

The Changing Qibla

The direction of prayer has been a feature of Islamic worship since the time of Mohammad, but very little is understood of the reasons behind the practice. Today, when Muslims pray, they turn to face towards the *Kaaba* in the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, which is a cube-shaped structure built of grey granite blocks and covered with black silk.

Muslims believe that Mecca is a sacred city and believe the Quran refers to the mosque in Mecca as *Al-Masjid al-haram*. They also believe that it is a requirement of their religion that they make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca during their lifetime. They consider Mecca and the Kaaba to form one of the pillars, or foundational beliefs of Islam and Muslims credit this teaching to the Quran. Islamic tradition also says the *Kaaba* marks the location where Abraham attempted to sacrifice his son and consider it to be the location of the first “*Bayt Allah*” or House of God. But these beliefs are not actually stated in the Quran. When we read the Quran, there is no mention of Mecca or its black stone, and there is nothing written to indicate that Mohammad ever visited Mecca or the Kaaba in Saudi Arabia.

The following discussion attempts to identify the location of the “*al-Masjid al-haram*” as mentioned in the Quran and answer the questions of why early Muslims faced Petra and why later Muslims turned themselves towards Mecca.

The direction that Muslims face when praying is called a *Qibla* (kiblah), and mosques and prayer rooms now have a *mihrab* or niche in the wall to indicate the direction to Mecca. The requirement of praying five times a day facing Mecca has been a characteristic of the Islamic faith for many centuries; however, a *Qibla*, or direction of prayer is not unique to Islam. Jews, Samaritans and Christians also have a *Qibla*, and often pray in a particular direction during both individual prayer and when coming together to pray and worship.

During the Exodus when the Israelites left Egypt and journeyed to the Promised Land, they would arrange their camp around the tabernacle with the tent of meeting positioned in the centre. So, when they prayed, they faced the centre and prayed toward the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant.

After reaching the Promised Land, the Israelites initially established their capital at Shiloh in central Israel, where the ark and the tabernacle rested for over three hundred years. However, after conquering the land, Israel became divided into two kingdoms and the direction of prayer also became divided. The northern Kingdom of Israel directed their prayers towards Mount Gerizim while the southern tribes of Judah prayed towards Jerusalem where the temple and the Ark were located (2 Chronicles 3:1).

When Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, he prayed that God would hear the people’s prayers when they faced his temple (1 Kings 8:29-35). The prophet Daniel prayed three times each day towards Jerusalem when living in exile in Babylon (Daniel 6:10) and the Israelites continued to pray towards Jerusalem, and its temple, (Psalm 5:7, 28:2).

This situation remains today; the Samaritans pray towards Mount Gerizim and Jews pray towards Jerusalem or the Western Wall of the temple mount.

Christians also adopted a *Qibla*, but instead of facing Mount Gerizim or Mount Moriah, Christians built their churches facing east-west towards the light and prayed to the east. There are several reasons for this change. For Christians, the focus was no longer on the temple, but on Christ Jesus. Christians believe that Jesus will come again will come from the east. See: Malachi 4:2, Ezekiel 43:4, 46:12.

"For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." Matthew 24:27

Jesus told the Samaritan woman, *"the hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father"* John 4:21.

It is not surprising that Christians adopted a new *Qibla* for unlike the Jews, they do not live in hope for the rebuilding of the temple but recognize that Christ Jesus is the true temple and they have put their hope and faith in his return. All religions have a *Qibla* of some sort but the Islamic *Qibla* we see today is very different from those of other religions for two reasons. Muslims believe they must face precisely towards the city of Mecca and believe that the correct facing is a requirement for God to hear their prayers.

There is certainly solidarity and unity in common prayer, and a *Qibla* can be an outward sign of a person's faith. However, to imagine that God requires believers to face a particular direction when praying is not a teaching of the Quran or the Bible. Jesus never taught his followers to face any particular direction, and Mohammad did not teach his followers that the *Qibla* was a condition for prayer. The Quran warns against such rituals and the false belief that God only hears and accepts prayers said while facing a particular direction. Believers are free to pray facing any direction for God is not limited to one place but can be found in whichever direction we face. The Quran says"

"Unto Allah belong the East and the West, and whithersoever ye turn, there is Allah's Countenance. Lo! Allah is All-Embracing, All-Knowing". Q 2:115, (2:142)

There is always the danger that practice becomes a ritual and becomes devoid of meaning. In 450 AD, Leo the Great preached a sermon, (Sermon 27) against the foolish practice of some Christians who would turn to the rising sun and bow.

