished a closeness with God. Chapter, 53:7-18, of the Quran states:

*While he was in the highest part of the horizon:  
Then he approached and came closer, And was  
at a distance of but two bow-lengths or (even)  
nearer; So did (Allah) convey the inspiration to  
His Servant (conveyed) what He (meant) to  
convey. The (Prophet's) (mind and) heart in no*

**Table 1: Prophets Names in Quran**

Prophets Names mentioned in the Quran	Judeo-Christian Equivalent
Hazrat Adam (AS)	Adam
Hazrat Idrees (AS)	Enoch
Hazrat Nuh (AS)	Noah
Hazrat Hud (AS)	Eber
Hazrat Saleh (AS)	Salah
Hazrat Ibrahim (AS)	Abraham
Hazrat Lut (AS)	Lot
Hazrat Ismail (AS)	Ishmael
Hazrat Ishaq (AS)	Isaac
Hazrat Yaqub (AS)	Jacob
Hazrat Yusuf (AS)	Joseph
Hazrat Ayyub (AS)	Job
Hazrat Shuaib (AS)	Jethro
Hazrat Musa (AS)	Moses
Hazrat Harun (AS)	Aaron
Hazrat Zu-Al-Kifal (AS)	Ezekiel
Hazrat Dawud (AS)	David
Hazrat Suleiman (AS)	Solomon
Hazrat Ilyas (AS)	Elijah
Hazrat Al-Yasa (AS)	Elisha
Hazrat Yunus (AS)	Jonah
Hazrat Zakaria (AS)	Zechariah
Hazrat Yahya (AS)	John the Baptist
Hazrat Isa (AS)	Jesus
Hazrat Muhammad (SAW)	Muhammad

*way falsified that which he saw. Will ye then dispute with him concerning what he saw? For indeed he saw him at a second descent. Near the Lote-tree beyond which none may pass: near it is the Garden of Abode. Behold, the Lote-tree was shrouded (in mystery unspeakable!) (His) sight never swerved nor did it go wrong! For truly did he see the Signs of His Lord the Greatest. (Ibn Kathir)*

### Miraj and Five Daily Prayers

It was during the journey of Miraj that Allah ordered Muslims to pray the five daily prayers. The Holy Prophet Muhammad after returning from Miraj, announced to his people that Allah had given him the gift of five daily prayers for his followers. The first obligation of a Muslim is to undertake worship on a regular basis in his or her house, mosque or any



suitable place. This means observing the salaah five times a day at the proper times stated and prescribed in Qur'an, Chapter 30: 17-18:

*So (give) glory to Allah, when you reach eventide and when you rise in the morning; to him be praise, in the heavens and on earth; and in the late-afternoon and when the day begins to decline (Ibn Kathir).*

These five daily prayers are a fundamental part of Muslim belief. There is a very clear wisdom behind undertaking the five prayers at specific times of the day. They are divided into different times to offer both spiritual and bodily benefits for human beings, provided that the one who is offering the prayer is serious and prepares suitably before standing to offer the prayer. The way the five daily prayers are performed comes from the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This was a present to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from Allah, who undertook a binding duty of undertaking salaah 50 times a day at the beginning, which was then reduced to 5 times a day - at the supplication of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) during the night of Miraj by the advice of Prophet Moses. After the appeal of Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Allah showed his mercy and blessing by announcing good news to Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), reducing it to five daily prayers. Praying the salaah plays very important role in the life of the Muslim.

Ibn Kathir narrates a hadith where Muhammad (PBUH) led the prayers for all the other prophets of Allah in Al Aqsa Mosque.

*'Then I left and it was not more than a little while when a lot of people gathered, and someone called for the prayer and the prayer was established'. He (the Prophet) continued, 'So we stood in lines waiting for someone to come and lead us, then Jibra'il took my hand and asked me to lead the prayer, and I did. After the end of the prayer Jibra'il asked me, 'O Muhammad, do you know who prayed behind you?' I said, 'No'. He said, 'Every Prophet sent by Allah SWT prayed behind you.' Then Jibra'il took my hand and we ascended to heaven (<http://muslimsincalgary.ca/masjid-al-aqsa-and-the-incredible-night-journey/>).*

The above hadith, narrated by Ibn Kathir states the importance of salaah in Islam. All the Prophets of Allah prayed together in Al Aqsa Mosque which give greater significance to their congregational prayer (Jama'ah). This endows Al Aqsa Mosque with further importance in Islam and motivation Muslims to visit the blessed

surrounding of the holy site of Al Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis; all the Prophets of Allah assembled here and offered the prayer. Al Aqsa is the only place on earth where all the Prophets of Allah prayed together behind the Imam Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

