A TALE OF MOON AND STAR: JUDAISM, ISLAM, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR JERUSALEM

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the intertwined histories and theological connections between Judaism and Islam from the call of Abraham (Genesis 12:1) through modern conflicts. Both traditions stem from the figure of Abraham (Ibrahim) and his descendants. In Judaism the promise made to Abraham leads to the covenant with Israel through his son Isaac, whereas in Islam Abraham's line through Ishmael is honored as a source of Arab identity and monotheism. We survey the development of Judaism – the building and loss of the First and Second Temples (Solomon's Temple c. 960 BCE; Second Temple 516 BCE–70 CE) and the exiles to Babylon and Rome – alongside the emergence of Islam in the 7th century, its claims to Abrahamic heritage, and its claims on Jerusalem (Al-Aqsa, Dome of the Rock). Key doctrinal contrasts are examined (the Jewish expectation of a Messiah vs. Islam's emphasis on Muhammad (SAW) as prophet; Torah law vs. the Qur'an; the particularist covenant vs. Islam's universal ummah). We then discuss the shared sacred geography of Jerusalem – especially the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, Western (Wailing) Wall, Dome of the Rock, and Al-Aqsa Mosque – and flashpoints from antiquity to today: the Babylonian exile, Roman destruction of Jerusalem (70 CE), Caliph ʿUmar's 7th-c. accession, the Crusades, and the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Finally, we consider contemporary legal and political issues: sovereignty claims, the status quo on holy sites, religious freedom, and international law. Throughout, we draw on primary sources and key scholarship (e.g. Karen Armstrong, Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths; Bernard Lewis, The Middle East; Josephus, Jewish War) to illuminate how these faiths have diverged yet remain deeply connected through common origins and contested landscapes.

Introduction: Abraham's Call and the Split of His Line

Figure 1: Map of Canaan

The common roots of Judaism and Islam lie in the patriarch Abraham (Hebrew *Avraham*; Arabic *Ibrāhīm*). The Torah begins this story in Genesis 12:1–3 when God commands Abraham, "*Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you*[1]". Abraham's obedience and journey to Canaan inaugurate God's covenantal plan. From Abraham's two sons – Ishmael (by Hagar) and Isaac (by Sarah) – the later narratives of the Jewish and Islamic peoples are derived. Jewish tradition holds that Isaac's son Jacob (Israel) became the father of the twelve tribes, whereas in Islamic tradition Ishmael is honored as an ancestor of the Arab peoples (for example, Josephus already identified Arab tribes with the "sons of Ishmael")[2]. Both lines derive legitimacy from Abraham's faith, but each religion interprets the promise differently: Judaism traces the land-covenant through Isaac and Jacob, while Islam views Abraham (and Ishmael) as original monotheists whose legacy Muhammad (SAW) (descended from Ishmael) continued. As Karen Armstrong notes, Jerusalem's very soil is revered in all three faiths – ***"held by believers to contain the site where Abraham offered up Isaac, the place of the crucifixion of Christ and the rock from which the prophet Muhammad (SAW) ascended to heaven"***[3] – symbolizing how Abrahamic heritage underpins Jewish, Christian, and Muslim claims.

In the Hebrew Bible and later Jewish thought, God's promise to Abraham[4] establishes the Israelites as a people with a special covenant. This includes the land of Canaan (Palestine) as an inheritance and the promise of numerous descendants. By contrast, Islam emphasizes Abraham as *Khalīl Allāh* (God's friend) and progenitor of true monotheism. The Qur'an recounts Abraham's pious worship and holds that God made Abraham a model *umma* (community) to all peoples[5]. Notably, the Quran relates Abraham to Jerusalem indirectly: Sūra

1 Genesis 12:1
2 Armstrong K, A History of Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths (London: HarperCollins, 1996; rev. ed. HarperPerennial, 2005), 496 pp. ISBN 978-0-00-638347-5.
3 Armstrong K, A History of Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths (London: HarperCollins, 1996; rev. ed. HarperPerennial, 2005), 496 pp. ISBN 978-0-00-638347-5.
4 Genesis 12:1-3
5 The Qur'an, Surah 2:124 (al-Baqarah).