The Quran warns believers of the danger of relying on any practices that might give the impression of righteousness for a *Qibla* does not make believers righteous. "

"It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards east or west; but it is righteousness to believe in God and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which you have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God-fearing" Q 2:177.

The Quran also says that it was not God, but believers themselves who changed the orientation of their Qibla to distinguish themselves from the unbelievers (Q 2:143). According to the Quran, a Qibla is much more than the direction believers face when coming together to pray. The Quran describes a Qibla as the "*goal*" (Surah 2:148), a goal that was "*dear*" to Mohammad (Q 2:144). The Quran does not say that the Qibla validates pray, nor does the Quran emphasize that the Qibla is part of any ritual prayer practice. Translators of the Quran, however, often insert the word "*when you pray*", into the text of the Quran to over emphasize the Qibla's role in prayer.

A Qibla is a **goal** for which we are to strive. When Mohammad fled from persecution in his hometown and reached Medina, he looked to heaven for direction from God and in response, God pointed him in the direction of his goal. To a destination that pilgrims were forbidden to enter.

Mohammad's goal was not Mecca and had nothing to do with the Kaaba. There is nothing written in the Quran mentioning Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Also, during Mohammad's lifetime, there was no Kaaba in Mecca, and Mecca was not a destination for pilgrims until the end of the second Arab civil war.

Archaeological and historical research, especially that done within the last few years, demonstrates convincingly that the Kaaba was originally in the city of Petra. Dan Gibson has found from examining the foundations of early mosques, that mosques were initially built facing Petra until around 743 AD. Mecca did become an alternative site for pilgrimages shortly before this time, but it was not until 727 AD that Arabs began to build mosques that faced Mecca. Caliph Uthman is said to have introduced signs in mosques indicating the direction of Makkah around 650 AD, however, the earliest example of a Mihrab that points to Mecca, date to around 708 AD, built during the rule of Al-Walid, the son of Abu Al-Malik.

It appears that Mecca became an alternate pilgrimage destination just after the end of the 2nd civil war, becoming one of several which included destinations such as Jerusalem, Petra and the church of Sanaa in Yemen. The Arabs could initially choose to go to one or more of these sites and as we know, Jerusalem has remained a destination for pilgrims. Sanaa, despite al-Zubyr apparently looting its great church, remained a destination for pilgrims until the reign of the Abbasid caliph Al-Mansur, around 754 AD.

Petra was a famous pilgrim site since the time of the Nabateans and continued to be the main destination for Arab pilgrims until 749 AD when the city was damaged, along with many surrounding cities, by a massive earthquake.

After Petra was abandoned, Mecca was then established as a pilgrim destination. Mecca with its black stone would have remained a minor pilgrimage destination for Arabs was it not for several reasons.

- Petra's position of a fault-line and the series of earthquakes that destroyed its dam and led to the eventual abandonment of the city.
- The defeat of the Umayyad caliphate in 750 AD and the Abbasids adoption of Mecca as a pilgrim site.
- The Abbasids eliminated any competing sites and promoted Mecca as the main destination for Arab pilgrims.

Mohmmad was recognised as a prophet during his lifetime and he was able to attract many followers, but within sixty years of Mohammad's death, most of his supporters and followers were dead. Not only were many of Mohammad's companions killed in the early battles, including many who could recite the Quran, but many more were either assassinated or killed in the civil wars that followed Mohammad's death.

The second *fitna* or rebellion erupted after the death of the Umayyad caliph Muawiya (r. 661–680). It began with disagreement over the unpreceded succession of his son Yazid as the next caliph and resulted in the rebellion of several cities. Among those who rebelled were Husayn, the son of Ali (the fourth caliph), Abn Allah ibn al-Zubayr, the son of Zubayr ibn al-Awam (a companion of Mohammad), and the people of Medina. Medina had been the city of the Prophet, and it was the centre of his support. In response, Yazid killed Husayn at what is now referred to as the battle of Karbala, 680 then sent an army to attack Medina in 683 AD. When the Arab army captured Medina, they slaughtered thousands of its inhabitants over three days, among those executed included some eighty of the Prophet's companions.

After silencing the Medians, Yazid sent an army against al-Zubayr, the governor of Petra, and the rebels holding out in Petra. However, this attack was called off with the sudden death of Yazid in 683 AD, and the rebellion continued for nine years.

The Umayyad caliphate was in danger of collapse as many provinces also rebelled.

However, under the leadership of Marwan (r. 684–685), and later his son Abu Al Malik (r. 685–714), the Umayyads were able to secure Egypt and Syria and defeat the rebels in Iraq. The Umayyad general Al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf besieged Al-Zubayr in the city of Petra for six months but were only able to capture of Petra and end the second civil war after the death of Ibn al-Zubayr in 692 AD.

