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Article

The Holy Land in the Holy Quran: A Combined Content Analysis of the Holy Quranic Verses and Theological Perspectives

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Abstract

This research paper presents a comprehensive theological and content-based analysis of the concept of the Holy Land as represented in the Holy Qur'an, with a particular focus on the verses associated with the birth, migration, and prophetic missions of Moses and other prophets. Contrary to many classical and modern interpretations that link the Holy Land and Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa directly to Prophet Muhammad, this study argues that no verse in the Qur'an explicitly mentions Muhammad in this context. Through a rigorous content analysis of the Qur'anic text, supported by linguistic and historical exegesis, the study reconsiders Surah Al-Isrā (17:1) not as a reference to Muhammad's Night Journey, but rather as a continuation of the narrative of Moses and the Children of Israel. The findings suggest that the Holy Land in the Qur'an primarily refers to the geographical and spiritual region associated with the prophetic traditions of Abraham, Lot, and Moses, rather than a direct association with Mecca or Medina. This reinterpretation contributes to a renewed understanding of the Qur'anic geography of revelation and calls for a re-examination of inherited exegetical assumptions.

Keywords: Holy Land; Qur'an; Moses; prophetic migration; Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa; Exegesis; theological geography; divine promise

1. Introduction

Out of 6,236 verses in the Holy Quran, 42 were directly or indirectly related to the Holy Land, with the following term frequency: "Blessed land" (الأَرْضُ الْمُبَارَكَةُ), seven times, "Bayt al-Maqdis" (implicitly): 4 times, "Holy land" (الأَرْضُ الْمُقَدَّسَةَ), one time, "Land of the Prophets": inferred from 12 verses and "Masjid al-Aqsa" (المسجد الأقصى), one time. The concept of sacred geography occupies a central place in the worldview of the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Among the various sites considered sacred, the Holy Land stands out as a pivotal axis around which much of the prophetic history, divine revelation, and eschatological expectation revolves. Known broadly as the region encompassing modern-day Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and parts of Syria, the Holy Land features prominently in religious scripture and theological discourse. For Islam, the Holy Land is not only a geographic reality but also a metaphysical and symbolic space, representing divine favour, prophetic legacy, and spiritual elevation. The Quran, the primary source of Islamic theology and practice, contains numerous references to this region, both explicit and implicit, contextualising it within the framework of divine narratives and moral lessons.

Despite the significance of the Holy Land in Islamic theology, much of the existing scholarship tends to focus on its role within Jewish and Christian traditions. The Islamic perspective, although rich and nuanced, is often examined in isolated terms—either as part of tafsir (Quranic exegesis) literature or within the confines of political theology. This fragmentation limits a holistic

understanding of the theological dimensions embedded within the Quranic references to the Holy Land. As Mahmoud Ayoub (1984) suggests, the Quran frequently employs geographical and historical references not merely to narrate events, but to convey ethical, theological, and eschatological truths. Thus, a comprehensive study that synthesises content analysis of the relevant Quranic verses with theological interpretations can fill a vital gap in the literature.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the Holy Land is depicted in the Quran and how Islamic theological traditions interpret and expand upon these depictions. The Quranic discourse on the Holy Land encompasses various themes, including divine blessing, prophetic mission, moral obligation, and eschatological significance. The concept of *barakah* (blessing), for example, is often associated with the land through verses like Surah Al-Isra (17:1), which mentions al-Masjid al-Aqsa, described as being located in “the surroundings We have blessed.” This verse, traditionally linked to Jerusalem, encapsulates the spiritual centrality of the land in Islamic consciousness (Nasr, 2002). Similarly, Surah Al-Ma'idah (5:21) features Moses exhorting the Children of Israel to enter “the holy land which Allah has assigned to you,” indicating both a historical promise and a moral trial (Esack, 2005).

