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Discussion Guides

AN INTRODUCTION TO JERUSALEM: THE MOVIE AND THE CITY

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.—Psalm 125:2

For centuries, religious pilgrims have journeyed up to Jerusalem. Even today, so many people long to walk the hallowed cobblestones of the Old City. This vibrant, ancient city continues to captivate us 3,000 years after King David declared it his capital. Now an epic new film for IMAX® and Giant Screen theatres brings us inside JERUSALEM, to holy sites cherished by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It is a gorgeous celebration of sites revered by billions of people worldwide.

For those who've always longed to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land but haven't been able to make the journey, JERUSALEM offers a rousing opportunity to explore the highlights of the region on 70 ft high screens (25 meters). At last, filmgoers can take a cinematic trip to some of the most iconic sites in the Bible: the City of David, the site of the Temples, the Mount of Olives, the Dead Sea, the Judean Desert, the River Jordan and the Sea of Galilee. This film takes audiences underground Jerusalem and inside ancient rituals as they are still practiced today during Passover, Easter and Ramadan. We see where Jesus entered Jerusalem to palm branches and "hosannas" and follow his painful steps to Golgotha. We retrace the Prophet Muhammad's miraculous night journey that made Jerusalem equally precious to Muslims.

From the executive producer of beloved films like "Chariots of Fire," "Driving Miss Daisy," and "Dances with Wolves," JERUSALEM rises above contemporary politics. It puts a human face on the Old City and gives audiences unprecedented access, swooping above the holy sites and dropping us into annual observations of Passover, Easter, and Ramadan. We follow those who cherish the city and appreciate its remarkable and complex history. In Hebrew, it is *Yerushalayim*. In Arabic, it is *al-Quds*: "the Holy City." This giant screen experience is an opportunity to be enlightened and entertained by a city brimming with abundant life: beguiling Jerusalem.

These study guides are intended to serve as a compliment to the movie. They were created in consultation with an array of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim scholars and are offered freely to filmgoers and religious audiences. The first guide delves into the Jewish connection to *Yerushalayim* and is intended for rabbis and Jewish community leaders. The second section outlines the Christian attachment to Jerusalem and can enhance pastors' sermons or Bible studies. The third section adopts an interfaith perspective, helping Jews and Christians understand the Islamic connections to *al-Quds*. While adherents of each Abrahamic faith may be drawn to a particular section of this study, the aim of the film (and this guide) is to broaden and deepen our appreciation of each other. It offers additional background and spiritual reflection for those who've experienced *JERUSALEM: The Movie*.

JERUSALEM

Islam Discussion Guides

JERUSALEM: THE HOLY CITY

The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said that the angels of God spread their wings across the lands surrounding Jerusalem.

Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, places special emphasis on Abraham. Muslims consider him an ancestor of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) through his son Ishmael. They also honor Abraham as a spiritual forefather whose travels through ancient Iraq, Syria, Canaan, Egypt and Arabia as God's "faithful friend" set an example of sacrifice, perseverance, and trust for all who follow in his footsteps. In fact, the Quran stresses that the basic message preached by Muhammad is the same as that emphasized by many other prophets who preceded him, including Abraham's progeny through Isaac, such as Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, and Jesus.

He hath ordained for you that religion which He commended unto Noah, and that which We inspire in thee (Muhammad), and that which We commended unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus, saying: Establish the religion, and be not divided therein. Dreadful for the idolaters is that unto which thou callest them. God chooseth for Himself whom He will, and guideth unto Himself him who turneth (toward Him). – Quran 42:13

Today, Muslims commemorate Abraham and his family's trials through reenactments taught by Muhammad that form the annual pilgrimage to Mecca known as the Hajj. According to Islamic tradition, in ancient times Abraham and Ishmael built a rudimentary house of worship dedicated to the One God, called the Ka'bah, in a young settlement in the valley of Mecca. Over time, this gathering place attracted polytheistic Arab tribes who installed their own deities in the sanctuary. Ishmael's descendants became absorbed within the Arabian society. According to a *hadith* (a transmitted saying of Muhammad later recorded by scholars in written compilations), some decades later Abraham established a similar simple place of worship in Canaan, at a site that became part of the future city of Jerusalem. This sacred "house of God" is called in Islamic tradition the *bayt al-Maqdis* (holy house). The Arabic name for Jerusalem, Al-Quds, reflects this consecrated quality.

Generations later, the Israelites, descendants of Isaac, were led by Moses from Egypt and came to Jerusalem, where they established a recognizable temple and important ritual practices as the center of Jewish religious life for many centuries. The Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., six centuries before the region became part of a new Muslim empire following Muhammad's death.

While Muhammad was alive, the Christian Byzantine empire and Sasanid Persian empire engaged in several critical battles in Syria, Palestine and Anatolia stemming

from decades of conflict between these major powers. Meanwhile in Arabia, Muhammad steadily attracted disparate tribes into the fold of Islam, eventually defeating the Meccan elites who opposed him and extending control over much of the Arabian peninsula. The fledging Muslim state was poised for expansion, and Muslim forces in northern Arabia skirmished with both Byzantine and Sasanid forces. Following the Prophet's death, the Muslim armies, united in faith and operating under the able leadership of several commanders, handily defeated their opponents and took control of areas of Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Egypt by the mid-7th century.