Al-Hajjaj ended the rebellion by securing the eastern part of the Arab empire and defeating the rebels in Petra. Al-Hajjaj then rebuilt the Kaaba and led the pilgrimages to the city in the following two years. He was able to re-establish Umayyad rule but with great brutality, killing thousands of rebels, including Mohammad's supporters in Medina. According to the historian al Tabari, he continues to find excuses to seek out and either kill or humiliate companions of Mohammad that were still living, even tying lead seals around their necks.

While the early caliphs are generally viewed as defenders of the faith, from the very first caliph Abu Bakr, the priority for each of these rulers had been ensuring and enforcing the unification of the Arab tribes. It was not until Abu al-Malik that there was any mention of the name Mohammad, and it was only the Abbasids that made the effort to collect the stories of Mohammad. Though it appears that this was done to legitimise their caliphate, rather than preserve the teachings of Mohammad.

By the time of the Abbasid's conquest in 750 AD, there was no longer an *Ummah* or community of believers. Mohammad's followers had quickly found themselves part of a broader alliance of tribes, over which they had little or no control over. Any authority or respect that they may have initially had diminished when Damascus became the chief city and ended with the destruction of Medina, the city of the prophet in 683AD. After which the people of Medina were no longer able to challenge the rule of any caliph. While the chaos of the civil wars brought much destruction, fortunately the Quran appears to have survived with seemingly little significant alteration or change.

What was lost in the wars of rebellion was an understanding of the prophet and his Quran. Later attempts in the eighth century to interpret and translate the text into meaningful verses were constrained and even today, once the original text is translated into classic or modern Arabic, its meaning is lost. For example: the word *Islam* means “*submission to God*”, but because the word is not translated along with the rest of the verse, it instead becomes a word describing a new religion. The word “*Makkah*” is another example of mistranslation, modern translators insist Makkah refers to Mecca. The most common error in translation of the earliest Quran though is to insert words into the text such as the name ‘*Mohammad*’ where verse is referring to Jesus.

Many of these translation errors or insertions are easy to detect, some though are not so obvious. The term *Al-Masjid al-Haram* is used numerous times throughout the Quran (Q 2:144, 2:149, 2:150, 2:191, 2:196, 2:217, 5:2, 8:34, 9:7, 9:19, 9:28, 17:1, 22:25, 48:25, 48:27), however, the Quran does not specifically identify where this was. We can only assume that Mohammad's original audience did understand the meaning of this term. The word “*Haram*” means forbidden and “*masjid*” means mosque or place of worship, so the term “*Al-Masjid Al-Haram*” can be understood to mean: a forbidden place of worship.

The Quran identifies a Masjid as a place that belongs to God (Q72:18). A place of worship (Q18:21), and a place for all the Children of Adam (Q7:31). The Quran describes a Masjid as a place where Christians worship and a place where the Jews worshipped and gathered (Q2:114). The Quran even uses the term Masjid when referring to the Temple in Jerusalem (Q17:7).

The Quran describes this forbidden place of worship as:

- a place that believers no longer had access to (Q2:217, 5:2, 8:34)
- a place of pilgrimage (Q2:196)
- a place whose guardians should only be the righteous (Q8:34)
- a place that believers respect (Q9:19)
- a place that pagans have no right to approach (Q9:28)
- a place remembered in a night journey (Q17:1)
- a place appointed for all mankind (Q22:25)
- a place where sacrifices were made (Q48:25)
- a place that can be entered (Q48:27)
- a place that the Jews know as well as they know their children (Q2:145-146)

Islamic commentators tell us that the Quran is referring to Mecca and its Kaaba, but this does not fit the description in the text, nor does it fit with the historical and archaeological evidence. Researchers such as Dan Gibson have found that the Quran points to northern Arabia and in particular, to Petra as the city where Mohammad began his ministry. Dan Gibson has shown that early mosques appear to all face Petra, but while we can view Petra as the birthplace of Mohammad and the place where he received his first revelation, Petra does not fit the Quran's description of *Al-Masjid al-Haram*.

Even if the Arabs after Mohammad's death did begin to refer to the Kaaba in both Petra and Mecca as *Masjid al-Haram*, the place the Quran is referring to and the place Mohammad's

audience would have recognised as *Al-Masjid al-Haram*, must be Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a sacred gathering place for the Jews and the Law requires that the Jews were to make three pilgrimages to Jerusalem each year, Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. However, for centuries the Jews were forbidden to even enter their sacred city. When the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in 587 BC, the Jews were exiled to Babylon and the city became *haram* (forbidden) to them for they were not allowed to return.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke of a seventy-year exile (Jeremiah 29:10) where both rich and poor, wise and foolish were deported to Babylon (Jeremiah 19) and many Jews, including the prophet Daniel, died in exile.