Theologically, the Holy Land in Islam is understood not merely as a reward but as a trial. The Quran's narrative of the Israelites' refusal to enter the Holy Land despite a divine command (Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:22-26) underscores the moral responsibilities that accompany divine favour. This incident is not only a historical retelling but also serves as a cautionary tale for believers, urging them to uphold faith and obedience in the face of fear and adversity (Saeed, 2006). In this sense, the land becomes a spiritual metaphor, a symbol of opportunity and divine promise that must be earned through righteousness and steadfastness.

Modern Islamic thinkers have also engaged with the concept of the Holy Land about issues of justice, identity, and political sovereignty. Sayyid Qutb, for example, viewed the Israelites' rejection of the Holy Land as emblematic of a broader spiritual failure—an abandonment of divine trust due to cowardice and materialism (Qutb, 2003). Fazlur Rahman, on the other hand, interpreted such Quranic narratives through a more ethical-historical lens, emphasising moral responsibility and collective agency (Rahman, 1980). These interpretations underscore the dynamic and evolving understanding of the Holy Land within Islamic theological discourse.

Despite this richness, a need remains for a systematic analysis of Quranic verses related to the Holy Land that combines both textual scrutiny and theological insight. While *tafsir* literature offers depth and commentary, it is often constrained by the epistemological frameworks of its time. A modern content analysis enables the categorisation and thematic evaluation of these verses, providing fresh insights into their frequency, usage, and interconnections. Moreover, combining such an approach with theological perspectives enables a holistic understanding of the role the Holy Land plays in the Islamic worldview.

This study, therefore, employs a dual methodology—quantitative content analysis and qualitative theological review—to examine how the Holy Land is constructed in the Quran. The analysis will focus on identifying and categorising the verses that reference the land either directly or through associated themes, such as prophetic missions, divine blessings, and eschatological narratives. It will then integrate these findings with classical and contemporary theological interpretations to create a multidimensional portrait of the Holy Land in an Islamic context.

In sum, the Holy Land in the Quran is more than a piece of earth; it is a living symbol of divine-human interaction, a ground where history, theology, and ethics converge. Through this study, we aim to uncover the textual and theological dimensions of this sacred geography, providing a comprehensive understanding of its role and significance within the Islamic tradition.

2. Literature Review

The concept of the "Holy Land" (*al-ard al-muqaddasah*) occupies a distinctive theological and historical position within the Abrahamic religions, particularly in Judaism and Christianity. However, within Islamic tradition, the treatment of this concept in the Quran and classical exegesis

is uniquely layered, integrating historical narrative, moral lessons, eschatological significance, and sacred geography. This literature review synthesises both classical Islamic scholarship and contemporary academic studies that have addressed the Holy Land from various disciplinary perspectives, including Quranic exegesis, Islamic theology, geography of the Quran, and political theology.

2.1. *Classical Islamic Exegesis on the Holy Land*

Classical exegetical literature provides the foundational understanding of the Holy Land within Islamic thought. Early commentators such as al-Tabari (d. 923), al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144), and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) offer detailed interpretations of Quranic verses that mention the Holy Land directly or refer to events and figures associated with it. Al-Tabari's *Jami' al-bayan 'an ta'wil ay al-Qur'an* interprets Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:21, where Moses commands his people to enter the "Holy Land which Allah has ordained for you," as an explicit reference to the land of Canaan, occupied by various peoples but promised to the Israelites on condition of faith and obedience (al-Tabari, 1987). He emphasises the conditional nature of divine favour, rewarded to the obedient and revoked from the rebellious.

Al-Zamakhshari, known for his rhetorical emphasis and Mu'tazilite leanings, interprets the verse through a moral and linguistic lens, focusing on the term "muqaddasah" (sanctified). He explains that this sanctity is derived from divine command and purification, not merely geographical importance (al-Zamakhshari, 1984). Ibn Kathir further develops these themes in his *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*, where he connects the verse to the larger narrative of the Israelites' trials and tests in the desert. He draws parallels between their historical hesitation and the spiritual lessons intended for the Muslim community (Ibn Kathir, 2003).

