Jerusalem and Antioch in the Qur'an

by Emran El-Badawi

Does the Qur'an speak to Jews and Christians, as well as to the pagans of Arabia? Yes it does. For only they would have understood all the biblical references in the text, including the importance of cities like Jerusalem and Antioch. Jerusalem was where the temple was destroyed, and Antioch was where the church began. Although the Qur'an only alludes to these cities, they are an integral part of its theology and law.

In the Qur'an, Jerusalem represents the passing of an old faith—Judaism—and the rise of a new one—Islam. Muhammad (d. 632 C.E.) is believed to have ascended from the site of the temple into the heavens (Q 17:1-39). This site once housed the first and second temples where Jews worshipped and upheld the laws given to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod 20) until they were destroyed (Jer 52; Josephus, The Jewish War, Book 1). The Qur'an teaches that Mosaic law is divine (Q 11:17) and that when the children of Israel disobeyed the law, God destroyed the temple to teach them a lesson.

Before turning toward Mecca, the earliest generation of Muslims prayed in the direction of Jerusalem (Q 2:144-50). The creation of the first Islamic sanctuary in Mecca may be considered, therefore, a replacement of the Jerusalem temple. It is also framed as a restoration of a theological worldview surpassing both Judaism and Christianity and going back to the pure faith of Abraham (Q 3:96-97, Q 28:57-59, Q 29:67-69). In this respect, the Qur'an supplants the theology of Paul in Rom 4 and Gal 3:8-9 concerning Abraham the Gentile, who is refashioned as the first Islamic patriarch (see also Q 3:63-68).

In the Qur'an, Antioch represents the decline of the early church as a result of its abandonment of Mosaic law. A close reading of Q 57:26-27 in light of the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters demonstrates the text's condemnation of the early church. Beginning with Paul's Gentile flock in Antioch in the mid-first century C.E., circumcision no longer became a requirement to be a Christian. By the early second century C.E., the church founded by Peter in Jerusalem had been completely Hellenized, and Jewish law no longer played a central role among the Christian faithful.

However, Q 57:26-27 also states about the Christians of late antiquity, "some of them are guided." This statement echoes the "remnant" of Israel found in Rom 9:27 but refers more specifically to the minority of non-Chalcedonian Christians who held fast to Mosaic law. Likewise, the following statement that "many of them are corrupt" is a criticism of Paul's Gentile flock (Acts 15, Gal 2), whose growth in numbers, from a Qur'anic perspective, led to the corruption of the church as a whole. This is because by abandoning Mosaic law, the early church is seen to have severed its link to God. The Qur'an illustrates Muslims as the successors of Christian and Jewish traditions, and as the new guardians of God's laws.


Contributors

Emran El-Badawi
Assistant Professor, University of Houston

Emran El-Badawi is director and assistant professor of Arab Studies at the University of Houston. He is also codirector of the International Qur'anic Studies Association (http://iqsaweb.org/) and author of The Qur'an and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions (Routledge, 2013). His interests include Qur'anic studies as well as contemporary Arab thought.

Religious Interests

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