When Cyrus the Great conquered the Babylonian empire in 538 BC, he allowed the Jews to return and even supported their rebuilding of the temple; however, this freedom did not last. Jerusalem was again attacked and captured in the Hellenistic period; it capitulated to Alexander the Great in 322 BC and later fell under the control of various Ptolemaic and Seleucid rulers. In 175 BC Jerusalem was sacked, and Antiochus IV outlawed Jewish religious practices and set up Greek Gods in the temple.

Then during the Roman period, the city was besieged and captured by Pompey in 63 BC and remained mostly under the Roman control until the city was destroyed in 70 AD by the Roman General Titus. As Jesus had prophesised, the Romans razed the city to the ground, and not one stone left on another (Matthew 24:2).

After the Romans put down the 2nd Jewish revolt, a new city was built on the ruins of Jerusalem called Aelia Capitolina, in 135 AD. Under Roman / Byzantine rule, Jews were forbidden entry into the new city and restricted from holding public office. Although they did gain access to the city during the reign of the anti-Christian Emperor Julian (332-363AD), their success was short-lived.

Julian had given the Jews tax concessions and supported them in rebuilding the temple, however, after he died in 363 AD, their favour and hope of rebuilding the temple ended. A massive earthquake in the same year destroyed the construction material gathered for the task and witnesses reported balls of fire scattering the workmen and driving the Jews from the site. Since this time, not only has the temple not been rebuilt, but knowledge of the exact location of the temple was lost. Even today, the precise location of the temple and the site of its sanctuary is still unknown.

Despite their attempts to regain control of Jerusalem, the Holy city continued to be a forbidden gathering place for the Jews for many centuries. During the time of Mohammad, Jerusalem was under Sassanid control from 614 AD to 629 AD, and both Jews and Believers were unable to enter. The Jews did gain temporary access when they helped the Persians capture the city in 614 AD, but their success was temporary and the Persians banished the Jews from the city in 617 AD. When Mohammad arrived in Medina in 622, Jerusalem was haram to both Jews and Believers. So, when Mohammad told his followers to turn toward *Masjid al-Haram*, it would have been clear to his audience that they were to face Jerusalem (Aelia Capitolina), the sacred city they were unable to enter.

Jerusalem was forbidden to Mohammad and all others until it was liberated in 629 AD by the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius. This victory is significant in our understanding of the Quran and both Mohammad and Heraclius have much in common. Arab tradition affirms both Mohamad and Heraclius as righteous men and leaders. Both were called Believers and both Mohammad and Heraclius were similar ages. Mohammad received his first revelation in 610, the same year Heraclius came to power. Mohammad and his followers arrived in Medina in 622, the same year Heraclius gained his first victory and turned the tide of the war against the Persians. The year 622 was the turning point in the lives of both Heraclius and Mohammad. Heraclius went on to decisively defeat the Persian King and his armies and liberated Jerusalem (*Masjid al-Haram*).

The year 622 AD also the year that Mohammad's fortunes changed. Mohammad left Makkah and was welcomed by the believers in Medina and helped them to achieve a victory over the pagan Arabs who attacked the city.

AL-Tabari also says Heraclius received a similar vision as Mohammad, a dream of a victory over Chosroes, the Sassanid King. The Quran also mentions this victory where Mohammad told his audience that the Romans would emerge victorious in nine years (Q 30:4). It is also of significance that Heraclius' victory over the Persians was achieved with the help of the Arabs. For centuries, the Arab tribes had acted as allies and mercenaries to the Romans, providing a buffer state in the earlier Parthian wars and the later wars against the Persians. Arab troops had also previously helped save Constantinople from being captured by the Goths in 378 AD. During the Sassanian-Byzantine war, the Arab foederati, which included the Salihids, Kalbids, Tanukhids and Ghassanids remained loyal to the Byzantines. Unlike the Avars and Slavs who took advantage of the weakened empire and attacked the Byzantine cities in the Balkans, the Arab tribes of northern Arabia, many of which were Christian, remained loyal and continued to support the Byzantine armies.

The Quran reminds us of this Arab / Byzantine alliance, stating, "*believers will rejoice*" in the Byzantine victory over the Persians (Q 30:4). The Quran also reminds us, that the (Persians) "*the ones who disbelieved*" had obstructed them from entering *Al-Masjid al-Haram*, (Jerusalem) (Q 49:25).

This verse is usually understood to refer to pagans preventing Mohammad from entering Mecca and the Kaaba, however, in the context of history, it makes much more sense as a reference to the Persians and their control of Jerusalem from 614 to 629 AD.