Many classical commentators also discuss Surah Al-Isra' 17:1, which mentions the Prophet Muhammad's miraculous Night Journey (Isra) from al-Masjid al-Haram to al-Masjid al-Aqsa. This verse is central to Islamic sacred geography, as al-Masjid al-Aqsa is located in the region traditionally known as the Holy Land. Classical tafsir literature often identifies this location with Jerusalem, attributing to it spiritual, eschatological, and historical importance (Ibn Kathir, 2003; al-Qurtubi, 1967). The verse serves as a theological and symbolic linkage between the Abrahamic traditions, situating Islam within a continuum of divine revelation.

1.2. *Modern and Contemporary Islamic Scholarship*

In modern Islamic thought, the Holy Land has been explored through theological, ethical, and political lenses. Fazlur Rahman (1980) argues that Quranic references to historical peoples and lands, including the Israelites and the Holy Land, are meant not only as historical accounts but as moral and ethical parables for the Muslim community. He interprets verses like Surah Al-Ma'ida 5:21-26 as instructive narratives that highlight the consequences of disobedience and the responsibilities associated with divine favour. Rahman's work departs from a literalist reading and instead focuses on thematic coherence and moral universalism within the Quran.

Sayyid Qutb (2003), a leading figure in 20th-century Islamic revivalist thought, approaches the concept of the Holy Land through a highly moralised and ideological framework. In his *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an (In the Shade of the Quran)*, Qutb interprets the Israelites' failure to enter the Holy Land as emblematic of cowardice and a failure to uphold divine trust. He contrasts this with the ideal Muslim community, which must be prepared to struggle and sacrifice for the establishment of divine justice on earth. For Qutb, the Holy Land becomes not just a physical territory but a symbol of divine struggle and human responsibility.

Toshihiko Izutsu (2002), in his seminal work *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*, also sheds light on the Quranic worldview concerning places and ethical geography. He argues that the Quran uses space not only descriptively but prescriptively, embedding moral lessons within spatial references. The Holy Land, in this context, is a "value-charged" concept—its sanctity is not inherent

but derived from divine decree and human righteousness. Izutsu's linguistic and semantic approach provides an alternative methodology for analysing the significance of Quranic geography.

Furthermore, Nasr (2002) examines the metaphysical aspects of sacred geography in Islamic cosmology. He considers Jerusalem and the Holy Land as spiritual centres within a divine order that connects heaven and earth. Drawing on both Quranic verses and Sufi cosmology, Nasr explores how the land's holiness is linked to its role as a locus of divine revelation and prophetic missions. His view resonates with the traditional understanding but introduces a metaphysical layer that expands the significance beyond historical and political concerns.

1.3. Quranic Geography and Sacred Space

The study of Quranic geography as a field has undergone significant development in recent years. Scholars such as McAuliffe (2006) and Neuwirth (2010) have examined the Quran's use of geographic references as tools for narrative and theological emphasis. While much of this scholarship focuses on Mecca and Medina, increasing attention has been paid to other sacred locations, including those associated with the Israelites and earlier prophetic communities.

McAuliffe (2006) emphasises that the Quran constructs a sacred topography where moral actions and divine history are geographically situated. For instance, the Holy Land is not merely a historical location but also a theological space that frames the relationship between divine promise and human action. Similarly, Neuwirth (2010) views the Quran as a text deeply rooted in late antique religious discourse, wherein locations such as Jerusalem are employed not only for historical referencing but also for rhetorical and theological impact.

Studies on sacred space in Islam, such as those by Choueiri (2005), also provide relevant insights. He notes that sacredness in Islamic thought often arises through divine-human interaction—prophetic acts, divine blessings, and liturgical practices. Thus, the Holy Land gains its sacredness through its association with multiple prophets (e.g., Abraham, Moses, Jesus) and divine events (e.g., the Night Journey), as recognised within Quranic and Islamic tradition.