## Methodology

The overall research approach taken in this paper follows a methodology proposed by Bernard (2006), this ethnographic approach was undertaken to gain better and deeper understandings of the motivation for Muslim travellers to the Holy City of Jerusalem. The author used these ethnographic approaches in association with secondary research, which was undertaken in the form of a literature review of key theories and current related research. This process took the form of researching books, journals, newspaper articles, online journals and the internet. This process was essential in developing an awareness of the current state of knowledge on the subject and how the proposed research would add to what is already known (Gill & Johnson, 2002).

This approach responds to Veal's (2006) suggestions on how theoretical knowledge should be applied to primary research. It was important to the researcher that the chosen area of investigation would be contemporary to ensure sound findings which could be referred to in future research.

## Significance of Al Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis

The significance of Al Aqsa Mosque and the reason why Bayt al-Maqdis has obtained a holiness for Muslims is due to it being the first Qiblah. This continues to cause interest today in the region. Al Aqsa is the name of the mosque inside a compound within the old city of the Jerusalem. The area is known to as Al Haram al-Sharif or Noble Sacred house by Muslims or the Temple Mount by Jews, and the compound also contains the Western Wall (Wailing Wall) which is highly significant in Judaism. The Western Wall is also known as Al-Burqa wall by Muslims because they believe that noble Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) tied al-Buraq (his winged steed) there when travelled from Makkah to Jerusalem before he ascended to the heavens.

The United Nations cultural agency, UNESCO has designated the Old City of Jerusalem and its walls as a World Heritage site. It is one the most blessed city in the world with historical and spiritual significance for

Christians, Jews and Muslims. Its significance for these three Abrahamic faiths is most extraordinary and all three see the City of Jerusalem as an important place to worship God.

Jerusalem is known in Arabic as Bayt al-Maqdis (The Noble and Sacred house) and according to some historians it was originally built by Prophet Adam (AS). In a hadith narrated by Abu Dharr (RA) it is reported that he asked the Holy Prophet (PBUH),

*O Prophet of Allah, which Masjid was built first on earth?' The Prophet replied, 'The Sacred Masjid of Makkah.' Abu Dharr again asked, 'Which was next?' The Prophet said, 'The Masjid al-Aqsa.' 'How long was the period between them?' Abu Dharr asked. The Prophet said, 'Forty years. Apart from these, offer your prayers anywhere when it is time to pray, although excellence is in praying in these Masjid' <http://muslimsincalgary.ca/masjid-al-aqsa-and-the-incredible-night-journey/>).*

Allah blessed the land of Al Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis and its surrounding areas. In Islamic theology this blessing means that the land is associated with Allah's mercy and because it is a blessed part of Allah's creation, humanity can receive benefit from it. Allah's endowed spiritual blessing also extends to people who reside in the local area of Jerusalem, providing they are practicing their salaah and following the commandments of Allah.

The table 2, highlight the brief history of Al Aqsa Mosque according to most Muslim religious scholars and historian.

### **Distinction Between Al Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock**

Over the centuries there has been confusion between two holy sites Al Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem by Muslims and other faith communities.

The major misunderstanding comes from historical context the difference between the two holy sites. Al Aqsa Mosque (Figure 1), the 'farthest mosque (in Jerusalem)' mentioned in the Quran, is the third holiest site in Islamic theology. The Dome of the Rock (Figure 2) is another famous Islamic site located in the compound of the old city of Jerusalem. This site is not a mosque, but a holy site for Muslim, because it is believed to be place from where noble Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) ascended to heaven during his night journey (see also Figure 3).

Figures 1 and 2 show that Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock are different holy sites located within the Noble Sanctuary compound. Al Aqsa Mosque has a grey lead painted Dome and the Dome of the Rock is holy shrine with a golden dome, within the same compound.

### **Muslim Visitors' Motivation for Pilgrimage to Al Aqsa Mosque – Case Study**

The holy city of Jerusalem has strong attraction and emotional enticement in the hearts of Muslims. Jerusalem is the third holiest city in Islamic theology after the cities of Makkah and Madinah, both of which are in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The fundamental love and desires for Jerusalem come from it being the first Qibla for Muslims to pray towards in the early years of their faith. This creates significant emotional associations with the mosque of Al-Aqsa. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), travelled to Jerusalem during his night journey, which creates further association for Muslims. The Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH), miraculous night journey to heaven is clearly mentioned in the Quran. During this night journey Allah took his servant from the Holy Mosque Makkah to the Mosque of Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem.

