

## **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska  
3 January 2015

### ***Jerusalem: The World's Most Controversial City***

With the controversy between Jews and Muslims over the 37-acre compound called Temple Mount brewing these last few months, the Palestinian Liberation Organization made an extraordinary decision that defies all logic and history: The name used by Jews for this site—Temple Mount—the PLO declared to be “null and void.” They stipulated that the site can only be called Al Aqsa Mosque or the Noble Sanctuary. [A lesser known Arabic name for the site is Bait al-Maqdis, “house of the holy.”] For Islam, this is where the Prophet Muhammad is said to have ascended to heaven, where his role as Allah’s Prophet was affirmed. The controversy over the site the Jews call Temple Mount is over more than sovereignty or the title of the site. When Israel conquered Temple Mount during the 1967 war, the government restored responsibility of administering Temple Mount to a Muslim Foundation called the Waqf. The understanding of this decision was that only Muslims could pray on Temple Mount; Jews and Christians could not. In 2014, that understanding is being challenged. Although the vast majority of Israeli Jews have never been on Temple Mount (most rabbis discourage such a visit), more and more Jews wish to pray on Temple Mount; hence, the Palestinians (and other Muslims) fear that Israel will take over Temple Mount, replacing the Dome of the Rock with a third Temple. Over the last several months, there have been five terrorist attacks, including the horrific attack on a Jewish synagogue in West Jerusalem. In addition, a Palestinian attempted to assassinate a Jewish rabbi who argues strongly for Jewish rights to pray on Temple Mount.

*New York Times* reporter, Jodi Rudoren, shows that Temple Mount has been a flash point since the birth of the modern Zionist movement. More than 100 people died in a week of rioting in 1929 over access to the Western Wailing Wall. In 1990, the Israeli border police killed 22 Palestinians protesting a Jewish group’s announced plans to lay the cornerstone for a third temple. The opening of the “Rabbi’s Tunnel” system in 1996 resulted in 60 Palestinians being killed, along with 15 Israeli troops. Furthermore, the denial among Palestinians that Jewish Temples ever existed on Temple Mount is widespread and has a long history. For example, after Israel was created in 1948, the Waqf removed all references in its guide to the site of the existence of Solomon’s Temple on Temple Mount, when earlier editions stated its location was “beyond dispute.” Since the 7<sup>th</sup>-century, Muslims have worshipped on Temple Mount. In addition to the Dome of the Rock, which is a memorial not a mosque, and the Al Aqsa Mosque on the southwestern corner, there are other mosques, domes, gates, schools, homes and a museum. Images of Al Aqsa hang in nearly every Palestinian home. Thousands of Palestinians visit the Mount each week to pray.

It is also important to remember that when Israel was created in 1948, the intent of the United Nations was that Jerusalem would be declared an international city, ensuring that the holy sites would not be controlled by either Jews or Muslims. Following the war of independence after the UN 1948 declaration, the armistice agreements changed the status of Jerusalem. East Jerusalem was given to Jordan and West Jerusalem to Israel. Barbed wire and stretches of “no-man’s land” separated the two sections of Jerusalem. The Wailing Wall became a garbage dump. When Israel captured the Old City of Jerusalem in the 1967 War, the government made Jerusalem the capital and vowed that Jerusalem would remain “united forever.” Thus, Israel ringed the city with Jewish neighborhoods and built extensively in the newly annexed area. Officially, 300,000 Palestinians live in East Jerusalem (37% of the city’s population) and are considered “permanent residents,” meaning they can travel and work freely in Israel, receive welfare and health benefits, and vote in municipal (but not national) elections. But Palestinians do not normally vote in such elections and refuse to grant legitimacy to Israeli authorities. Neither side in this struggle—the Israeli government or the Palestinians who live in East Jerusalem—has much of a plan to produce a functioning, productive city of Jerusalem where each side can live side-by-side together. For that reason, some are suggesting that Jerusalem become the capital of both the Israeli state and the yet-to-be-formed Palestinian state. Quite frankly, it is difficult to see that ever occurring.

One additional factor needs to be a part of any discussion about Jerusalem—the state of Jordan. Jordan’s King Abdullah II is the latest ruler of a dynasty that claims its members are direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. This is a significant basis for his legitimacy as the ruler in Jordan. In addition, as a result of the 1994 peace treaty with Israel, Jordan has been given the custodianship of Islam’s holy places in Jerusalem. Abdullah must show his people and the Muslim world that he can protect the holy sites on Temple Mount—the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque—or he would lose their support, which could undermine his rule. Thus, as a result of the recent trouble on Temple Mount, Abdullah withdrew the Jordanian ambassador from Israel. He has yet to return. Abdullah must evidence the ability to protect Al Aqsa and failure to do so will undercut his authority at home and throughout the Muslim world. For that reason, a recent multibillion-dollar natural gas deal with Israel might be in jeopardy. Some Jordanians are protesting the deal by shouting, “No Zionist Gas!” “Our government is being bought out by the Israelis.” The language of such protests also stresses that the money from the gas deal will go into the Israeli treasury to fund further erosion of Palestinian presence on Temple Mount and undermine any progress in the West Bank. Such hyperbole does nothing more than heighten tensions in an already volatile region.

Psalm 122:6 instructs us to “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” As one reads the Old and New Testaments, it becomes clear that the city of Jerusalem is central to God’s heart and to His plan to bring history to an end. Since 586 BC, Jerusalem was ruled by various Gentile kingdoms and has been conquered more than almost any other city on earth. That all changed in 1948. Today, it is one of the most tension-filled cities on this planet. Yet, the Bible states clearly that Jesus will return to the Mount of Olives, enter Jerusalem and claim it

for His Father, then march north and defeat His enemies at Armageddon. He will then set up His kingdom and rule for 1,000 years with Jerusalem as His capital. The destiny of Jerusalem is, therefore, completely wrapped around the return of Christ and His kingdom. Until that time, as Psalm 122 declares, let us “pray for the peace of Jerusalem.”

See Jodi Rudoren in the *New York Times* (23 November 2014); Eetta Prince-Gibson in *ibid.*; and William Booth and Taylor Luck in the *Washington Post* (23 November 2014).