

# PRAYING TOWARDS AL-AQSA MOSQUE: A STUDY ON MUSLIM CLASSICAL SOURCES

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## Abstract

*Prayer is the second pillar of Islam after the testimony of faith. It is the only obligation that all Muslims must perform on a daily basis, regardless of financial, health, work, or other status. As the first Qiblah (direction of prayer) of the Muslims, al-Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis obtain special holiness for Muslims that continues to affect the situation in that region today. This article investigates the classical Islamic references' views on two main aspects that shaped the relationship between Muslim prayer and al-Aqsa Mosque. Namely, the duration of this relationship in the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, and the alteration of Qiblah from Bayt al-Maqdis to Makkah. This article concentrates mainly on the standard historical and exegetical traditions, since these kinds of classical sources are considered the main sources on which other historical literature on Bayt al-Maqdis, such as the books of Fada'il (virtues) rely. Indeed, identifying the nature and length of this relationship is important, as contemporary Muslims continue to refer to al-Aqsa Mosque in Bayt al-Maqdis as their first Qiblah, even though their main relationship in prayer is with the Ka'bah in Makkah. The reasons for changing the direction of prayer to Makkah have been widely discussed in classical Muslim sources. However, major questions that should have been answered in this context have not been tackled in most of these classical sources. This article studies this issue as was elaborated in Muslim classical sources. It reveals that the Prophet Muhammad prayed towards al-Aqsa Mosque in his lifetime for more than 14 years, a longer period than he prayed towards the Ka'bah. This shows an extensive importance of al-Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis that has been built within Islamic thought since the beginning of Muhammad's Prophethood.*

**Keywords:** Al-Aqsa Mosque, Muslim, Qiblah, Jerusalem, Bayt al-Maqdis, Ka'bah

## Introduction

According to many *ahadith* (prophetic traditions), the obligation of the five prayers in Islam dates back to the Night Journey of the Prophet Muhammad to al-Aqsa Mosque. Imam Muslim (d. 261 AH / 875 CE) narrates the authentic *hadith* of the story about the obligation of the five prayers that occurred in heaven during the Night Journey of Muhammad and his Ascension to Heaven.<sup>1</sup> However, this *hadith* does not speak about the beginning of performing prayer in Islam. Prayer is mentioned in the Qur'an at a very early stage of the Qur'anic revelation. Two of the earliest revealed chapters of the Qur'an, namely chapter 73 (*al-Muzzammil*) and chapter 74 (*al-Muddaththir*) mention prayer:

- i. O you, who are enfolded in your cloak! Keep awake throughout the night, all except a small part of it. (Quran, 73: 1–2)
- ii. O you, who are wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning! Proclaim the greatness of your Lord. (Quran, 74: 1–3)

Most exegetes interpret the first verse, 'Keep awake throughout the night' (Quran, 73: 2), as praying throughout the night. Scholars of exegesis including al-Tabari (d. 310 H / 922 CE)<sup>2</sup>, Ibn Kathir (d. 774 H / 1372 CE)<sup>3</sup>, al-Zamakhshari (d. 528 AH / 1134 CE)<sup>4</sup>, and al-Razi (d. 604 AH / 1208 CE)<sup>5</sup> agree on this interpretation. This concept is known in Islamic thought as *Qiyam al-Layl* (staying awake [in prayer] during the night). The term *قم الليل qum al-layl* in verse (73: 2) of the Qur'an should be considered as one terminology, not two separate words, since it refers to a known concept in Islamic core sources, namely *قيام الليل Qiyam al-Layl*. This term can also be found in many *ahadith* of the Prophet Muhammad. For example, the Prophet Muhammad mentions night prayer in the *hadith* of al-Nasa'i (d. 303 AH / 916 CE)<sup>6</sup> and the *hadith* of Muslim.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Vol. 1 (Vaduz: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation, 2000), p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, Vol. 12 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1999), pp. 278-279.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*, ed. 'Abd al-Qadir al-'Arna'ut, Vol. 4 (Damascus: Maktabat Dar al-Fayha', 1994), p. 558.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Zamakhshari, *Tafsir al-Kashshaf 'An Haqa'iq Ghawamiq al-Tanzil wa 'Uyun al-Aqawil fi Wujuh al-Ta'wil*, ed. Muhammad Shahin, Vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1995), pp. 623-624.

<sup>5</sup> Fakhr al-Din Al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-Kabir Aw Mafatih al-Ghayb*, Vol. 15 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1990), pp. 172-173.

<sup>6</sup> Narrated by Humayd Ibn 'Abd al-Rahman: The Prophet said: (The best prayer after the obligatory ones is *Qiyam al-Layl* ...). Al-Nasa'i, *Sunan al-Nasa'i*, Vol. 1 (Vaduz: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation, 2000), p. 272.

Verse (20) of chapter 73 also mentions night prayer: 'Indeed, your Lord knows that you stand [to pray at night] less than two-thirds of the night, [sometimes] half of it, and [sometimes] one-third of it, and so does a group of those [the believers] who are with you'. This verse affirms the concept of night prayer and notes a reduction in the duration of night prayer for Muslims of that period. In verse (74: 3), al-Zamakhshari argues that the mention of *Takbir* (proclaiming the greatness of God) refers to the same act that is usually performed in prayer (i.e. it might refer to the prayer itself)<sup>8</sup>. Al-Rāzī agrees and further interprets this verse to mean that there was prayer in the beginning of the Prophet's mission and that it may have been voluntary.<sup>9</sup>

Numerous narrations of *hadith* and *sīrah* (biography) of the Prophet Muhammad prove that prayer, as an obligation, started at the beginning of Muhammad's Prophethood. For example, Ibn Ishāq (d. 151 AH / 768 CE) specifically mentions that prayer started after Khadijah, the wife of the Prophet, embraced Islam.<sup>10</sup> Khadijah was the first person to convert to Islam after the Prophethood of Muhammad. Ibn Ishaq mentions that, at the beginning of the Prophethood, the Prophet and Khadijah used to pray secretly.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Ibn Ishaq quotes the companion 'Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud: 'We could not pray beside the Ka'bah until 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab embraced Islam'<sup>12</sup>. 'Umar converted to Islam in Makkah in 6 AB / 615 CE, well before the Night Journey and after the first Muslim migration to Abyssinia.<sup>13</sup> This account shows that the Muslims prayed at a very early stage. It also shows that prayer was most likely performed by the Prophet, and so by Muslims, since the beginning of the Prophet Muhammad's mission. This makes prayer the first of the four physical pillars of Islam, which are obligatory for Muslims.<sup>14</sup>

With regard to the number of daily prayers, al-Suhayli (d. 581 AH / 1185 CE) quotes al-Muzani (d. 264 AH / 878 CE): 'Prayer, before the Night Journey, was a prayer before the sunset, and another one before the sunrise'.<sup>15</sup> Al-Suhayli adds that Yahya Ibn Salam (d. 201 AH / 816 CE) had a similar opinion. The only change that occurred after the Night Journey was to specify five daily obligatory prayers. This major change occurred during the Ascension (*Mi'raj*) that took place during the Night Journey and started in Bayt al-Maqdis. Prayer, thus, was the first practical manifestation of Muslim belief, and it began at the beginning of the Prophethood of Muhammad. Moreover, Bayt al-Maqdis was the first place on earth to receive the obligation of the five daily prayers, granting it a central role in the history of prayer in Islam.

