

2. A Blessed and Holy Land

THE “BLESSED LAND” under the Islamic ethos means land associated with *barakah* – the land over which Allah ﷻ has endowed spiritual and physical blessings from which all of humanity can derive benefit. The *barakah* also extends to the people who reside within this land, on condition that they conform to the commands of Allah ﷻ, i.e., practise Islam.

Al-Aqṣā Sanctuary has been honoured and glorified by Allah ﷻ and showered with His divine blessings for the benefit, enlightenment and guidance of all mankind.

The Qur’ān states that the blessings of this land are for “*al-Ālamīn*” – which means for all the world’s creatures until eternity. It implies that the blessings are not restricted to any specific group of people or species, rather encompassing all living and non-living things.

The boundaries of this “blessed land” are not clear and there are differences of opinion about its exact extent. Some classical Islamic scholars of the Qur’ān and aḥādīth, including Ibn Kathīr, al-Qurtubī and Ibn al-Jawzī, consider the whole area of al-Shām (modern-day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine) as blessed. Other interpreters believe that the blessed land is contiguous from the Hijāz (Saudi Arabia) through al-Shām to Egypt. A further, and maybe a more logical opinion, is that within the area of the modern Middle East, there are pockets of “blessed land” like the compound of al-Aqṣā Sanctuary, the Prophet’s ﷺ Masjid in Madinah and the Holy Masjid in Makkah. However, in all the opinions on the extent of the “blessed land”,

al-Aqṣā Sanctuary is included.

The blessings of al-Aqṣā Sanctuary in particular and al-Shām area in general is expounded in the Holy Qur’ān and the traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ:

THE QUR’ĀN

1. *Sūrah al-Isrā’* makes a direct reference to al-Aqṣā Sanctuary with no ambiguity and Allah ﷻ informs us that the Masjid al-Aqṣā and its surrounding area has been “blessed” by Him for mankind to reap spiritual and material benefit.

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلًا مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ
الْأَقْصَا الَّذِي بَارَكْنَا حَوْلَهُ لِنُرِيَهُ مِنْ آيَاتِنَا إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ ﴿١٧﴾

Holy is He Who carried His servant by night from the Holy Masjid (in Makkah) to the farther Masjid (in Jerusalem) whose surroundings We have blessed that We might show him some of Our Signs. Indeed He alone is All-Hearing, All-Seeing.

[Sūrah al-Isrā’ 17: 1]

2. After Mūsā ﷺ took the Banū Isrā’īl away from the tyranny of the Pharaoh in Egypt to the outskirts of Palestine, he directed them to enter the “Holy Land”. The Holy Land described in the Holy Qur’ān is the land of Palestine in general and the city of al-Quds more specifically.

يَقَوْمَ ادْخُلُوا الْأَرْضَ الْمُقَدَّسَةَ الَّتِي كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ وَلَا تَرْتَدُّوا عَلَى
أَدْبَارِكُمْ فَتَنْقَلِبُوا خَاسِرِينَ ﴿٢١﴾

My people! Enter the holy land which Allah has ordained for you; and do not turn back for then you will turn about losers.

[Sūrah al-Mā'idah 5: 21]

It is significant to note that the Qur’ān refers to the land of Palestine as “holy” and not as a “promised” land. A clear indication of the all-encompassing nature of Almighty Allah ﷻ – to bestow favours on the whole of mankind rather than a specific group. It cannot be befitting for the Creator of mankind to favour one group over any other by the simple virtue of their birth, rather those that are nearest to Him are those who are most pious – that is, those who abide by His commands.

3. In *Sūrah al-A’rāf*, Allah ﷻ further informs us that He poured His Blessings on to the land both East and West of al-Quds (Jerusalem). This was the abode of Banū Isrā’īl at that time, and was most probably in the era of Prophet Sulaymān عليه السلام.

وَأَوْرَثْنَا الْقَوْمَ الَّذِينَ كَانُوا يُسْتَضْعَفُونَ مَشْرِقَ الْأَرْضِ وَمَغْرِبَهَا الَّتِي بَارَكْنَا فِيهَا ۖ وَتَمَّتْ كَلِمَتُ رَبِّكَ الْحُسْنَىٰ عَلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ بِمَا صَبَرُوا ۖ وَدَمَرْنَا مَا كَانَ يَصْنَعُ فِرْعَوْنُ وَقَوْمُهُ وَمَا كَانُوا يَعْرِشُونَ ﴿١٣٧﴾

And We made those who had been persecuted inherit the eastern and western lands which We had blessed. Thus your Lord’s gracious promise was fulfilled to the Children of Israel, for they had endured with patience; and We destroyed all that Pharaoh and his people had wrought, and all that they had built.

[Sūrah al-A’rāf 7: 137]

The land of Palestine was under the rule of the Egyptian Pharaoh and hence the reference to the levelling to the ground of the great buildings which the Pharaoh erected.