The Quran mentions a vision given to Mohammad; it described Believers entering *Al-Masjid al-Haram* (Jerusalem) in victory and safety with their heads shaved or hair cut short (Q48:27). The cutting or shaving of the hair is a Christian practice known as Tonsure. The practise started in the 6th century and was done as a sign of humility, to show themselves slaves of Christ.

The description of shaving the head when entering *Al-Masjid al-Haram* matches the story of Heraclius' entry into Jerusalem. When Heraclius attempted to return the True Cross to Jerusalem, he was stopped by an Angel and told to dismount and enter the city in humility.



Emperor Heraclius carrying the True Cross into Jerusalem

A-Tabari includes a description of Heraclius entering Jerusalem, described by Abu Sufyan b Harb,

"I went with a number of Quraysh merchants to Syria.... We got there when Heraclius had defeated the Persians and driven them out of his territory and had recaptured from them his Great Cross which the Persians had plundered... Heraclius then came out from Hims, which was his headquarters, and walked by foot--- in order to pray in the Holy City. Carpets were spread for him and aromatic herbs were thrown on the carpets. "

The Armenian bishop Sebeos' also wrote a description of Muhammad that states that it was Mohammad's intention that his followers retake (Jerusalem), *"the land which God gave to your father Abraham"*.

"At that time, a certain man from among those same sons of Ismael, whose name was Mahmet [Muhammad], a merchant, as if by God's command, appeared to them as a preacher [and] the Path of Truth. He taught them to recognize the God of Abraham, especially because he was learnt and informed in the history of Moses. Now because the command was from on high, at a single order, they all came together in unity of religion.

*"Abandoning their vain cults, they turned to the living God who had appeared to their father Abraham. So, Mahmet legislated for them: not to eat carrion, not to drink wine, not to speak falsely, and not to engage in fornication. He said: 'With an oath God promised this land to Abraham and his seed after him forever. And he brought about as he promised during that time while he loved Ismael. But now you are the sons of Abraham and God is accomplishing his promise to Abraham and his seed for you. Love sincerely only the God of Abraham and go and seize the land which God gave to your father Abraham. No one will be able to resist you in battle, because God is with you."*¹

¹ *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos Part – I: Translation and Notes, 1999, Translated Texts For Historians – Volume 31, Liverpool University Press, pp. 95-96)*

When we look closely at the early history of the rise of the Arabs empire, we notice that it was only after the death of Mohammad that the Arabs armies began attacking the Byzantines. Previously, only the Lakhmids, an Arab tribe allied with the Persians, had made attacks against the Roman armies.

When western historians wrote of the early Arab conquests, they described the Arabs as Ishmaelites, (sons of Ishmael), Hagarenes (sons of Hagar), Tayyaye, Mahgraye and as Saracens. These were the names the Arabs also used to describe themselves; it was not until after 690 that we find any reference to Arabs as Muslims or to a religion of Islam. The Arabs were initially viewed as separate people, not as a separate or new religion.

We understand that Mohammad was able to inspire great loyalty amongst his followers, and his name has continued to be remembered but the unification of the Arab tribes and the rise of Arab nationalism had begun before 622 AD. As mercenaries and allies to both the Persian and Roman armies, the Arabs had benefited from their central position between these warring empires. The rapid military expansion of the Arabs had little or nothing to do with Mohammad's teachings and more to do with other factors.

Reasons for the Arab conquests include:

- the plague which reached Constantinople in 541 AD had spread through North Africa, Europe and east into Persia and Asia, having its greatest effect on the densely packed cities and less effect on the desert nomads.
- The weakened state of the Byzantines & Sassanids at the end of the war,
- the Parthian uprising that further weakened the Persians
- the effectiveness of the Arab composite bow.
- The Byzantine church alienating many of the Arab Christians

Mohammad followers were originally a faith-based community of believers who voluntarily followed a man they believed was a prophet of God. However, after Mohammad's death and the election of the first caliph, the community of believers became a small part of a larger political alliance based on race and tribe.

The first caliph, Abu Bakr was an Umayyad, one of the clans of the Quraysh, who were initially opponents of Mohammad. The Umayyads managed to establish their pre-eminence through political and tribal alliances and through force of arms. Abu Bakr is described as a Muslim, and he is said to have led prayers in the mosque, but he admitted having never read "the Book". Abu Bakr showed little respect to the relatives of Mohammad, and the numerous uprisings against Abu Bakr are evidence that his rule was not widely supported.