Pilgrims travel to religious sites to enhance their knowledge, to gain benefits, for personal supplication

**Table 2: Brief History of Al Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis**

Prophet Adam (AS) first built Al Aqsa Mosque
Ibrahim (AS) rebuilt Al Aqsa Mosque
Prophet Daud (AS) began the rebuilding of Al Aqsa Mosque
Prophet Sulayman (AS) completed building Al Aqsa Mosque after his father Prophet Daud (AS) passed away.
Al Aqsa mosque was destroyed in 587 BC by the King of Babylon.
Al Aqsa mosque site was rebuilt by Great Khalifah Umar bin Khattab when he liberated Jerusalem in 637/638 CE.
The Umayyad Khalifah, Abd' al Malik ibn Marwan in 691/692 CE [72/73 AH] built the Dome of the Rock.



**Figure 1: Al Aqsa Mosque**



**Figure 2: Dome of the Rock**



**Figure 3: Inside of the Dome of Rock**



(Photos by Author, 2020)



and for the glorification of God, these are a very important parts of Muslim worship. Raj *et al.* (2015:113) suggest that:

*Islam has been identified as the religion where the most pilgrimages are made, although most religions require their adherents to visit their sacred places to help relieve spiritual or material troubles. Before the development of mass systems of transportation in the 19th century most religious travellers had to walk to their destination (only the wealthy could afford to travel on horseback or by carriage). Even so, the wealthy were expected to walk at least some of the way during pilgrimage.*

Therefore, Jerusalem is very special place for Muslim visitors. One travels in the footsteps of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) when one enters the courtyard of Al Aqsa mosque (Figure 2). This adds greater motivation for Muslim visitors to travel to Jerusalem and offer prayer in Al Aqsa Mosque. The City of Jerusalem is also a symbol of past prophets and it was first Qiblah. In the early years of Islam, Muslims turned towards Jerusalem for their prayers after Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) received the command to prayer five times a day from God, during his journey of Miraj. The Qiblah was changed 16 months after the migration to Madinah by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), was instructed to change Qiblah from Jerusalem to Makkah. Allah stated in chapter 2:44 of the Qur'an:

*We have certainly seen the turning of your face, [O Muhammad], toward the heaven, and We will surely turn you to a qiblah with which you will be pleased. So turn your face toward al-Masjid al-Haram. And wherever you [believers] are, turn your faces toward it [in prayer]. Indeed, those who have been given the Scripture well know that it is the truth from their Lord. And Allah is not unaware of what they do. (Ibn Kathir)*

Al-Bukhari in his sahih hadith narrates that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said:

*There are only three mosques to which you should embark on a journey: the sacred mosque (Mecca, Saudi Arabia), this mosque of mine (Madinah, Saudi Arabia), and the mosque of Al -Aqsa (Jerusalem).*

The main purpose for visitors is to travel to pilgrimage sites to enhance their knowledge and find pleasure, love and dedication for themselves. Therefore, Muslim visitors' motivation for pilgrimage to Al Aqsa Mosque is to offer pray and visit the holy sites. It is very clear

that Islam has a definitive link with the holy city of Jerusalem from the very early days, which motivates Muslim to visit and it became Muslim duty to protect it from invasion by the Byzantines and the Persians. Abu -Amr (1995) further highlights the importance of holy city of Jerusalem to Muslim pilgrimage.

*Omar Ibn al-Khattab, the second Muslim caliph, accepted in person the capitulation of Jerusalem which was under Byzantine rule. Omar had also located the Rock, the place hallowed by the Prophet's nocturnal journey, and before leaving Jerusalem, he built a mosque close to the Rock. Furthermore, a number of the Prophet's companions visited the city and at least one of them resided and died in it.*

Jerusalem has always been a major religious site for Muslim pilgrimage, prayer and study. Muslim scholars and students have visited the city over the last fourteen hundred years. Muslim worshippers come from all around the world to pray in the Mosque of Al-Aqsa, the sister city to Makkah and Madinah.