1.4. Political and Eschatological Implications

The Holy Land in Islamic thought has also been examined in the context of political theology and eschatology. This is especially relevant in the context of modern geopolitical conflicts involving Palestine and Israel, which have reignited theological debates about ownership, stewardship, and sanctity of the land. Khalidi (2006) and Said (1979) have addressed how modern Muslim identity and attachment to Jerusalem are shaped not only by religious beliefs but also by anti-colonial and nationalist movements.

From an eschatological perspective, traditions within Islamic eschatology, derived from both the Quran and Hadith, position Jerusalem and its surrounding areas at the centre of end-time events. Though the Quran itself offers limited direct references to the eschatological role of the Holy Land, classical and modern scholars have read relevant verses in conjunction with Hadith literature to affirm this view (Saeed, 2006; Esposito, 1998). This dimension further reinforces the multifaceted significance of the land in Islamic theological imagination.

1.5. Gaps in the Literature

While there is a wealth of classical tafsir and modern theological writing on specific verses relating to the Holy Land, few studies attempt a systematic, combined content analysis of all relevant Quranic references and their theological implications. Much of the literature is fragmented, focusing either on specific verses (e.g., 5:21 or 17:1) or addressing the broader sacredness of Jerusalem without connecting it to a Quran-wide analysis. Moreover, while exegesis is rich, it is often not accompanied by thematic synthesis across the Quranic corpus.

Additionally, most contemporary scholarship either leans heavily on historical-geopolitical concerns or adopts a narrow theological approach, without examining how the Quran systematically and symbolically constructs sacred space. This study addresses this gap by applying a content

analysis method that categorises relevant Quranic verses thematically while also incorporating theological commentary to derive a more integrated understanding.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis methodology to investigate the concept of the Holy Land in the Holy Quran, drawing on both classical and contemporary theological perspectives. Content analysis, a method well-suited for textual interpretation and thematic categorisation, enables the systematic exploration of religious texts while maintaining contextual sensitivity and theological depth (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012). The primary objective is to identify, analyse, and interpret Quranic verses that directly or indirectly reference the Holy Land (*al-ard al-muqaddasah*), as well as to synthesise associated exegetical and theological interpretations.

3.1. Data Collection

The primary data source is the Holy Quran, using the Arabic text alongside several authoritative English translations, including those by Yusuf Ali (2000), M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (2005), and Muhammad Asad (2003), to ensure both linguistic and semantic clarity. Key search terms included "*al-ard al-muqaddasah*" (the sanctified land), "*al-Masjid al-Aqsa*," "*Bayt al-Maqdis*," and references to prophetic missions involving the region (e.g., Moses, Abraham, Jesus). A total of 14 core verses were identified as directly or indirectly related to the concept of the Holy Land.

3.2. Analytical Framework

Following data collection, the selected verses were coded thematically using an inductive approach. Categories emerged around spiritual sanctity, historical context, moral implications, eschatological references, and interreligious significance. The analysis was guided by a hermeneutic approach, respecting the layered meanings of the Quranic text and integrating tafsir literature from classical scholars such as al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, and al-Qurtubi. Contemporary theological analyses from scholars such as Fazlur Rahman (1980), Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2002), and Sayyid Qutb (2003) were employed to contrast and supplement traditional interpretations.

3.3. Integration of Theological Perspectives

In addition to textual analysis, the study incorporates comparative theological perspectives drawn from Islamic philosophy, Sufi metaphysics, and political theology. These viewpoints help position the Quranic concept of the Holy Land within broader Islamic cosmological, moral, and eschatological frameworks. A thematic synthesis approach was used to collate theological commentary under the identified categories, ensuring coherence between scriptural content and interpretative traditions (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.4. Limitations

The study acknowledges certain limitations. Content analysis of sacred texts can be influenced by the interpreter's linguistic, doctrinal, and cultural background. While every effort has been made to engage with diverse exegetical traditions, this study is primarily rooted in Sunni interpretations, with limited engagement from Shi'a or other Islamic perspectives. Future studies may expand this scope to achieve broader inclusivity.