History tells us that the Jews were forbidden to enter their sacred city and their scriptures told them that it was God's will they had been banished from Jerusalem. The prophet Jeremiah wrote:

I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." Jeremiah 29:14

The Quran is a reminder, reminding us that God sent the Jews into exile, and God determined the time they would return.

"And there is a ban upon any community which We have destroyed: that they shall not return until when Gog and Magog are let loose,..." Q 21:95-96

Even though God allowed the Jews to return from exile, they continued to be driven from the city, and while they had managed to regain access to the city through various wars and revolts, their success was always temporary. When the Arabs captured Aelia Capitolina in 637 AD, they not only gave the Jews access to the city but also appointed a Jew as its governor, but even this situation did not continue.

Petra was the place of Mohammad's birth and the location of the cave where he received his first revelation. Petra was a fortress and a place of safety and described by Josephus as "the chief and capital of all Arabia" (Antiquities of the Jews. IV,vii,1). God sent Mohammad to warn the "mother of (cities) and those around it" (Q 6:92, 47:2) of the coming Day of Judgement. It was Petra, not Mecca that was called a "metropolis", a Latin word meaning chief, capital or mother city. The three Goddesses mentioned in the Quran, al-Lat, al-'Uzza and Manat (Q 53:19-20), were worshipped by the pagan Arabs in Petra and southern Jordan, not in Saudi Arabia or Mecca.

Jerusalem too was called the "mother of cities", and it was a sacred city to all believers. It was the city of Abraham, the city of David and the city of Jesus. The Quran says the People of the Book (the Jews) would recognise the direction of "*al-Masjid al-Haram*" as the truth from their Lord (Q 2:144). A place that they knew as well as they knew their children (Q 2:145-146). It would have been obvious to the Jews that the sacred, forbidden place Mohammad was referring to was Jerusalem for it had been forbidden to the Jews for centuries and even today, the Jews do not have full control over Jerusalem for the temple mount area is still haram to them.

Al-Masjid al-Aqsa

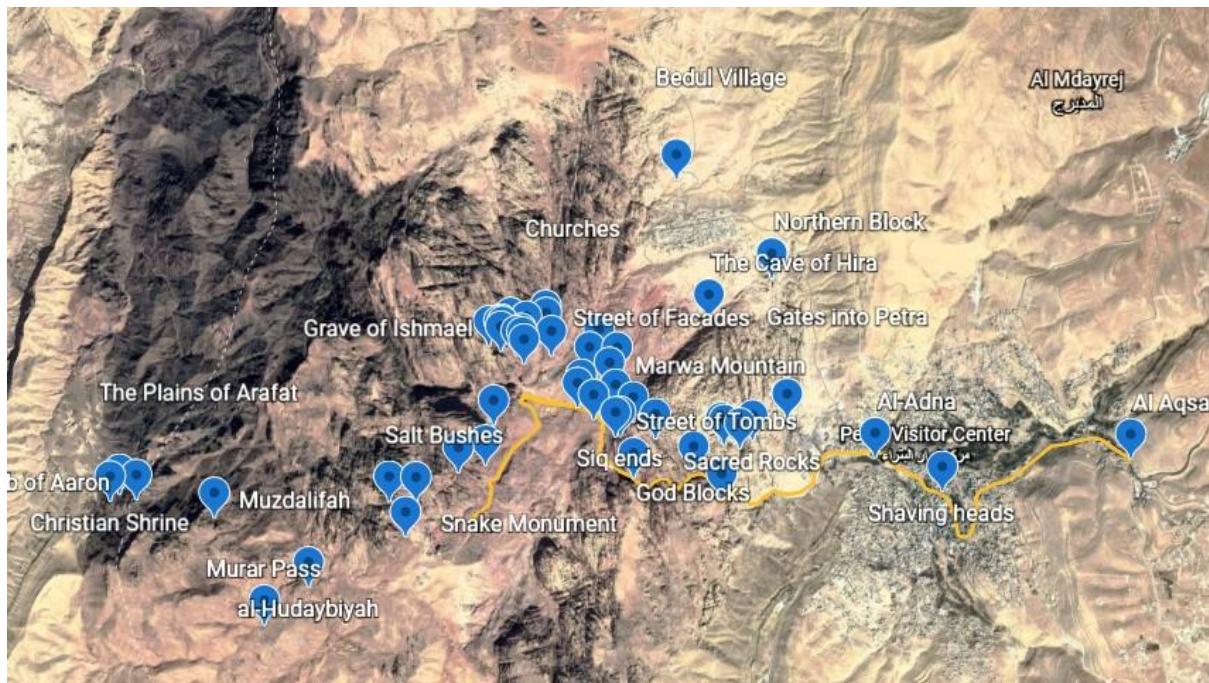
The Quran says God's servant was taken from *Al-Masjid al-Haram* to *Al-Masjid al-Aqsa*; or from the forbidden Mosque to the furthest Mosque (Q 17:1).