17:1 speaks of Muhammad (SAW)'s "Night Journey" from the Sacred Mosque in Mecca to *al-Masjid al-Aqṣā* (the Farthest Mosque) – understood in Islamic tradition as referring to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem[6]. Thus, Islam inherits and universalizes the Abrahamic legacy, explicitly linking Muhammad (SAW)'s revelation to the land of Canaan.

Jewish Temple and Exile: Solomon's Temple to Roman Destruction

Judaism's religious identity developed around the Jerusalem Temple. Solomon's First Temple (c. 960 BCE) embodied the Davidic covenant, centralizing worship of Yahweh[7]. This First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, an event seen as divine judgment and a formative exile. After Cyrus the Great allowed the Jews to return, the Second Temple was built (completed in 516 BCE) under Persian auspices. Herod the Great later expanded it, and it became the focal point of Jewish ritual and national identity until the Roman siege in 70 CE. The Roman-Jewish Wars, chronicled by Flavius Josephus, end with Titus ordering the burning of Jerusalem: **"*Titus gave orders to set fire to the gates of the temple. In no long time after which the holy house itself was burnt down*"[8].** This catastrophe – the destruction of Herod's Temple – shattered the ancient Jewish state and initiated the Jewish Diaspora. The Western (Wailing) Wall remains today as the sacred remnant of the Second Temple complex.

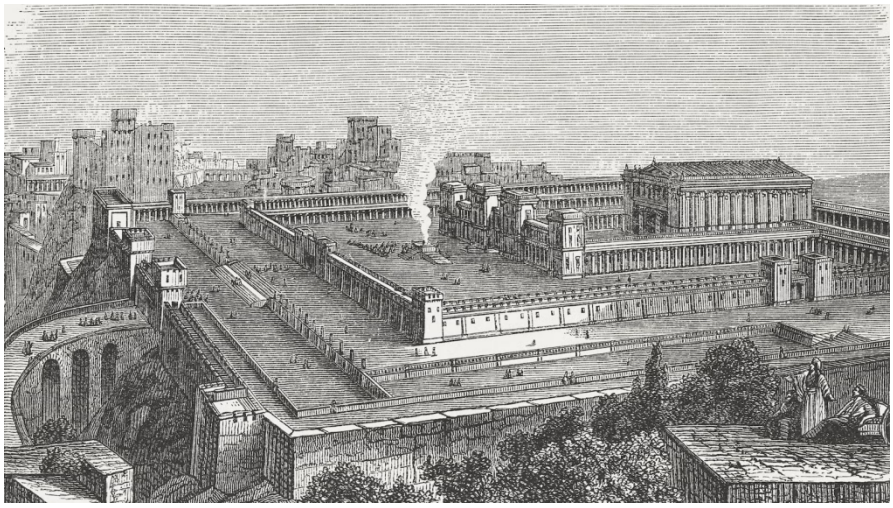


Figure 2: Reconstruction of Solomon's First Temple in Jerusalem

The loss of the Temple (twice) and the experience of exile deeply shaped Jewish theology (e.g. emphasis on covenant, Law, and hope for a Messiah who would restore Israel). For example, Deuteronomy 7:6–8 proclaims Israel as a "holy people" chosen by God in covenant – a particularist theology contrasting with Islam's later universalizing message. The destruction of the Second Temple

6 The Qur'an, Surah 17 (al-Isrāʾ / Bani Isra'il).
7 The Old Testament (Hebrew Bible), 2 Sam. 7.
8 Josephus, The Wars of the Jews, Book VI, trans. William Whiston (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1890).

in 70 CE left only the retaining walls (including today's Western Wall) and led to Rabbinic Judaism's focus on Torah study and synagogue worship in the Diaspora. Josephus himself lamented the catastrophe, implying divine sanction of Jewish failings[9]. Meanwhile, on the Arabian Peninsula, another Abrahamic legacy was emerging.