Muhammad's political successors, called caliphs, were based in the city of Medina in Arabia. The available Muslim historical sources from the following centuries record that when Muslim forces arrived outside Jerusalem in late 636 C.E., the Christian Patriarch Sophronius agreed to surrender control to the caliph only. In April 637, the third caliph Umar traveled to Jerusalem to accept the keys of the city from the Patriarch. Sophronius invited Umar to perform the afternoon prayer in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but the caliph declined to prevent his followers from subsequently misappropriating the church. This is an interesting incident, because it suggests that at the time, under other circumstances, the followers of Islam might have been encouraged to share sacred space with fellow monotheists. In fact, in Damascus and Cordoba, early Muslim worship did take place by agreement in space provided within local Christian churches. As the Muslim population grew in these and other cities through conversion and immigration, these spaces became full-time mosques, and Christians were afforded new sites for their congregations.

But what of the site of the first and second Temple in Jerusalem? The historical texts state that Caliph Umar was led to the location by Sophronius, and found it in a poor state, full of Roman-era debris and trash. He ordered the area to be cleansed, identifying the spot as a holy place of the prophets of old. The site also became strongly associated by Muslims with Muhammad's miraculous night journey (Isra) and ascension (Miraj) to God's presence in the heavens one night in 621 C.E.

Glory to (God) Who did take His servant for a Journey by night from the sacred mosque to the farthest mosque, whose precincts We did bless, in order that We might show him some of Our Signs: for He is the One Who heareth and seeth (all things). – Quran 17:1

Scholarly Muslim commentators on the Quran have unanimously identified the "sacred mosque" as the Ka'bah in Mecca, and the "farthest mosque" (al-masjid al-aqsa) as the site of Abraham's blessed precincts in Jerusalem, where the Jews had later built temples for the worship of the Lord: one mosque in Arabia, and one beyond its limits, together binding prophetic histories together. In fact, while Muhammad and his followers were in Mecca prior to their emigration to Medina, they performed their prayers facing Jerusalem, and only years later was the direction changed to Mecca in anticipation of its restoration as a purified House of God.

In light of these connections, early Muslims saw themselves as taking over the responsibility of preserving and propagating God’s teachings to all mankind, while safeguarding their monotheist predecessors’ rights to observe their practices. Under Muslim rule, Jews had greater social interaction and opportunities, and Jews in diaspora were able to return to Jerusalem, while many Jewish communities began thriving elsewhere in Near Eastern and Mediterranean Muslim societies. Christians also were able to practice their faith, provided they paid taxes customary for subject groups and remained politically loyal.

Caliph Umar had acted to restore the sanctity of the sacred site in Jerusalem. For early Muslims, it was logical to begin using the location as a place of worship. Seeing their faith as a renewed and purified form of monotheism, on the open site they built a mosque to embody the Quranic appellation of “Al-Aqsa.” Subsequently, in the 690s caliph Abd al-Malik, the fifth ruler from the Umayyad family that then ruled the Muslim empire, expanded the mosque and built an iconic structure nearby, around the large rock found atop the platform where the Jewish temples once stood. This eye-catching octagonal structure, called the Dome of the Rock, protects the outcrop where it is believed Abraham laid his son for sacrifice, and from where it is believed Muhammad had ascended. For Abd al-Malik, such a major construction project featuring the finest mosaics, ornamentation, calligraphy of Quranic verses, and a brilliant golden cupula, was a means to signal the glory of Islam and the Umayyads’ legitimacy as imperial heirs in the region. Over the centuries, these structures, especially the prominent golden dome, have uniquely symbolized the image of Jerusalem as control of the city has passed through the hands of Muslims, Christians, and Jews by turns to the present day.

Another hadith states: *“For three mosques a special journey may be undertaken: The Sacred Masjid (Ka’bah), my Masjid (in Medina) and Masjid of Jerusalem (Al-Aqsa).”* Thus, very early on, Jerusalem has figured as part of Islamic sacred history, due to the important events that have taken place there in connection with numerous messengers of God. After all, Moses’ followers settled there, David and Solomon reigned there, and Jesus preached there. Islamic tradition states that while in Jerusalem, Muhammad was escorted by Angel Gabriel to the divine realm, and along the way Muhammad was lovingly greeted by Jesus, Moses and other prophets, whom he later led in prayer at the sacred spot upon his return from the heavens. Jerusalem, then, more than any other city, is a nexus connecting the stories of the prophets, a gateway connecting the earthly realm to Heaven.

In the Muslim imagination, Jews and Christians are “People of the Book,” and the three faith communities are entwined not only in a shared history, but in a shared destiny. Islamic tradition absorbed or reinforced much of the lore from the predecessor communities, particularly with respect to eschatology (beliefs about the end times). Calamitous events, the appearance on earth of a messianic figure in a final battle to restore justice and vanquish evil, the resurrection of the dead, and the location for the

final Judgment, are all associated with one place – Jerusalem. Historically, members of these faiths communities have opted to view claims about the city and God’s favor towards them in exclusivist ways. In today’s interconnected and globalized context, it remains to be seen how these communities will find ways to cultivate greater mutual respect and appreciation, negotiate political aspirations that often obscure shared interests, and create a better world for all humanity. It is hoped that Jerusalem, as a literal common ground, can increasingly serve as a unifying city of peace.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS:

1. How can Abraham function as a unifying rather than dividing icon for Jews, Christians and Muslims?
2. How can a sense of interconnected history help Jews, Christians and Muslims explore common religious ideas and ethical teachings?
3. The pilgrimage to Mecca involves casting off the trappings of routine worldly affairs. How can this type of experience help you gain perspective regarding the meaning and purpose of life?