## The *Qiblah*

The word *Qiblah* in Arabic literally means 'direction'<sup>16</sup>. Its root is *Q B L*. *Qiblah*, in Islamic thought, specifically refers to the 'direction of prayer'<sup>17</sup>. Directing prayer towards a specific side, horizon, or building is not unique to Islam, as Jews and Christians also follow certain directions during prayer. According to Gordon, most Christians direct their prayers towards the East, regardless of the person's geographic location.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 'A'ishah said: (Do not leave *Qiyam al-Layl*, since the Messenger of God never left it, and he used, if he felt ill, to pray sitting (i.e. instead of standing). Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Vol. 1, p. 223.

<sup>8</sup> See Al-Zamakhshari, *Tafsir al-Kashshaf*, Vol. 4, p. 633.

<sup>9</sup> See Al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-Kabir*, Vol. 15, pp. 191-192.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Ishaq, *al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah Li-Ibn Ishaq*, ed. Ahmad Farid al-Mizyadi (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2004), p. 180.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>13</sup> See Safi-ur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, *al-Raheeq al-Makhtum (the sealed nectar) Biography of the Noble Prophet* (Riyadh: Darussalam publications, 1996), p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> As for the other physical pillars of Islam; *Siyam* (Fasting) and *Zakah* (Charity) became obligatory for Muslims shortly after the migration of the Prophet to Madinah, while *Hajj* (Pilgrimage) became obligatory for Muslims a year before the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Suhayli, *al-Rawd al-'Unuf fi Tafsir al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah li Ibn Hisham*, ed. Majdi Ibn Mansur Ibn Sayyid al-Shura, Vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1994), p. 423.

<sup>16</sup> See Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, ed. Amin 'Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, Vol. 11 (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1999), p. 25, and see Al-Fayrūz'Abadi, *al-Qamus al-Muhit*, Vol. 4 (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1991), p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> Muhammad Rawwas Qal'aji and Hamid Sadiq Qunaibi, *Mu'jam Lughat al-Fuqaha' (Dictionary of Islamic legal terminology)* (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā'is, 1988), p. 356.

<sup>18</sup> B. L. Gordon, 'Sacred Directions, Orientation, and the Top of the Map', *History of Religions*, 10-3 (1971), p. 212. The direction of Christian prayer is not relevant to this article and therefore is not discussed.

Jewish tradition specifies praying towards Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup> Gordon argues that Jews pray towards ‘Holy Jerusalem, The City of God’, which may not always be in the East, depending on the person’s geographic location. Solomon, whom the Bible describes as the builder of the Temple, said, ‘And they pray to Yahweh, turning towards the city which you have chosen and towards the Temple which I have built for your name’ (1 Kings 8: 44). This verse shows that the direction of prayer for Jews is towards the ‘Temple’, which most Jews believe is traditionally located in Jerusalem, although some Jewish sects, such as the Samaritans, believe the location of the Temple to be in Nablus, north of Jerusalem.

### The *Qiblah* of the Prophet Muhammad

The *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad mentions that he first prayed towards *Bayt al-Maqdis* (i.e. al-Aqsa Mosque).<sup>20</sup> Al-Qazqi collected all the different narrations of *ahadith* that mention the change of the *Qiblah* from *hadith* sources, mainly that of al-Bukhari, Muslim, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, al-Tirmidhi, Malik (d. 179 AH / 795 CE), Abu Dawud (d. 275 AH / 888 CE), Ibn Majah (d. 275 AH / 888 CE), and al-Nasa’i (d. 303 AH / 916 CE).<sup>21</sup> These sources mention 34 narrations.<sup>22</sup> Most of these narrations have minor differences in individual letters and non-central words. Al-Bukhari in his *sahih* 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.<sup>23</sup>

In this *hadith*, the narrator has doubts about whether the Prophet faced al-Aqsa Mosque in his prayer for 16 or 17 months. Other narrations, such as that of al-Nasa’i, specify the duration clearly as 16 months.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Usamah Ibn Munqidh (d. 584 AH / 1188 CE) mentions an event that took place when he visited al-Aqsa Mosque during the rule of the Crusaders while accompanied by a Crusade diplomat. When Usamah was performing prayer in al-Aqsā Mosque and directing himself towards the South (i.e. towards the Muslims’ *Qiblah* in Makkah), a Crusade soldier approached him and turned him by force towards the East, ordering him to pray in that direction. Usamah recorded his Crusade companion’s comment, which shows that the soldier thought that the direction of prayer should be towards the East and that he did not know that they prayed in Europe towards the East because that is the direction of the ‘Holy City of Jerusalem’. See Usamah Ibn Munqidh, *Kitab al-I’tibar*, ed. Philip Hatti (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1999), pp. 134-135.

Thus, Jerusalem’s status as a *Qiblah* in Christianity could have been inherited from Jewish tradition, since the two religions believe in the Old Testament.

<sup>20</sup> The term *Bayt al-Maqdis* in this context (i.e. whether it means a mosque, a city, or a region) make no difference to the arguments, except to study the direction of the Prophet’s prayer inside al-Aqsā Mosque during the Night Journey. However, translating this term from Arabic to English as ‘Jerusalem’ might not be fully acceptable in all cases, especially when translating the Prophet’s *ahadith* or when there is no clear reference in the *hadith* to a mosque, a city, or a region. Therefore, the term *Bayt al-Maqdis*, as transliterated, is used when relating it to the Prophet’s *ahadith*. See Abdallah Ma’rouf Omar, ‘(Islamic Jerusalem – Bayt al-Maqdis) Reflections of translation’, Paper presented in the 7<sup>th</sup> International Academic Conference on Islamic Jerusalem Studies, Dundee, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2005.