While Muslims understand this as a reference to Mohammad's night journey to heaven, there is little consensus on the details of what happened. Some Muslims say that the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is built over the location where Mohammad ascended to heaven. Others say a winged horse took Mohammad from Mecca to Jerusalem.

Shia tradition considers the furthest Mosque, (*Al-Aqsa*), to be a reference to heaven. Sunni tradition though holds the belief that the Quran is referring to the *al-Aqsa* mosque in Jerusalem even though it was not built until after Mohammad's death and after Umar had captured the city in 638 AD.

According to Arabic tradition there was a place known as the furthest mosque during the time of Mohammad and Mohammad is said to have prayed there. While Dan Gibson has identified a location named Al-Aqsa on the old prime path, in a village of Jiranah, just outside of Petra, this is not necessarily the same Masjid al-Aqsa that is mentioned in the Quran. Tradition says that Al-Aqsa in Petra was built forty years after the Al-Masjid al-Haram, which suggests that it was a pagan site.²

Aerial view of Petra



<https://nabataea.net/media/01explore/08FoundingIslam/Photos/GoogleWalkThrough.jpg>

Dan Gibson has identified many of the pilgrim sites around Petra mentioned in the Arab traditions. These sites were situated along a route that the pilgrims followed during the annual pilgrimages to Petra.

These pilgrimages began during the time of the Nabateans as pagan religious festivals, but they continued after the Roman conquest of the region and the decline of Petra and the incense trade in the third century. These annual or twice-yearly pilgrimages presented opportunities for social and cultural exchanges for the Nomadic Arabs as well as opportunities for trade and barter. Providing the ruling Quraysh tribe with a source of income.

Petra provided a stunning back drop with its amazing architecture, and its dams and cisterns were able to provide water for the thousands who attended. The use of Biblical names for locations in Petra suggests that it was not only the pagan Arabs who attended these pilgrimages.

² Sahih al-Bukhari: Volume 4, Book 55, Hadith Number 585

As marked in the above map, Dan Gibson has identified places such as the tombs of Aaron and Ishmael, the spring of Moses, Safa and Marwa, as well as the original location of the Kaaba. However, even though many of these names can be found in the Bible, there is little to suggest that any of these sites marked their exact location of their name sake. Instead, the ruling Quraysh tribe were presenting pilgrims with what might be best described as a theme park adventure. Promoting Petra and later Mecca, as a immersive religious experience with all sites within easy walking distance.

The Moses spring in Petra is certainly no-where near the true Mount Horeb where Moses split the rock (Exodus 17:6). **Safa** and **Marwa** are mentioned in the Quran as “*among the symbols of Allah*” (Q2:158, but these locations in Petra were simply reminders of the **rock** and the **flint** mentioned in the Bible (Psalm 114:8). Before the small hills in Mecca were given the names Safa and Marwa, there were two mountains in Petra that were also given that name. But neither Mecca or Petra mark the true location of Safa and Marwa. The Kaaba was also moved from Petra to Mecca, and at both locations the Arabs promoted the site as the location of the House built by Abraham. Sadly, both Petra and Mecca were little more than sideshow carnivals, with pilgrims seemingly as gullible then as they can be today.

Dan Gibson identifies the Kaaba was the **Masjid al-Haram** mentioned in the Quran, but while the Kaaba and the Al-Aqsa mosque were in Petra before they were built in Mecca or Jerusalem, it is still not a sufficient reason to assume the Quran was referring either of these sanctuaries in Petra. Mohammad and his followers had been able to freely enter the Kaaba area, so it does not fit the description of a forbidden sanctuary.

In his “night journey” or dream, Mohammad apparently ascended from Al-Masjid al-Haram, (Jerusalem) to Al-Masjid al-Aqsa (in heaven). It would appear Mohammad was speaking of a trip from Jerusalem to the New Jerusalem, to a heavenly mosque when he spoke of the **Al-Aqsa** or furthest mosque.

Jerusalem

According to Arab tradition, Mohammad initially faced Jerusalem when praying and Muslims have been told that Mohammad changed the direction to Mecca. Yet, there is no historical or archaeological evidence to support the idea that Mecca was sacred to Mohammad or his followers. The Quran says nothing about Mecca but does mention a place called Makka (Q 48:24). However, according to Tovma Artsruni, an Armenian historian who wrote a brief description of Mohammad in the late 9th century, Makka was the name of a city in Arabia Petraea Paran" (Petra).