Islam's Emergence and its Connection to Abraham and Jerusalem

Figure 3: The Dome of the Rock (Jerusalem) built 691 CE on the Temple Mount.

Islam arose in the 7th century CE, claiming continuity with the Abrahamic tradition. Muslims see Abraham (Ibrāhīm) as a great prophet who rebuilt the Kaaba in Mecca with Ishmael and instituted monotheism (*hanīf*)[10]. Crucially, Islam regards Abraham's circle as models of submission (*islām* means submission): the pilgrimage rites at Mecca (Hajj) and rituals at nearby Mount Arafat trace to Abrahamic figures. In this Islamic worldview, Isaac and Ishmael are both honored prophets and ancestors, but Ishmael is especially tied to the Arabs and to Muhammad (SAW). The Qur'an explicitly recounts Abraham's trials and trusts God to make him "a leader (imam) for the nations", language reflecting Islam's universalist message.

Islam's ties to Jerusalem crystallized with the ʿIsrāʾ (Night Journey) and the subsequent construction of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Tradition holds that Muhammad (SAW) was transported at night from Mecca's Sacred Mosque to "the Farthest Mosque" (*al-masjid al-aqṣā*), shown some of God's signs there[11]. In practice, the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik erected the gold-domed shrine (the *Dome of the Rock*) in 691 CE to commemorate either the *Miʿrāj* (Ascension) of Muhammad (SAW) or (for Jews) the site of Abraham's sacrifice. Nearby, Al-Aqsa Mosque (the grey-domed prayer hall) was built and repeatedly rebuilt (notably by Umar in 637 and Walīd I c. 705). These structures sit on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, Islam's third holiest site. Thus, Islam enshrined Jewish sacred

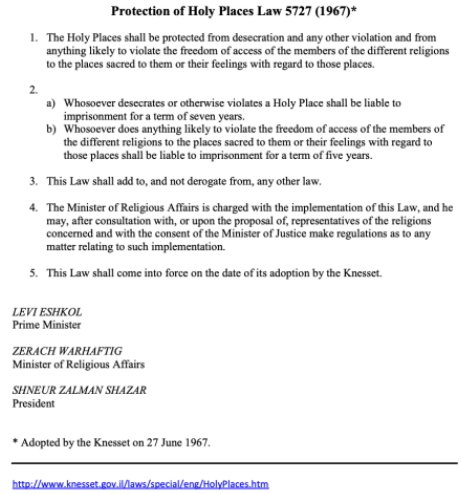
9 Josephus, The Wars of the Jews, Book VI, trans. William Whiston (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1890).
10 The Qur'an, Surah 2:127 (al-Baqarah).
11 The Qur'an, Surah 17:1 (al-Isrāʾ).

ground: as Armstrong observes, Jerusalem's Temple site is blessed by Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary, and by Jews as the Holy of Holies. Under Muslim rule (beginning 638 CE), Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem (per Umar's caliphal covenant) and pray at the Temple's ruins, though with restrictions.

Islam's theology of Prophethood also diverges sharply from Judaism: while Jews await a future Messiah (traditional expectation from a Davidic heir), Muslims accept Muhammad (SAW) as the "Seal of the Prophets"[12] and regard Jesus (ʿĪsā) as a prophet/messenger, not divine. Moreover, Islam teaches a universal covenant: the Qur'an declares that God's message to humanity is one, with Jews, Christians, and others all part of Abraham's *umma* if they believe[13]. In contrast, Jewish theology emphasizes the particularist Abrahamic covenant with Israel (e.g. *b'nai Yisrael*) and the centrality of the Torah given to Moses. The Quran venerates many Torah figures (e.g. Abraham, Moses, David) but also sometimes "corrects" biblical narratives to promote its universal vision (for instance insisting Abraham enjoined monotheism to all nations). The Torah's legalism and "chosen people" focus stand in tension with the Quran's message to all peoples; this theological distinction underpins later frictions.