<sup>21</sup> See Sa’id Ibn ‘Abd al-Rahman Al-Qazqi, *Bayt al-Maqdis fi al-Hadith al-Nabawi al-Sharif* (Dubai: Markiz Jum’ah al-Majid Lil-Thaqafah wa al-Turath, 2003), pp. 35-55.

<sup>22</sup> Additionally, al-Qazqi lists 11 other narrations that are mentioned in sources of the *hadith*, other than the previously discussed main ones. These include the narrations of Sa’id Ibn Mansur (d. 227 AH / 842 CE), Ibn Abi Shaybah (d. 230 AH / 845 CE), al-Dārimī (d. 255 AH / 869 CE), and al-Tabarani (d. 360 AH / 971 CE). He lists five additional narrations of this event that are mentioned in the sources of Tafsir, mainly that of al-Tabari and Ibn Abi Hatim (d. 327 AH / 939 CE).

<sup>23</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol.1 (Vaduz: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation, 2000), p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Narrated by al-Bara’ Ibn ‘Azib: The Messenger of God came to Madinah and prayed towards *Bayt al-Maqdis* for 16 months, then he was ordered to turn to the Ka‘bah. A man, who prayed with the Prophet [towards Makkah], passed near people from the *Ansar* [praying towards *Bayt al-Maqdis*] and said: ‘I testify that the Messenger of God has been ordered to turn to the Ka‘bah’, so they turned towards the Ka‘bah [during their prayer]. Al-Nasa’i, *Sunan al-Nasa’i*, Vol. 1, p. 120.

Many scholars were interested mainly in showing how many months passed in Madinah before the change of the *Qiblah*. Yet many do not notice that this period is in fact related only to Madinah, not to the Makkan period.<sup>25</sup> Muslims started praying the five obligatory daily prayers after the Night Journey, which took place more than a year prior to the migration to Madinah. Furthermore, there is no evidence that prayer before the migration was towards any other direction than al-Aqsa Mosque. In fact, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal confirms this in his narration:

Narrated by Ibn ‘Abbas: Prophet Muhammad used to pray, while he was in Makkah, towards *Bayt Al-Maqdis*, putting the Ka‘bah in front of him. He stayed [praying towards *Bayt al-Maqdis*] after his migration for 16 months, then he was turned [by God] towards the Ka‘bah.<sup>26</sup>

This *hadith* describes the Prophet praying towards Bayt al-Maqdis when he was a resident of Makkah, yet he prayed behind the southern corner of the Ka‘bah, which is called *al-Rukn al-Yamani* (the Yemeni corner). Thus, he simultaneously faced al-Aqsa Mosque and the Ka‘bah (See Figure 1).

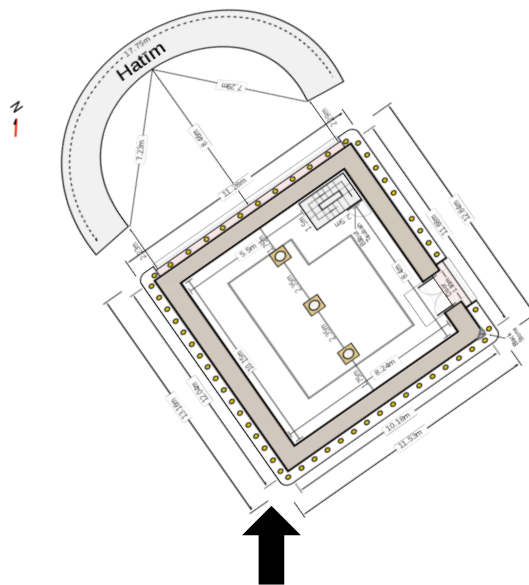


Figure (1): Praying place of the Prophet Muhammad near *al-Rukn al-Yamānī* of the Ka‘bah<sup>27</sup>

This narration specifies 16 months exactly and is also cited by Al-Bara’ Ibn ‘Azib, the same teller of al-Bukhari’s narration, which questioned whether the period was 16 or 17 months. Muslim and al-Nasa’i stated that the period was 16 months. Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani (d. 852 AH / 1448 CE) gathered, studied, and compared most of these narrator chains for this *hadith* and tries to reconcile the differing opinions:

The reconciliation of the two narrations is easy; whoever states that the period was 16 months must have counted the days only, starting from the day when the Prophet entered Madinah until the month during which the turning of the *Qiblah* happened, while whoever states that the period was 17 months must have counted the two months altogether. Whoever doubts the two opinions must have hesitated. See Ibn Hajar Al-‘Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari*, ed. Muhammad Fu‘ad ‘Abd al-Baqi, Vol.1 (Riyadh: Maktabat Dar al-Salam, 1997), p. 130

<sup>25</sup> Al-‘Asqalani states that the change of the *Qiblah* was most likely in the middle of *Rajab* (Ibid. *Rajab is the seventh month of the Muslim lunar calendar*). Ibn Hisham also quotes Ibn Ishaq on this point. (See Ibn Hisham, *al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah*, ed. Muhammad Muhyi al-Din ‘Abd al-Hamid, Vol. 2 (Cairo: Dar al-Tala’i, 2005), p. 98) However, If counting the 16 months starts in the middle of *Rabi’ al-Awwal* (the third month of the Muslim lunar calendar) in the year 1 AH, then the month of changing the *Qiblah* would be the middle of *Rajab* in the year 2 AH. This is the case in the authentic *ahadith*.

<sup>26</sup> Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad*, ed. Hamzah Ahmad al-Zayn, Vol. 3 (Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 1995), p. 310.

This *hadith* is authentic, as al-Haythami (d. 707 AH / 1308 CE) mentions. See Al-Haythami, *Majma’ al-Zawa’id wa Manba’ al-Fawa’d*, ed. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Ata, Vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2001), p. 88.

<sup>27</sup> Plan of the Ka‘bah is taken from <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/ba/Kaaba-plan.svg/1280px-Kaaba-plan.svg.png> (Date acquired: 1<sup>st</sup> December 2017).

Ahmad Ibn Ḥanbal's narration is indeed more reliable than what Ibn 'Abd al-Rahim Al-Mubarakfuri (d. 1353 AH / 1934 CE) claims in his explanation of the *Sunan* of al-Tirmidhi. Al-Mubarakfuri mentions a very weak narration originally taken from al-Ṭabarānī, who attributes it to Ibn Jurayj:

The Prophet prayed in the beginning towards the Ka'bah, and then he was turned [by God] to *Bayt al-Maqdis* while he was in Makkah, and he prayed [towards there] for three years, then he migrated, and prayed towards it [*Bayt al-Maqdis*] after his arrival in Madīnah for 16 months, and then, God turned him towards the Ka'bah [again].<sup>28</sup>

Al-'Asqalani mentions that one of the narrators for this narration is 'Abdul Rahman Ibn Yazid Ibn Aslam, who is considered a weak narrator, and this weakens this narration.<sup>29</sup> This weak narration contradicts the other more authentic ones in this context and should not be accepted.