The Quran also mentions a word, “*bibakkata*” (Q 3:96) which Muslims are told means Bakkah, and then told that Bakkah is another name for Mecca. However, the verse does not even appear to be referring to a place.

‘Indeed, the first house setup for the people, those who segregated, blessed and a guidance for the worlds.’ Q 3:96

Christoph Luxenberg translates the word *bibakkata* to mean fenced in or segregated. Another interpretation links the word bakkah with the Hebrew word Baca used in Psalm 84:6 “the valley of Baca’ or valley of weeping. In either case, the Quran is not referring to Mecca, instead the Quran appears to be reminding us of the first house or place of worship, the Temple of Solomon, located on Mount Moriah, one of the four hills of Jerusalem. The same place Abraha built an altar to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22:2, 2 Chronicles 3:1).

The Quran makes several references to the altar built by Abraham and describes both the altar and the later Temple, as the "House" (Q 2:12, 22:26).

While knowledge of Mohammad's Qibla has been lost, his Qibla may not have been so quickly forgotten. Different caliphs continued to recognise Jerusalem. Muawiya (r. 661-680), received the oaths of allegiance in Jerusalem and then publicly proclaimed his faith in Christ Jesus, praying at the sites of Golgotha, Gethsemane and the tomb of Mary. The caliph Abu al-Malik was considered to have been a pious and observant Muslim, yet, he spent the equivalent of seven years revenue from Egypt, the richest province at the time, to rebuild the Basilica of Saint Sophia (the Church of Holy Wisdom), commonly known today as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (692 AD). Up until the time of the crusades, Christians and Muslims believed that the rock over which the Dome of the Rock now stands had the imprints of Jesus feet marked in the rock. It was only in later centuries that Muslims began to claim that the rock marked the location of Mohammad's journey to heaven.

The reason the Abbasids chose Mecca with its black stone as their pilgrimage destination is possibly because it was established by the rebels of the Umayyad dynasty. It is also possible they chose Mecca because it was closer than any other pilgrim site. The Abbasids then accused Abu al-Malik of setting up an alternate pilgrimage site, but it could be that al-Malik was simply attempting to re-establish Mohammad's original Qibla.

Mohammad did change the Qibla, but it appears that the Arabs have changed the Qibla several times since. Mohammad told his followers to face *Al-Masjid al-Haram* (Jerusalem) at all times and in all activities and also told the Arabs that the Romans were going to emerge victorious within nine years. This prophecy did come true. Against all expectations and probability, the prayers of Believers were answered. The Persians were defeated, and Jerusalem was liberated in 629 AD. The Quran tells us that this was Mohammad's desire and tells us that Believers would celebrate Heraclius' victory over the Persians.

After Jerusalem was liberated in 629 AD and the relic of the true cross returned, believers had no reason to call Jerusalem "*Haram*". The Arabs also had no reason to call Jerusalem *Masjid al-Haram* after caliph Umar captured the city in 638. Arabs though have continued to use the name **Haram** for Jerusalem; making it necessary to change the definition of the term haram from forbidden to also mean holy or sacred.

Mohammad's goal was achieved when Jerusalem was liberated from the unbelievers and Believers did celebrate the return of the relic of the True Cross to Jerusalem. And even though Umar captured the city, Jews and Christians were allowed to freely enter the city. The name of the Temple Mount is now called, *Haram al-Sharif*.

Considering that Mohammad had nothing to do with Mecca, it is not surprising that early mosques do not face Mecca. What is surprising is that few if any early mosques face Jerusalem. The reason mosques face Petra may be in remembrance of one of Mohammad's last actions, which was after helping to liberate Jerusalem, Mohammad turned his attention to Makkah (Petra), the original capital of Arabia. Mohammad was able to enter Petra without opposition and removed the pagan idols from its Kaaba, leaving only images of Jesus and Mary.

Mohammad and his followers helped defeat the unbelievers and assisted in the liberation of Jerusalem and went on clear the idols from Petra. His legacy still remains and is yet to be fully appreciated because we still struggle to know the real Mohammad. The history of Islam has been rewritten and reimaged and while the early Arab historians attempted to piece the story back together, in doing so, they either ignored much of what did not make sense to them or printed only what they were allowed to. The story we hear today is the story the Abbasids wanted to tell. The Abbasid caliphate emerged victorious as new rulers of the Arab empire in 750 AD, but their interest was not in restoring the true memory of Mohammad, their interest lay in recreating a story that supported their agendas.

Evidence of the Abbasid's rewriting of history is shown in the actions of the Abbasid caliph al-Mamun who added an inscription to the Dome of the Rock which was built by the Umayyad caliph Al-Malik, claiming the credit for its construction for himself.