The reward for offering prayer on the land of Al-Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis is to obtain a special holiness in the hearts of Muslims. Omar (2017:103) in his article mentions the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) which stated that he prayed for 16 to 17 months toward Al-Aqsa Mosque: Al-Bukhari in his sahih hadith narrates:

*Narrated by Al-Bara' Ibn 'Azib: When the Prophet came to Madinah, he stayed at the beginning in his grandfathers' or maternal uncles' homes. They were from the Ansar [the original residents of Madinah]. He performed his prayers facing Bayt al-Maqdis, and this remained for 16 or 17 months. Yet he wished that he could pray facing the Ka'bah [in Makkah]. The first prayer which he performed facing the Ka'bah was the 'Asr [afternoon] prayer, and he was accompanied by some people. Then, one of those who prayed with him [towards Makkah] passed near some people, in a mosque, bowing during their prayers [facing Bayt al-Maqdis]. The man said: 'I swear by God, I testify that I prayed with the Messenger of God facing Makkah'. Hearing that, those people changed their direction towards the Ka'bah immediately. In the meantime, Jews and the people of the scripture were first pleased to see the Prophet facing Bayt al-Maqdis in his prayers. Yet when he changed his prayer direction towards the Ka'bah, they refused that.*

The Muslim pilgrimage to Al-Aqsa Mosque and the historical sites in the holy city of Jerusalem by pilgrims

connects the faithful with the site where the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) prayed during his night journey, leading the prayer as Imam for 124,000 prophets. The pilgrimage follows the sunnah of Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and doing so is an emulation of the Prophet's sunnah. Performing salaah prayer at the religious site is one of the fundamental beliefs of pilgrimage to Al-Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis. According to Omar (2017:110)

*The Prophet prayed towards al-Aqsa Mosque for more than 14 years. Al-Aqsa Mosque, Bayt al-Maqdis and the Night Journey were significant influences in the Prophet Muhammad's life, as evidenced by the numerous times he mentioned them throughout his life. Jerusalem represented optimism for the Prophet Muhammad during the Night Journey and prior to his migration to Madinah. It represented hope during the Prophet's hardest times. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Prophet would have disliked al-Aqsa Mosque, Jerusalem or praying towards it. This also contradicts verses of the Qur'an and the ahadith, in which the Prophet mentions the virtues of al-Aqsa Mosque and urges the Muslims to go and pray there.'*

From a Muslim visitor's motivational point of view, since one travels on pilgrimage to Al Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis to find love and pleasure, it is highly important them to seek the rewards of praying at the site. Raj (2012:103) further highlights the importance of prayer during this visitation:

*One of the major reasons why a Muslim goes on pilgrimage is to pray in the holiest Mosques in Makkah, Madinah and Jerusalem. The reward rises exponentially if the person offers Salaah in Makkah (Masjid-e-haram), Madinah (Masjid-e-nabawi) and Jerusalem (Masjid-e-Aqsa).*

There has been a constantly changing political landscapes in Jerusalem over the last 70 years. Despite the loving motivation of Muslim pilgrims to gain benefits from visiting their holy pilgrimage sites, it has been difficult to gain access to Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. The main reason for Muslim people to go to pilgrimage sites is to gain individual purification and contentment. It is a fundamental belief that the individual must develop personal supplication and glorification of God, these are very important parts of Muslim worship, particularly when visiting pilgrimage sites.

## Muslim Pilgrimages Experience of Visiting the Holy City of Jerusalem

The following is the author's (Razaq Raj) personal experience of visiting the Old City of Jerusalem.

*It had always been my dream to visit Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. My main motivation was to visit these pilgrimage sites in Jerusalem to enhance my knowledge and find pleasure, love and offer my prayer at Al Aqsa Mosque. The first time I visited Jerusalem was in May 2016. I was very excited and impatient to reach the old part of Jerusalem with my great Friend Maria Leppäkari from Swedish Theological Institute (STI) in Jerusalem. I had read much about Jerusalem as a holy city for believers of the three monotheistic faiths and the Night Journey (Miraj) of Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from Makkah to Jerusalem and onward to heaven (Miraj, Rise). I was not quite prepared for the overwhelming feelings and sheer beauty of the experience of Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. I felt tremendous humility in the place and felt the sacredness of Al Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock and Old City of Jerusalem.*

*The second time I went to visit Jerusalem was in January 2020, again invited by my great Friend Maria Leppäkari. During this visit I was with colleagues and friends from the other three monotheistic faiths. During this visit I was well prepared and understood the shared beauty of visiting religious sites in Jerusalem. Exemplified within these sites are the historical facts and pervasive treasure of holiness of Al Aqsa Mosque and other sacred sites within the share surroundings of this beautiful Holy Land.*