Another narration about al-Bara' Ibn Ma'rur (d. 1 AH / 622 CE), a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, also supports the opinion that the Muslims prayed towards al-Aqsa Mosque before the Prophet Muhammad's migration to Madinah. The following story, mentioned by Ibn Hibban (d. 354 AH / 965 CE) and Ibn Hisham, took place when a delegation from Madinah, including al-Bara', came to the Prophet in Makkah for the second al-'Aqabah pledge in the year 1 BH / 622 CE:

When they [i.e. the delegation of Madīnah] were at Dhi al-Hulayfah, al-Bara' Ibn Ma'rur Ibn Khansa' Ibn Sakhr, who was the leader of the *Ansar* [the Muslims of Madīnah], said: 'I have an opinion and I do not know whether you agree with me or not; I decided not to turn my back to this building [i.e. the Ka'bah], and to pray towards it'. They said: 'By God, this is not a good opinion, and we would never pray to a different *Qiblah* [other than *Bayt al-Maqdis*]'. They refused his opinion and he insisted to pray towards it [i.e. the Ka'bah], when the sun set, he prayed towards the Ka'bah, and they prayed towards al-Sham, [and they remained so] until they arrived at Makkah. Al-Bara' Ibn Ma'rur said to Ka'b Ibn Mālik: 'O my nephew, by God, I am not comfortable with what I did during this journey, so let us go to the Messenger of God in order to ask him about what I did'... [When they met the Prophet] Al-Bara' Ibn Ma'rur said to him: 'O Messenger of God, I have done something in my journey that I am not comfortable with, so tell me [your opinion on the matter]; I decided not to turn my back towards this building [i.e. the Ka'bah], and I prayed towards it. My peers scolded me and they opposed me'. The Messenger of God said: 'You were on a *Qiblah* that you should have been patient [and pray] towards it', and he did not say more than that.<sup>30</sup>

This narration indicates that the direction of *Qiblah* before the migration of the Prophet Muhammad was towards al-Aqsa Mosque, and that the Muslims of Madinah directed their prayers towards it from the time of the first pledge of al-'Aqabah. However, it does not specify when the start of prayer towards al-Aqsa Mosque first took place in Makkah.

As previously mentioned, there is no evidence of change in the *Qiblah* before the year 2 AH. Such a vital event would have been well-recorded. This means that Muslims prayed towards al-Aqsa Mosque since the start of prayer in Makkah. Thus, the Prophet and the Muslims prayed towards al-Aqs Mosque for more than 14 years, of which only about 16 months were in Madinah, while the rest of the time was in Makkah. In other words, the Prophet Muhammad prayed towards al-Aqsa Mosque more often than he prayed towards the Ka'bah.

### The change of the *Qiblah* in the Qur'an

Studying the issue of praying towards al-Aqsa Mosque invites discussion with regard to the actual reasons and circumstances for changing the *Qiblah* from Bayt al-Maqdis to Makkah. For example, does the change of the *Qiblah* mean that Bayt al-Maqdis lost its importance for the Prophet Muhammad? Was the principle of praying

<sup>28</sup> Abu al-'Ula Muhammad Al-Mubarakfuri, *Tuhfat al-Ahwadhi Sharh Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, ed. Sidqi Muhammad Jamil al-'Attar, Vol.8 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 2003), p. 253.

<sup>29</sup> Al-'Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari*, Vol. 1, p. 651.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Hibban, *al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah*, ed. 'Abd al-Salam Ibn Muhammad 'Allush (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 2000), p. 87-88. And Ibn Hisham, *al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah*, Vol. 2, p. 27.

towards that region a mistake that was later ‘corrected’ to Makkah? The Qur’an presents different arguments and reasons to support changing the *Qiblah*. Verses 142–150 in chapter 2 (*al-Baqarah*) of the Qur’an refer to changing the *Qiblah*.<sup>31</sup>

In these and the preceding verses (2: 40–123), the Qur’an strongly criticises the people of the scriptures, mainly the ‘Children of Israel’, and decides that they disobeyed God and changed the real message that was revealed to them through the Prophet Moses and other Prophets. Verse 124 then describes the story of Prophet Abraham building the Ka‘bah in Makkah, followed by the story of Prophet Jacob (Israel) and his legacy to his children, concentrating on the concept of Islam in particular in the stories of Abraham and Jacob. Shortly after the story of Abraham rebuilding the Ka‘bah, verses 135–141 of the Qur’an argue that Muslims are the true followers of the Prophets Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac. The Qur’an then discusses the changing of the *Qiblah*. Thus, verses 40–141, which precede the verses about the *Qiblah*, could be interpreted as an introduction to an issue that the Qur’an itself describes as ‘immense’ (2: 143).

### ***Qiblah* as Divine Revelation or Personal Choice**

A central question that arises from this discussion is whether praying towards al-Aqsa Mosque was a revelation from God or the Prophet Muhammad’s personal choice. Al-Tabari presents opinions of exegetes arguing that the Prophet Muhammad chose *Bayt al-Maqdis* as a *Qiblah* without any revelation from God, as noted in a narration by Abu al-‘Aliyah:

The Prophet of God was given the choice to turn his face [in prayer] wherever he chooses, so he chose *Bayt al-Maqdis* in order to approach the people of the scripture [i.e. the Jews] and so it was his *Qiblah* for 16 months, during which he used to turn his face in the sky [i.e. hoping to be ordered to pray towards the Ka‘bah], then God turned him towards the al-Ḥarām Mosque [i.e. towards the Ka‘bah as a *Qiblah*].<sup>32</sup>

Abu al-‘Aliyah attributes this narration to the Prophet, but there is no connection between Abu al-‘Aliyah and the Prophet. Abu al-‘Aliyah is a *tabi‘i* (successor), not a companion, of the Prophet. Therefore, this narration has no connection with the Prophet, and thus, it is *hadith mursal*,<sup>33</sup> which most *hadith* scholars consider weak,<sup>34</sup> especially if it contradicts a stronger narration or text.<sup>35</sup> Such is the case in the narration of Abu al-‘Aliyah, which contradicts a Qur’anic text that discusses the change of the *Qiblah*:

Yet We have not made the *Qiblah* that you were [facing during your prayer] but to know who follows the Messenger and who turns over. (2: 143)

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<sup>31</sup> For a full analysis of these verses, see Fadi Alrabi, ‘Islamic Jerusalem, The First Qiblah’, *Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies*, 10 (2009), pp. 1–26.