Sacred Geography: Jerusalem's Holy Places and Sectarian Claims

Jerusalem's Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif encapsulates the religious rivalry. For Jews, this mount is har ha-bayit (Temple Mount) – the site of the destroyed Temples and the location of God's presence. The Western Wall (remnant of the Second Temple's expansion by Herod) is the focus of Jewish prayer and pilgrimage. For Muslims, the same area is Al-Ḥaram al-Sharīf ("the Noble Sanctuary"), containing Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. This is an *awraḳ* ("sanctum") of Islam, marking Muhammad (SAW)'s Night Journey and a place from which the Prophet is believed to have ascended to



Protection of Holy Places Law 5727 (1967)*

1. The Holy Places shall be protected from desecration and any other violation and from anything likely to violate the freedom of access of the members of the different religions to the places sacred to them or their feelings with regard to those places.
2. a) Whosoever desecrates or otherwise violates a Holy Place shall be liable to imprisonment for a term of seven years.
   b) Whosoever does anything likely to violate the freedom of access of the members of the different religions to the places sacred to them or their feelings with regard to those places shall be liable to imprisonment for a term of five years.
3. This Law shall add to, and not derogate from, any other law.
4. The Minister of Religious Affairs is charged with the implementation of this Law, and he may, after consultation with, or upon the proposal of, representatives of the religions concerned and with the consent of the Minister of Justice make regulations as to any matter relating to such implementation.
5. This Law shall come into force on the date of its adoption by the Knesset.

LEVI ESHKOL
Prime Minister

ZERACH WARHAFTIG
Minister of Religious Affairs

SHNEUR ZALMAN SHAZAR
President

* Adopted by the Knesset on 27 June 1967.

http://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/HolyPlaces.htm

Figure 4: Protection of Holy Places Law, 1967

12 The Qur'an, Surah 33:40 (al-Aḥzāb).
13 The Qur'an, Surah 2:136 (al-Baqarah).

heaven. The *waqf* (Islamic trust) of Jerusalem, historically administered by the Ottoman sultan and later by the Jordanian custodianship, maintains Muslim religious control over the site.

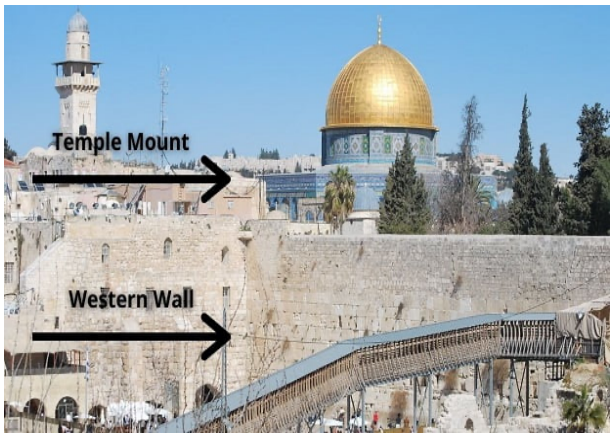


Figure 5: The Western Wall

Conflicts over access and sovereignty have been acute. The 1967 Six-Day War saw Israel capture East Jerusalem, including the Haram. Israel passed the **Protection of Holy Places Law (1967)** to guarantee "that places of sacred significance remain accessible to all faiths without interference". In practice, Israeli forces now secure the compound but allow Jordan's Islamic Waqf to manage prayer at Al-Aqsa and the Dome – an arrangement Moshe Dayan famously called the "*status quo*." Even so, restrictions remain: Jews may visit the Temple Mount but overt Jewish prayer there is forbidden; instead, Jews pray at the Western Wall. As one analysis explains, the Temple Mount is "the most contested" site, "the holiest site in Judaism and the third holiest site in Islam," and a potent symbol of national identity for both peoples. Even today, changes to the status quo provoke unrest: for instance, Israeli public figures 'visits to the Mount (considered provocations by Palestinians) have sparked violence, and Palestinian militants invoke Al-Aqsa's defense as a rallying cry (e.g. Hamas's 2023 "Al-Aqsa Flood" operation)[14].