*On this, my second visit, I stood and gazed at the beauty and sacredness of Al Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock and at that moment in time, I felt at peace and tranquil in myself. Time seemed to have stopped. It is difficult to describe my feelings and emotions when visiting Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. One has to be there to experience such feelings in the environs of the sacred site.*

When asked about visiting the site, Umar Razaq, a financial advisor from the UK, told me that:

*The highlight of the holy city was of course the blessed and sacred Al-Aqsa Mosque, where the Prophet PBUH rose to the heavens. Entering the fields of the mosque brings a different sort of essence to one's mind as one takes in the pleasant breeze and the interior aesthetic view*



**Figure 4: Inside view of Al-Aqsa Mosque**

(Photo by Author, 2020)

of Al-Aqsa Mosque (Figure 4), which is regarded as the main prayer hall, and the Dome of the Rock, with its exquisite architectural presence. The Old City as a whole is an exhilarating experience, especially for a Muslim as it is filled with so much Islamic culture and history, and this is felt vastly once stepping into the Al-Aqsa Compound as it is full of sheer tranquillity and one can truly find peace within these grounds.

Dr Ayesha Chowdhury, an academic colleague from Staffordshire University, UK, stated that:

*I was nervous and enthusiastic as I boarded the airplane to travel to visit the Old City of Jerusalem. A spectacular experience which demonstrated to me that Caliph Umar (RA) was an excellent leader who established religious harmony. After the conquest of Jerusalem by the Muslims in 638 CE this is the place where Caliph Umar (RA) performed salah. The Patriarch of Jerusalem was showing Umar (RA) around the Church of the Holy Sepulchre during which the time for salah occurred. The Patriarch then offered Umar (RA) a place to pray in the church but Umar (RA) humbly*

*refused. He explained to the Patriarch, 'Had I prayed inside the church, the Muslims coming after me would take possession of it, saying that I had prayed in it.'*

*Caliph Umar's (RA) farsightedness back in 638 CE is indeed praiseworthy and exemplary for today's leaders. Umar (RA) also signed a covenant with the Patriarch of Jerusalem, giving assurances of safety to the (non-Muslim) people of Jerusalem which is displayed outside Umar mosque next to Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This was an exceptional example of religious harmony and unity among 2 different religious communities - the essence of Jerusalem. The peace treaty signed by Umar (RA) still stands as an excellent example of protecting religious freedom and the interest of the minority.*

### Summary

This paper has presented an exploration of the Muslim religious pilgrims' experience of Al Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem by way of discussing the Motivation for Muslim Travellers to the Holy City of Jerusalem. The paper has attempted to discuss, how and why Muslim visitors are attracted to the Holy City of Jerusalem, which has a loving place and emotional connection within the hearts of Muslims. Jerusalem is the third holiest city in Islamic theology after the cities of Makkah and Madinah in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The fundamental love and desire to visit Jerusalem come from it being the first Qibla for Muslims to pray towards in the early years, this creates significant emotional associations with Al-Aqsa Mosque. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), travelled to Jerusalem during his night journey, which creates further association for Muslims. The Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH), miraculous night journey to heaven is clearly mentioned in the Quran. In this night journey Allah (SWT) took his servant from the Holy Mosque in Makkah to Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

The paper further presents the significance of Al Aqsa Mosque and outlines how Bayt al-Maqdis has obtained holiness for Muslims. This continues to be a focus of attention today in the region. The holy and sacred character of the religious sites of Jerusalem and provided the increased significance because all of the Prophets of Allah assembled and offered prayer here means that Al Aqsa Mosque is the only place on earth where all the Prophets of Allah prayed together behind the Imam Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The paper also highlights the link between Muslim pilgrimage and Al-Aqsa Mosque as the first Qiblah that Holy Prophet

Muhammad (PBUH) prayed towards during the early days of the Islam, which further secured its status within the pilgrim's heart and also creates very strong motivations for Muslim travellers to Al-Aqsa Mosque. Muslim worshippers come from around the world to pray in Jerusalem, the sister city of Makkah and Madinah. The reward of offering prayer on the land of Al-Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis obtain a special holiness in the hearts of Muslim pilgrims.

Secondly, the case study highlights Muslim's need to undertake their worship on a regular basis in his or her house, mosque or any suitable place. This means to observe the salaah regularly, five times a day at the proper times stated and prescribed in the Qur'an. The way it is performed comes to us from the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and will always be deeply connected to these holy sites in Jerusalem.

**Figure 5: Umar Mosque next to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre**



(Photo by Author, 2020)



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