4. Prophet Ibrāhīm عليه السلام and his immediate family were delivered by his clansmen from the city of his birth, Ur, in a country called Sumer (modern-day Iraq), for preaching the *tawhīd* of Allah ﷻ. The Qur’ān informs us that Ibrāhīm عليه السلام was delivered by Allah ﷻ to the land which Allah ﷻ has “blessed for the nations”. This land, which Allah ﷻ eloquently refers to as “blessed for the nations”, is the glorious land of Palestine. Prophet

Ibrāhīm عليه السلام is believed to have re-constructed the Masjid al-Aqṣā in al-Quds (Jerusalem) with his son Iṣḥāq (Isaac) عليه السلام.

وَنَجَّيْنَاهُ وَلُوطًا إِلَى الْأَرْضِ الَّتِي بَارَكْنَا فِيهَا لِلْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٧١﴾

And We saved him and Lot and brought him to the land upon which We had bestowed Our blessings for all the people of the world.

[Sūrah al-Anbiyā' 21: 71]

5. The kingdom of Prophet Sulaymān عليه السلام was in present-day Palestine, with al-Quds (Jerusalem) as its capital. The Qur'ān refers to the whole area where Prophet Sulaymān عليه السلام travelled as “the land which We had blessed”.

وَلِسُلَيْمَانَ الرِّيحَ عَاصِفَةً تَجْرِي بِأَمْرِهِ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ الَّتِي بَارَكْنَا فِيهَا
وَكُنَّا بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

And We subdued the strongly raging wind to Solomon which blew at his bidding towards the land We blessed. We know everything.

[Sūrah al-Anbiyā' 21: 81]

6. In Sūrah Saba' there is a reference to the people of Saba' in Yemen who frequented the Frankincense highway via Arabia to Syria in the north and Egypt to the west. The “cities on which We had poured Our blessings” refers to the cities of al-Shām including al-Quds (Jerusalem).

وَجَعَلْنَا بَيْنَهُمْ وَبَيْنَ الْقُرَى الَّتِي بَارَكْنَا فِيهَا قُرَى ظَهْرَةً وَقَدَّرْنَا فِيهَا
السَّيْرَ سِيرُوا فِيهَا لِيَالِي وَأَيَّامًا آمِنِينَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

We placed other prominent towns between them, the towns that We had blessed and had set well-measured stages between them. Move back and forth between them, night and day, in perfect security.

[Sūrah Saba' 34: 18]

The verses of the Holy Qur'ān indicate that unlike any other place on earth, Allah ﷻ has blessed the land of Palestine. Allah ﷻ has blessed and honoured this area prior to any event or incident through His Great Mercy and through the subsequent events that took place there are further reasons by which the followers built their love and affection for this area. No doubt the presence of Prophets and the historical link to them builds a bond, but it is Allah ﷻ through His Great Mercy and Wisdom, who has chosen the area around al-Aqṣā Sanctuary to be blessed.

AḤĀDĪTH

The Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ is reported to have said, "Allah ﷻ has blessed what lies between al-Arish (in Egypt) and the Euphrates and has made Palestine particularly holy".

[Kanz al-'Ummāl]

Zayd ibn Thābit ؓ reports that the Prophet ﷺ said, "How blessed is al-Shām! The Companions around asked: "Why is that?" The Messenger ﷺ replied, "I see the angels of Allah ﷻ spread their wings over al-Shām". Ibn 'Abbās ؓ added, "and the Prophets lived in it. There is not a single inch in al-Quds (Jerusalem) where a Prophet has not prayed or an angel not stood".

[Tirmidhī and Imām Aḥmad]

'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar ؓ reports that the Prophet ﷺ said, "O Allah! Bestow Your blessings on our Shām! O Allah! Bestow Your blessings on our Yemen". The people said, "And also on our Najd".² He said, "O Allah! Bestow Your blessings on our Shām! O Allah! Bestow Your blessings on our Yemen". The people said, "O Allah's Apostle! And also on our Najd". I think the third time the Prophet ﷺ said, "There (in Najd) is the place of earthquakes and afflictions and from there comes out the side of the head of Satan".

[Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī]

The Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ prayed for the blessing of the people of al-Shām. Anas ibn Mālik ؓ reports that the Prophet ﷺ looked towards Iraq, al-Shām and Yemen then said, “O Allah! Bring their hearts over to Your obedience and relieve them of their burdens”.

[Tirmidhī]

Once the Prophet ﷺ advised ‘Abdullāh ibn Hawālah ؓ to join the army in al-Shām, over any other. However, the Prophet ﷺ noticing Ibn Hawālah’s indifference said, “Do you know what Allah says about al-Shām? Allah said, “Al-Shām you are the quintessence of My lands (*ṣafwatī min bilādī*) and I shall inhabit you with the chosen ones among My servants”.

[Al-Ṭabarānī]

Shurayh ibn ‘Ubayd said that the people of al-Shām were mentioned in front of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib ؓ while he was in Iraq and someone said to him, “Curse them, Commander of the Believers”. He replied, “No. I heard the Prophet ﷺ say, “The Substitutes (*al-Abdāl*) are in al-Shām – forty men – every time one of them dies, Allah replaces another in his place. By means of them Allah brings down the rain, gives us victory over our enemies and averts punishment from the people of al-Shām”.

[Imām Aḥmad]