<sup>32</sup> Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, Vol. 2, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> The *hadith mursal* is a *hadith* that is mentioned by a *tabi‘i* who links it directly to the Prophet without mentioning a companion between the *tabi‘i* and the Prophet. See Nur al-Din ‘Itir, *Manhaj al-Naqd fī ‘Ulum al-Hadith* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1997), p. 370.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 371.

<sup>35</sup> Abu al-‘Aliyah’s narration also contradicts another weak narration mentioned by al-Tabari, in which he quotes Ibn ‘Abbas considering the Ka‘bah as the *Qiblah* of Abraham:

Narrated by al-Muthannā: narrated by ‘Abdullah Ibn Salih: narrated by Mu‘awiyah Ibn Salih: narrated by ‘Ali Ibn Abu Talhah: narrated by Ibn ‘Abbas: When the Messenger of God migrated to Madinah, and most of its people were Jewish, God ordered him to pray towards *Bayt al-Maqdis*, so the Jews rejoiced. The Messenger of God prayed towards it [i.e. *Bayt al-Maqdis*] for more than 10 months, and the Messenger of God used to love the *Qiblah* of Abraham Peace Be Upon Him, and he used to supplicate and look towards the sky, so God revealed: ‘Verily, We see the turning of your face towards the heaven’. [Qur’an 2: 144]

Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, Vol. 2, p. 7.

This weak narration is mentioned by a companion, namely, Ibn ‘Abbas, who was closer to the Prophet’s acts. Thus, it is in a better position than that of Abu al-‘Aliyah, since Ibn ‘Abbas was closer to the Prophet Muhammad and his narration is considered as a *hadith marfu‘* (i.e. a *hadith* that is narrated from the Prophet directly by a companion). Therefore, since the two narrations contradict each other, Ibn ‘Abbas’s narration should be favoured because of its proximity to the Prophet. Also, al-‘Asqalani mentions these narrations and agrees that the *hadith* of Ibn ‘Abbas can be considered proof that praying towards al-Aqsa Mosque was through a revelation from God, not because of the Prophet, which strengthens the author’s argument even more (see Al-‘Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari*, Vol. 1, p. 651). However, this narration is still rejected, since the rest of its text shows that the satisfaction of the Jews was a factor that affected the decision of praying towards Jerusalem and changing the *Qiblah*, which contradicts the Qur’anic text, as clarified in this section.

The Qur'an uses the expression 'We have not made the *Qiblah*' to refer to the appointment of Bayt al-Maqdis as the first *Qiblah*. This expression indicates that appointing Bayt al-Maqdis as a *Qiblah* was not the Prophet Muhammad's opinion or choice, but rather that God ordered it. In other words, the appointment of al-Aqsa Mosque as a *Qiblah* was a divine revelation. Moreover, the Qur'anic expression *Tardaha* (accept it) in verse (2: 143) indicates that the Prophet Muhammad had no choice in praying towards Bayt al-Maqdis in the first place, because it was a revelation from God. If the Prophet Muhammad had a choice in his *Qiblah*, he would not have waited for a revelation to change it.

The verses of the *Qiblah* do not name Jerusalem or al-Aqsa Mosque specifically. These verses concentrate on the Ka'bah as the true *Qiblah* and declare that praying towards it is the 'Truth from your Lord' (2: 149). This raises a question about the authenticity of al-Aqsa Mosque itself as a *Qiblah*; does the Qur'an declare that al-Aqsa Mosque was a false *Qiblah*? Although the previously mentioned verses of Qur'an do not mention al-Aqsa Mosque or Jerusalem in name, the Qur'an does mention names of Prophets (e.g. Jacob [Israel] and Isaac) for whom no historical records exists to show they visited Makkah. It does not state whether Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob prayed towards Makkah or Bayt al-Maqdis. If these Prophets, whom the Qur'an mentions by name, never prayed towards Bayt al-Maqdis, and if the Prophet Muhammad chose to pray to al-Aqsa Mosque in Bayt al-Maqdis of his own accord, then the whole issue of changing the *Qiblah* to Makkah was only to correct a mistake by the Muslims, after more than 14 years of praying towards al-Aqsa Mosque.

Al-Ratrout argues that the *Qiblah* of all the Prophets before Muhammad was the Ka'bah in Makkah.<sup>36</sup> According to al-Ratrout, the Ka'bah was the first house of worship ever built, and thus all the buildings of worship of the Prophets were built facing the direction of the Ka'bah until the *Qiblah* was turned to al-Aqsa Mosque during the time of the Israelites. Al-Ratrout's argument depends on statements in Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Hamawī's (d. 1098 AH / 1687 CE) book *Tuhfat al-Akyas*.<sup>37</sup> However, Shihab al-Din al-Hamawī's argument does not depend on historical texts dating back to the times of the previous Prophets. None of the early religious texts of the three monotheistic religions (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) explicitly mentions anything about Makkah as a direction of prayer for Prophets. The only surviving places of worship that date back to these times are the Ka'bah and al-Aqsa Mosque. Al-Ratrout notes that al-Aqsa is an enclave that faces the Ka'bah<sup>38</sup> and that this direction shows that the Ka'bah was most likely built as a point of reference for all other places of worship.

According to Al-Tabari's narration, Ibn 'Abbas refers to the Ka'bah as the *Qiblah* of Abraham: 'The Messenger of God liked the *Qiblah* of Abraham Peace Be Upon Him'.<sup>39</sup> This text mentions the Ka'bah clearly as the *Qiblah* of Abraham, whom the Qur'an and Bible describe as one of the most highly ranked Prophets. Ibn Sayyid al-Nas (d. 734 AH / 1334 CE) argues that the Ka'bah was also the *Qiblah* of the Prophet Ishmael.<sup>40</sup> The concept of 'The *Qiblah* of Abraham' is not mentioned in al-Bukhari's narration of this *hadith*,<sup>41</sup> but it mentions 'the Ka'bah' by name instead of 'the *Qiblah* of Abraham'. Al-Bukhari's narration was taken from al-Bara', not from Ibn 'Abbas, which means that Ibn 'Abbas is the most likely source of the term 'the *Qiblah* of Abraham' in al-Tabari's narration. This strengthens the opinion that the Ka'bah was the *Qiblah* of the Prophet Abraham, according to Muslims. Thus, the Ka'bah could have been the *Qiblah* of other Prophets, who would have likely followed Abraham's example.