Theological Divergences: Messiah, Scripture, and Covenant

Theologically, Judaism and Islam differ in keyways. **Messiah vs. Prophet:** Judaism traditionally awaits a Messiah (Hebrew *māshīaḥ*) – an anointed king of David's line who will restore Israel. Islam recognizes the concept of *al-Masīḥ* (Messiah) for Jesus but interprets it as a title for a prophet (Jesus) rather than a divine savior. Muhammad (SAW) himself is regarded as the final prophet, not a messiah figure, so Islamic eschatology looks for a future Mahdi but not in the Jewish sense of a Davidic redeemer. **Torah vs. Qur'an:** Judaism holds the Torah (Pentateuch) and its Oral Law as the eternal covenant code given at Sinai. Islam reveres the Torah (Tawrāt) as originally divine but believes it was later altered; the Qur'an is considered

[14] Chloe Beylus, *Balancing Religious Freedom and Political Sovereignty: Israel's Protection of Holy Places Law and the Fragile Status Quo at the Temple Mount*, *International and Comparative Law Review*, University of Miami School of Law, October 25, 2024, https://international-and-comparative-law-review.law.miami.edu/balancing-religious-freedom-and-political-sovereignty-israels-protection-of-holy-places-law-and-the-fragile-status-quo-at-the-temple-mount/.

the final and uncorrupted revelation. Thus, Islam does not accept post-biblical Jewish law and sees Muhammad (SAW)'s law (sharīʿa) as universal. **Particularism vs. Universalism:** Judaism's covenant is particular (God's chosen people, see Deut. 7:6). Islam claims to renew the Abrahamic covenant in inclusive terms – a community (*umma*) open to all who submit (Q 3:110, 22:78, etc.). A midrashic example: in one Jewish view Abraham asked, "Who are you through whom the whole world is blessed?" to which God replied, "Through your son Isaac" (Exod. R. 1:32). In Islamic tradition Abraham instead prays that both of his sons may become righteous leaders (Q 2:124–129), indicating a broader scope.

These doctrinal differences have fueled polemics over the centuries. Each religion claims theological continuity with Abraham – but casts the other as divergent from the true Abrahamic faith. For example, Islamic texts often criticize Jews (and Christians) for breaking God's commandments, whereas medieval Jewish polemicists accused Muhammad (SAW) of perverting monotheism. In modern scholarship, Bernard Lewis and others have noted that such theological debates often mask political and social conflicts; for instance, Lewis observes that competing messianic expectations contributed to medieval tensions in the Holy Land (Christians having crusader kings, Jews a hoped-for Messiah, Muslims the Caliph and Prophet). (Lewis's *The Middle East* provides background on many such theological-political overlaps, although direct quotes are beyond our scope here.)

Sacred Rights and Modern Conflicts: International Law and Jurisprudence

The United Nations has played a critical role in shaping the international legal and political discourse surrounding Israel and Jerusalem. In 1947, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 181, recommending the partition of Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem as a corpus separatum under international administration[15]. Subsequent UN resolutions, such as Resolution 242 (1967) following the Six-Day War, emphasized Israel's withdrawal from occupied territories while calling for the recognition of every state's sovereignty,