4. Thematic Content Analysis of Quranic Verses on the Holy Land

The Holy Quran contains multiple references to land that has been made sacred by divine decree, prophetic activity, or moral purpose. The concept of the Holy Land (*al-ard al-muqaddasah*) emerges as a powerful theological symbol that transcends geography, serving both as a real and spiritual place. Thematic analysis of the relevant verses reveals five dominant categories: spiritual sanctity, historical and prophetic context, divine reward and punishment, interfaith significance, and eschatological dimension.

4.1. Spiritual Sanctity and Divine Blessing

The Quran explicitly refers to the Holy Land as muqaddasah—sanctified or consecrated. In Surah Al-Ma'idah (5:21), Prophet Moses urges the Israelites to enter “the sacred land which Allah has assigned to you,” using the Arabic phrase al-ard al-muqaddasah (Ali, 2000). This verse is central to the Islamic understanding of divine designation. The sanctity here is not attributed to military conquest or human declaration but to God's will and command.

Other verses reinforce this sanctity through the use of terms like barakna fiha (“We blessed it”), as in Surah Al-Isra (17:1), which speaks of al-Masjid al-Aqsa, “whose surroundings We have blessed” (Abdel Haleem, 2005). These blessings are not only agricultural or geographic but also spiritual and moral, underscoring the land's role as a site of divine communication and revelation. The sanctification is associated with purity, obedience, and proximity to divine law, distinguishing the land not merely as territory but as a moral and eschatological space (Nasr, 2002).

4.2. Historical and Prophetic Context

The Quranic verse traditionally associated with the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey (Isra')—Surah Al-Isra (17:1)—has often been cited as the foundational text linking Mecca and Jerusalem within Islamic theology. The verse reads:

“Glory be to Him Who carried His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque (al-Masjid al-Haram) to the Farthest Mosque (al-Masjid al-Aqsa), the precincts of which We have blessed, so that We might show him some of Our signs. Indeed, He alone is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing” (Qur'an 17:1, Abdel Haleem, 2005).

The mainstream exegesis, as represented in classical commentaries such as those of al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, and al-Qurtubi, interprets this verse as describing the miraculous nocturnal journey of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ from Mecca to Jerusalem, marking the connection between the two sanctuaries. This interpretation has become central to Islamic theological and devotional discourse, emphasising Jerusalem's incorporation into the spiritual geography of Islam (Ibn Kathir, 2003; Qurtubi, 2006).

However, this study challenges the traditional assumption that Surah Al-Isra (17:1) refers to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ or to the Meccan sanctuary. Linguistically and contextually, the verse does not explicitly name the Prophet; it refers only to “His servant” (‘abdihi)—a term used in the Qur'an for various prophets, including Moses, David, and others (Qur'an 19:30; 38:17). The identification of this ‘abd with Muhammad is thus interpretive rather than textual, rooted in post-Quranic exegetical tradition rather than the verse itself.

Moreover, the continuation of the surah provides strong evidence that the focus of the narrative may actually concern the Children of Israel and, by extension, Moses. Immediately after the opening verse, the chapter continues:

“And We gave Moses the Book and made it a guidance for the Children of Israel: ‘Take no guardian other than Me’” (Qur'an 17:2).

This immediate contextual shift to Moses and the Israelites suggests a thematic continuity between verse 1 and verse 2, making it plausible that the “night journey” and the “blessed precincts” refer to a historical and spiritual episode related to Moses' mission rather than to a physical journey of Muhammad. Classical tafsir rarely considers this possibility, yet from a structural and narrative standpoint, the transition from 17:1 to 17:2 indicates continuity rather than a change of subject (Rahman, 1980).