Some Muslim historical sources dispute the idea that Bayt al-Maqdis was the *Qiblah* of the previous Prophets, particularly the Prophets of the Children of Israel. They indicate that the original *Qiblah* of the Jews was towards Makkah, and they later turned it towards Bayt al-Maqdis. Ibn Sayyid al-Nas quotes a narration from al-Zuhri in this context:

<sup>36</sup> Haithem Fathi Al-Ratrout, 'al-Masjid al-Aqsa fi al-Athar al-Qur'aniyyah', *Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies*, 6–1 (2005), p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> This book has not been printed, and the manuscript could not be accessed, although a few manuscripts exist in libraries in Damascus and Madinah.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Ratrout, *al-Masjid al-Aqsa*, p. 12

<sup>39</sup> Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, Vol. 2, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> Ibn Sayyid al-Nas, *Uyun al-Athar fi Funun al-Maghazi wa al-Shama'il wa al-Siyar*, Vol. 1 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qudsī, 1986), p. 313.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol.1, p. 84.

... Khalid Ibn Yazid said [to the Umayyad Caliph Sulaymān Ibn ‘Abd al-Malik]: I swear by God, I read the book that God revealed to Muhammad (Peace be upon him) and I read the Torah. The Jews did not find it [i.e. that *Bayt al-Maqdis* is their *Qiblah*] in the book that God revealed to them [i.e. the Torah], but the Ark of Covenant was situated on the Rock [i.e. the Rock that is now under the Dome of the Rock in al-Aqsa Mosque], but when God got angry with the Children of Israel He ascended it, so their prayer was towards the Rock after their own consultation [among themselves].<sup>42</sup>

This narration assures that, according to Khalid Ibn Yazid, the Prophets of the Children of Israel did not pray towards Jerusalem before the Ascension of the Ark of Covenant. This means that the Prophets previously prayed towards another direction. Al-Tabari mentions a similar narration:

A Jew argued with Abū al-‘Aliyah about the *Qiblah*. Abu al-‘Aliyah said: [the Prophet] Moses used to pray beside the Rock [in Jerusalem] facing al-Haram Mosque [in Makkah], and putting the Rock in front of him [while praying]. The Jew said: Between us is the mosque of the Prophet Salih Peace be upon him [i.e. as a proof that its *Qiblah* was not towards Makkah but towards the Rock in al-Aqsa]. Abu al-‘Aliyah said: I prayed in the mosque of Salih, and its *Qiblah* is towards the Ka‘bah. Abu al-‘Aliyah said also: I prayed in the Mosque of Dhu al-Qarnayn, and its *Qiblah* is towards the Ka‘bah.<sup>43</sup>

Praying towards the Rock, or at least towards the al-Aqsa enclave, is mentioned in the Torah dating back to Solomon (1 Kings 8: 44).<sup>44</sup> This weakens the reliability of Ibn Yazid’s opinion, since he does not relate his opinion to any source from the Jewish historical narrations. This narration cannot be accepted, even though al-Tabari’s narration clearly mentions two Prophets, namely Moses and Salih, in addition to Dhu al-Qarnayn.<sup>45</sup> It neglects the fact that the core sources state that Moses did not enter the Holy Land, so how could he pray behind or beside the Rock in al-Aqsa Mosque, which is in the heart of Bayt al-Maqdis?

It could be argued from these narrations and opinions that Abraham was the only Prophet who prayed towards the Ka‘bah, as he rebuilt the Ka‘bah in Makkah according to the Qur’an. Ishmael also may have prayed towards the Ka‘bah, since he lived in Makkah. Yet there is no explicit evidence that any other Prophet prayed towards the Ka‘bah, especially the Prophets of the Children of Israel, according to Islamic faith, such as David, Solomon, and Jesus. In other words, the religious and historical information in the biblical sources confirms that Bayt al-Maqdis, not Makkah, was most likely the *Qiblah* of the Children of Israel’s Prophets. It is also unlikely that the Prophet Muhammad would have worshiped with no point of reference (i.e. revelation). As the Qur’an states, ‘He does not speak out of his own desires, verily, it is but a revelation’ (53: 3–4). If Bayt al-Maqdis was the *Qiblah* of the Prophets, as specified by a revelation from God, then why was the *Qiblah* changed?

## Reversing the Question

According to many Muslim sources, the Ka‘bah was most likely the *Qiblah* of Abraham, who represents the point of reference of the Prophet Muhammad, as stated in many verses of the Qur’an.<sup>46</sup> It is unlikely that the original direction of prayer was towards al-Aqsa Mosque in Bayt al-Maqdis, because Abraham’s *Qiblah* was the Ka‘bah, not al-Aqsa. By concentrating on the reasons for changing the *Qiblah* from Bayt al-Maqdis to

<sup>42</sup> Ibn Sayyid al-Nas, *‘Uyun al-Athar*, Vol. 1, pp. 313-314.

<sup>43</sup> Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, Vol. 2, p. 38.

<sup>44</sup> The Torah mentions that the ‘Temple’ was built on the Moria Hill (2 Chronicles 3: 1), on which al-Aqsa Mosque is located today.

<sup>45</sup> Dhu al-Qarnayn is not a Prophet, as can be understood in the Qur’an (18: 83–98).

<sup>46</sup> For example: ‘and follow the religion of Abraham [who was] *hanif*’ (4: 125). *Hanif* means the true pure monotheism, to believe in one God (see Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad al-Hilali, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an in the English Language*, (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers and Distributors, 1996), p. 804).

Other verses mentioned in this context include ‘and who rejects the religion of Abraham except for who fools himself’ (2: 130); ‘Say: Nay, but [I choose] the religion of Abraham [who was] *hanif*, and he was not among the polytheists’ (2: 135); ‘Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a *hanif*, Muslim, and he was not among the polytheists. Verily, the only [people] to have claim to Abraham are the ones who followed him [during his life], this Prophet [i.e. Muhammad] and the believers [i.e. the Muslims]’ (3: 67–68); ‘Say: God has said the truth, so follow the religion of Abraham [who was] *hanif*’ (3: 95); ‘Say: Verily, My Lord has guided me to a straight path, a true religion, the religion of Abraham [who was] *hanif*, and he was not among the polytheists’ (6: 161); ‘Then We revealed to you: Follow the religion of Abraham, [who was] *hanif*’ (16: 123); ‘The religion of your father, Abraham; he [Abraham] was the one who named you ‘the Muslims’ before’ (22: 78); and many more. These verses show that the point of reference of Islam in general is the Prophet Abraham.