Figure 6: Israel and occupied territories

[15] United Nations General Assembly. (1947). Resolution 181 (Partition Plan for Palestine). Retrieved from https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/181(II)

including the protection of Jerusalem's sacred sites[16]. Today the Jewish–Islamic contest over holy sites play out amid international law and modern statehood. Israel's 1967 occupation of East Jerusalem created a legal quagmire: Israel extended its law (annexing East Jerusalem), while Jordan (and much of the world) continued to claim a role. International law resolutions generally regards annexation as inadmissible[17], calling for negotiated status of Jerusalem. Religious freedom and sovereignty claims collide: Israel's **Protection of Holy Places Law** (1967) proclaims itself committed to "protecting [sacred sites] from desecration" and ensuring open access. In practice this has meant preserving the fragile "status quo" on Temple Mount: Israel (sovereign) forbids new religious structures or acts at contested sites without agreement, while allowing Jordanian/Islamic *waqf* to administer the Al-Aqsa complex. Jewish prayer at the Western Wall is protected (with Israeli security), but any public Jewish worship on the Temple platform is barred. Critics debate whether this complies with Israeli constitutional guarantees of religious freedom (its 1948 Declaration of Independence vows free access to holy sites) versus the reality of restrictions.

Internationally, Jerusalem's status remains unresolved. The Palestinians claim East Jerusalem (and Haram al-Sharif) as their capital; Israel claims an undivided Jerusalem. The international community generally regards the Old City and its sites as "occupied" territory, with special protections under the Fourth Geneva Convention. Various bodies (UNESCO, ICC investigations) have weighed in. For example, UNESCO resolutions (2016, 2019) explicitly affirmed Jewish ties to the Temple Mount, causing Israeli protests. Recently (2024), Israeli and U.S. officials reaffirmed the Dayan status quo in the face of Israeli settler calls to reopen Temple Mount for Jewish prayer, highlighting the sensitivity of these claims[18]. Conversely, some Islamic activists assert that Israeli presence (and archaeology) threatens Muslim sovereignty over Haram al-Sharif. These legal disputes revolve around concepts of sovereignty, the sanctity of inviolable religious law, and the rights of worshippers.

In short, the quest to apply modern legal principles (sovereignty, human rights, religious freedom) to medieval sanctities has proven difficult. As one recent analysis notes, even Israel's

[16] nited Nations Security Council. (1967). *Resolution 242 (The situation in the Middle East).* Retrieved from https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/resolutions-adopted-security-council-1967

17 United Nations General Assembly, Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, UNGA Res 2625 (XXV) (24 October 1970).

18" Netanyahu says no change at Al-Aqsa after Ben-Gvir's remarks," Reuters, July 24, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/netanyahu-says-no-change-jerusalem-holy-site-contradicting-minister-2024-07-24/

good-faith *Protection of Holy Places* regime illustrates the tension: it "*reflects Israel's dedication to preserving the profound spiritual and historical connections that Jews, Christians, [and] Muslims*" have to Jerusalem's sites, but also underscores that "religious identity, political sovereignty, and international scrutiny" often conflict at the Temple Mount. Thus, Jerusalem – sacred to both faiths – remains a touchstone of intractable political struggle.

Conclusion

From Abraham's call in Genesis 12 through the present, Judaism and Islam have shared a common origin but developed in divergent ways. Both claim a special relationship to Jerusalem but interpret Abraham's legacy through distinct theological lenses (covenant versus prophet). Historically, periods of peaceful coexistence (as under some Muslim caliphs) alternated with episodes of violent contest (as in 70 CE or 1099 CE). Theologically, Judaism's particularist covenant and messianic hopes contrast with Islam's universal revelation and final Prophet. Nonetheless, the two faiths remain linked by scripture (shared prophets, laws) and by overlapping sacred spaces. In modern times, the clash over Jerusalem's holy geography is as much political as religious, invoking international law and human rights. Understanding this relationship requires appreciating both the deep commonalities (Abraham, Jerusalem) and the critical differences (Messiah vs. prophet, Torah vs. Qur'an, chosen people vs. universal ummah). Only by acknowledging the complex history and theology on each side can the enduring conflict over Jerusalem and beyond begin to be addressed.