Furthermore, the verse's reference to al-Masjid al-Haram poses a semantic and historical challenge. The Quran nowhere explicitly identifies al-Masjid al-Haram as being in Mecca. The term appears several times (e.g., 2:144, 2:191, 8:34), yet the descriptions are ambiguous and can refer to a sanctuary of divine protection or covenantal holiness rather than to a specific built structure in Mecca.

The absence of an explicit link between al-Masjid al-Haram and Mecca in the Qur'anic text suggests that later exegetical and historical traditions may have projected post-Quranic geography backwards into the revelation.

If one reads al-Masjid al-Haram and al-Masjid al-Aqsa as theological rather than geographic symbols—representing stages of divine revelation or sites of covenantal continuity—the “journey” (asra bi-'abdihi laylan) can be understood as a spiritual and prophetic transition from one sacred dispensation (Moses and the Israelites) to another (the final revelation). This interpretation situates the Isra within the broader framework of divine guidance and human responsibility, aligning with the surah's overarching concern with moral order and the historical cycles of Israelite obedience and transgression.

Thus, in this reinterpretation, Surah Al-Isra (17:1) does not document a physical nocturnal journey of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ but narrates a symbolic or prophetic journey—possibly that of Moses—emphasising divine revelation, covenantal continuity, and the sanctity of the Holy Land as the site of prophetic missions. This reading re-centres the Holy Land within the Quranic discourse as a theological space of guidance rather than a geopolitical locus, inviting a deeper engagement with its symbolic and moral dimensions.

4.3. Divine Reward, Punishment, and Moral Responsibility

The Quran also uses the Holy Land as a backdrop for moral instruction. In Surah Al-Ma'idah (5:22-26), the Israelites' refusal to enter the Holy Land due to fear of its inhabitants results in divine punishment: “It shall be forbidden to them for forty years; they will wander through the land” (Ali, 2000). This narrative presents the land as a divine reward contingent upon obedience, trust, and spiritual readiness.

This moral framework reinforces the idea that sanctity does not exist in isolation; it is intimately tied to human behaviour. The land is “holy” when those who dwell in it uphold divine guidance. This interpretive approach is supported by Sayyid Qutb (2003), who notes that the loss or inaccessibility of the Holy Land in the Quran is not due to geopolitical failure, but rather to spiritual defiance.

4.4. Interfaith Significance and Shared Sacred Space

Several Quranic passages indicate that the Holy Land is not the sole spiritual inheritance of a single community. Surah Al-Baqarah (2:125-141) and Surah Al-Imran (3:33-67) emphasise the universal mission of Abraham and the continuity of monotheistic revelation. This theological inclusivity resonates with the Quranic portrayal of the Holy Land as a shared sacred space among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, particularly through figures like Moses, Jesus, and Mary, who are all prominently featured and venerated in Islam.

This interfaith aspect is reinforced by the Quranic understanding of ahl al-kitab (People of the Book) and the geographic overlap of sacred narratives. For example, Surah Maryam (19:16, 22) references Mary and Jesus in a location often interpreted to be near Jerusalem, reinforcing the area's significance across Abrahamic traditions. Fazlur Rahman (1980) argues that the Quran deliberately presents such stories to emphasise the ethical and spiritual unity of divine revelation across space and time.

4.5. Eschatological Dimension and the End of Time

Finally, Quranic references to the Holy Land often carry eschatological overtones. While the Quran does not detail the end times in a geographic sense as explicitly as Hadith literature does, many Islamic traditions associate the Holy Land—especially Jerusalem and its vicinity—with end-time events. Although indirect, some scholars interpret verses such as Surah Anbiya (21:105), “Indeed, We have written in the Psalms after the Reminder: My righteous servants shall inherit the earth,” as having eschatological implications connected to the blessed lands (Nasr, 2002; Qutb, 2003).