Makkah in verse (2: 143), the various interpretations of these verses in the different *Tafsir* sources miss the central point. Thus, the question of why the *Qiblah* was changed from Jerusalem to Makkah should be reversed: Why was the *Qiblah* towards al-Aqsa Mosque in Bayt al-Maqdis in the first place?<sup>47</sup> and why was the Prophet Muhammad ordered to pray towards al-Aqsa Mosque for more than 14 years? The only possible reason for this was to make al-Aqsa Mosque a point of reference for the Muslims and to establish a spiritual connection between Muslims and Bayt al-Maqdis that is manifested physically and practiced through prayer. This would convey the importance of the region and its crucial position in Islam.

The verses in the Qur'an that refer to the Prophet Abraham can be divided into two categories: the verses that were revealed before the migration to Madinah and the verses that were revealed after the migration to Madinah. The pre-migration verses usually mention the story of Abraham's early years in his home country (i.e. Iraq) until almost the end of his life. They discuss the nature of Islam as a continuation of Abraham's religion, but they do not argue against Jewish and Christian claims to Abraham. This could be due to the nature of the Makkian society and its relationship with Abraham; there was no need to argue about building the Ka'bah by Abraham or the right to claim him as a Jewish, Christian, or Muslim.

The post migration verses discuss Abraham's connection with the Muslims and their right to claim him. They argue against the Jewish and Christian claims to Abraham. During this period, the Qur'an deals with Abraham's relationship with Makkah and its surrounding region, especially the rebuilding of the Ka'bah. This may reflect relationships with the Jewish and Christian communities, which were established after the migration. This may also clarify the change of the *Qiblah* in Madinah; it was simply a return to Abraham as the point of reference in this religion. It was also to strengthen the relationship between the Muslims and the Prophet Abraham, who was linked historically with the Ka'bah in the Arab mind and who was a central point of discussion on the claims of the three monotheistic religions. Therefore, it is not strange to return to the *Qiblah* of the Prophet Abraham as a manifestation of the strong and original relationship between the Muslims and Abraham.

One reason why the Qur'an might discuss the Prophet Abraham, in the context of Madinah, is that a new religious argument and debate emerged through integration with the Jewish community after the migration. The Makkans' considered themselves as the actual descendants of the Prophet Abraham, and likely took their ancestry from Abraham for granted. Thus, the Prophet Muhammad likely took his relationship with the Prophet Abraham for granted, since he came to Makkah with a message that is linked to the true religion of Abraham, according to Muslims, and to which the Arabs in Makkah claimed to follow.

According to the Makkans' claim about the relationship with the Prophet Abraham, the Prophet Muhammad should have prayed towards the Ka'bah, not al-Aqsa Mosque, from the beginning of his Prophethood, since his community glorified the Ka'bah. After migrating to a Jewish community and sharing one of the most important aspects of his religion, namely the *Qiblah*, why would he turn it back towards Makkah? Therefore, the argument of pleasing the Makkans or the Jews is invalid. If the Prophet Muhammad had aimed to please the Makkans or the Jews, then he would have prayed towards the Ka'bah in Makkah and towards al-Aqsa Mosque in Madinah. Yet this was not the case.

Several reasons explain the long-term designation of al-Aqsa Mosque as a *Qiblah* for Muslims. Al-Aqsa Mosque in Bayt al-Maqdis was designated as a *Qiblah* to establish a relationship with the Muslims. The call of the Prophet Muhammad to Islam started in Makkah, where the Ka'bah was well known as the most sacred place on earth. Muslims prayed towards al-Aqsa Mosque on a daily basis for a long time to establish a sacred connection between them and this holy mosque, in addition to the holy city where it is located, namely Bayt al-Maqdis. This sacred connection would become one of the most important motivations for them to gain access to Bayt al-Maqdis.

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<sup>47</sup> Sayyid Qutb is the only scholar who tries to answer the reverse question (i.e. the reason why the *Qiblah* was directed to al-Aqsa). See Sayyid Qutb, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, Vol. 1 (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1996), p. 132.

Yet, his argument depends on the Ka'bah as the *Qiblah* before the migration to Madinah, then towards Jerusalem, and finally 'returned' back towards Makkah after the migration to Madinah. He argues that the change of the first *Qiblah* (i.e. the Ka'bah) to al-Aqsa Mosque was to test the believers who considered the Ka'bah a national symbol. This claim is not accurate, since evidences prove that the Prophet Muhammad prayed towards *Bayt al-Maqdis* when he was in Makkah before the migration.

## Turning the Prophet's Face towards the Sky

The Qur'an clearly states that the Prophet turned his face towards the sky (2: 144) and thus the *Qiblah* was changed from al-Aqsa Mosque to the Ka'bah in Makkah. The Qur'an mentions the Ka'bah as a *Qiblah* that the Prophet 'might be pleased with' (2: 144). Could this mean that the Prophet Muhammad disliked praying towards al-Aqsa Mosque? There is some consensus among the exegetes that the Prophet turning his face towards the sky means that he 'liked' the change of the *Qiblah* towards the Ka'bah. The term *Tardaha* (accept it) (2: 144) mentioned in this verse refers to the Ka'bah. Al-Tabari gathers different narrations to support this opinion.<sup>48</sup>

Al-Tabari<sup>49</sup>, al-Razi<sup>50</sup>, and others offer opinions on why the Prophet wished the *Qiblah* to be changed. One opinion is that the Prophet 'disliked' praying towards al-Aqsa Mosque, because the Jews of Madinah claimed that the Prophet was praying towards their *Qiblah* (i.e. Jerusalem) as he would not have known the direction unless the Jews had taught him. Al-Tabarsi (d. 548 AH / 1154 CE) argues that it is unlikely that the Prophet would have hated Bayt al-Maqdis.<sup>51</sup> He argues that the term *Tardaha* could mean that the Prophet liked Makkah only in a human, non-divine way. Al-Razi agrees with al-Tabarsi on this account.<sup>52</sup>

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.<sup>53</sup>

Al-Zamakhshari argues that the meaning of this verse (i.e. 2: 144) is that the Prophet was 'expecting' the change of the *Qiblah*, without specifying a reason, and this is why he turned his face towards the sky.<sup>54</sup> Al-Alusi agrees and adds that the reason for expecting the change of the *Qiblah* was because the Prophet liked to pray towards the Ka'bah for several reasons, including that it was the *Qiblah* of Abraham, and that the Jews took this issue as a reason to doubt Islam.<sup>55</sup>

Some might claim that the Prophet 'disliked' praying towards al-Aqsa Mosque because he used to pray towards it in Makkah from behind the Ka'bah. In other words, he did not feel that he was praying towards al-Aqsa, but towards the Ka'bah. However, the Prophet prayed towards al-Aqsa Mosque when he was beyond the range of the Ka'bah and even when he was in Makkah, such as when the Prophet, his family, and the Muslims spent three years in *Shi'b Abi Talib* (the valley of Abu Talib) during the boycott by the people of Makkah.<sup>56</sup> The valley of Abu Talib is east of the Ka'bah<sup>57</sup>, so it would be impossible to pray towards al-Aqsa and the Ka'bah simultaneously from there. Alrabi lists additional locations, such as al-Ta'if and al-Hijr, in which the Prophet

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<sup>48</sup> Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, Vol. 2, pp. 22-23.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> See Al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-Kabir*, Vol. 2, pp. 100-101.

<sup>51</sup> Al-Tabarsi, *Majma' al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Vol. 1 (Qum: Manshurat Ayat Allah al-'Uzma al-Mar'ashi al-Najafi, 1983), p. 227

<sup>52</sup> Al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-Kabir*, Vol. 2, p. 100.

<sup>53</sup> Al-Razi mentions a narration, quoted from Ibn 'Abbas, in which the Prophet Muhammad says to the Angel Gabriel: 'O Gabriel, I wish God would order me to pray to another *Qiblah*, rather than the *Qiblah* of the Jews, since I dislike it'. Al-Samarqandi (d. 373 AH / 983 CE) narrates a similar narration, in which the Prophet says to the Angel Gabriel: 'I wish God would order me to pray to another *Qiblah*, rather than the *Qiblah* of the Jews'. He does not mention the addition of al-Razi, who claims that the Prophet 'disliked' Jerusalem. The two narrations lack chains of narrators; therefore, they cannot be accepted as *ahadith*. However, as historical narrations, al-Samarqandi is much earlier than al-Razi. Moreover, his narration does not contradict many of the principles of the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, al-Samarqandi's narration can be considered stronger than al-Razi's.

See Al-Samarqandi, *Tafsir al-Samarqandi al-Musamma Bahr al-'Ulum*, ed. Mahmud Matarji, Vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1997), p. 127. And see Al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-Kabir*, Vol. 2, pp. 100

<sup>54</sup> Al-Zamakhshari, *Tafsir al-Kashshaf*, Vol. 1, p. 201

<sup>55</sup> Al-Alusi, *Ruh al-Ma'ani fi Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim wa al-Sab' al-Mathani*, ed. 'Ali 'Abd al-Bari al-Badawi, Vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1994), p. 407.

<sup>56</sup> See Ibn Hisham, *al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah*, Vol. 1, p. 238.

<sup>57</sup> See Shawqi Abu Khalil, *Atlas al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 2003), p. 43.

prayed during the Makkan period and in which it would be impossible to pray towards both the Ka‘bah and al-Aqsa simultaneously.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, the Prophet spent time in Mina, ‘Arafah, and Muzdalifah during the annual pilgrimage of the polytheists to invite them to Islam. These locations are southeast of Makkah, and it is impossible to pray towards al-Aqsa and the Ka‘bah simultaneously from any of these areas. Furthermore, no accounts or narrations mention that the Prophet prayed towards the Ka‘bah from these locations; thus, it is most likely that the Prophet prayed only towards al-Aqsa Mosque and that he was unable to put the Ka‘bah in front of him.

If the Ka‘bah was the *Qiblah* of Abraham and if praying towards al-Aqsa Mosque was only for the previously mentioned reasons, then it can be argued that the Prophet faced the sky most likely because the Ka‘bah was supposed to be his *Qiblah* from the beginning. The Qur’an affirms that it may also have been a test: ‘Yet We have not made the *Qiblah* that you were [facing] but to know who follows the Messenger and who turns over’ (2: 143). The Prophet could have wondered then if he should ‘return’ to the point of reference (i.e. the *Qiblah* of Abraham), after this new stage had begun. In addition, the different accounts that mention the claims of the Jews of Madinah show that the Prophet might have felt that the reason for praying towards al-Aqsa Mosque was fulfilled, and thus the benefit for Muslims would be to ‘return’ to the *Qiblah* of Abraham after many years of establishing the status of Bayt al-Maqdis in their hearts.

The turning of the Prophet’s face towards the sky was most likely a sign of expectation, as al-Zamakhshari and al-Alusi elaborated earlier. This does not contradict the emotional element (i.e. the Prophet’s wish to pray towards Makkah, his hometown), nor does it neglect the inner feelings of the Prophet Muhammad, who was negatively affected by the Jewish claims. His unique relationship with Abraham must also be considered. Together, these events led the Prophet to expect the change of the *Qiblah* back to the *Qiblah* of Abraham. Perhaps this is why the Qur’an mentions *Tarqāhā*, which in Arabic means more than just acceptance; it implies full satisfaction.

## Conclusion

Praying towards al-Aqsa Mosque may be considered a significant link between the Muslims and Bayt al-Maqdis that helped secure the status of that region in their hearts. Because of the nature of Islam and its reference to the religion of Abraham, the act of praying towards al-Aqsa Mosque was neither ordinary nor expected. Thus, the question is not why the *Qiblah* was changed from Bayt al-Maqdis to Makkah, but why it was towards Bayt al-Maqdis in the first place. The answer requires a thorough study of the religious and historical roots of *Qiblah* in Islam and the *Qiblah*’s unique relation to the Prophet Abraham in particular.

The majority of Muslim classical sources specify the duration of praying towards al-Aqsa Mosque as only months and, for some sources, only in Madinah. This claim neglects the significance of prayer during the Makkan period. Many narrations and *ahadith* mention important incidents in the Makkan period that related to prayer and occurred in a very early period in Islam. The full period of praying towards al-Aqsa Mosque included 13 years in Makkah and 16 additional months in Madinah, which means that the Muslims prayed towards this mosque more than they prayed towards the Ka‘bah in the Prophet’s lifetime. The significance of Bayt al-Maqdis in Muslims’ hearts reflects this history and indeed would have been one of the first links of Muslims to Bayt al-Maqdis and its holy mosque. The historical link between prayer and the Night Journey also confirmed the significance of Bayt al-Maqdis in the Muslim mind. Bayt al-Maqdis was not only the first place on earth to receive the obligation of the five prayers in Islam, but it had also the first *Qiblah* of those prayers, namely al-Aqsa Mosque. Thus, the five prayers and being the original *Qiblah* were a continuous and daily reminder of Bayt al-Maqdis and its importance.

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<sup>58</sup> See Alrabi, *The First Qiblah*, pp. 15-18.

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