The association of divine justice, the return of Prophet Jesus, and the final judgment with the regions of Palestine and Syria is a theme more prevalent in the Hadith. However, the Quran provides the theological framework that underscores this later tradition. Thus, the Holy Land operates as both a historical arena and a future stage for the fulfilment of divine purposes.

In summary, the Holy Land in the Quran is far more than a physical location; it is a theological symbol of divine blessing, moral responsibility, prophetic continuity, and eschatological significance. The five thematic categories—sanctity, history, morality, interfaith, and eschatology—reveal the depth and nuance of Quranic discourse on sacred geography. This multi-dimensional understanding affirms the Holy Land as a site of enduring theological and ethical relevance within the Quranic worldview.

5. Comparative Theological Interpretations from Classical and Contemporary Islamic Thought

The Quranic concept of the Holy Land, while consistent in its linguistic formulation, has been interpreted through various theological lenses across Islamic history. These interpretations reflect evolving understandings of divine geography, prophetic missions, and spiritual inheritance. This section compares classical exegetical traditions with modern theological thought, highlighting both continuity and divergence in their engagement with the Quranic verses concerning the Holy Land (al-ard al-muqaddasah).

5.1. Classical Interpretations: Literal Sanctity and Historical Fulfilment

The earliest Quranic commentators—such as al-Tabari (d. 923 CE), al-Qurtubi (d. 1273 CE), and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373 CE)—tended to interpret the Holy Land within the context of prophetic history and divine promises to the Children of Israel. Their exegeses consistently locate the al-ard al-muqaddasah in the region of the Levant, especially Palestine, and associate its sanctity with the physical presence and actions of prophets such as Moses, Abraham, and Jesus.

For example, al-Tabari, in his *Tafsir al-Tabari*, emphasises the land's sanctity as a direct result of God's blessing and the divine covenant with the Israelites. He explains the phrase in Surah Al-Ma'idah (5:21)—“O my people! Enter the holy land which Allah has assigned to you”—as referring specifically to Bayt al-Maqdis (Jerusalem) and the surrounding territory, which had been divinely designated as a reward for righteous conduct (Tabari, 1987).

Similarly, Ibn Kathir highlights in his *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim* that the holiness of the land stems from its historical association with multiple prophets and divine events. He writes that the Israelites' refusal to enter the Holy Land, despite God's command through Moses, resulted in their punishment, underscoring a theological principle that sanctity must be earned through obedience (Ibn Kathir, 2003). The land was not merely a geopolitical prize, but also a spiritual responsibility.

Al-Qurtubi adopts a slightly more mystical tone, suggesting that the Holy Land is sacred not only for its prophetic heritage but also due to its inherent qualities as a land chosen by Allah for revelation and divine interaction. He emphasises the importance of purity—both physical and moral—as a precondition for dwelling in or inheriting such land (Qurtubi, 1967).

These classical interpretations consistently link divine geography to moral action, portraying the Holy Land as a reward contingent upon righteousness and a burden that requires spiritual worthiness.

5.2. Contemporary Theological Perspectives: Ethical Symbolism and Universality

Modern Islamic theologians and thinkers have approached the Quranic concept of the Holy Land with a renewed emphasis on ethical universality, spiritual symbolism, and political prudence. Rather than limiting the concept to a physical space, contemporary scholars often broaden its meaning to include spiritual states, moral landscapes, or symbolic paradigms that reflect humanity's relationship with the divine.

Fazlur Rahman: Ethical Monotheism and Covenantal Responsibility

Fazlur Rahman (1980) interprets Quranic references to the Holy Land as illustrations of what he calls “ethical monotheism.” He argues that the Quran is less concerned with physical geography and more focused on the ethical conduct of believers. For Rahman, the land is not inherently holy; it becomes holy through divine blessing and human responsibility. He writes, “*The Quran’s lesson is not about who owns the land but who deserves to inhabit it based on moral behaviour and social justice*” (Rahman, 1980, p. 98).

This perspective aligns with the Quranic principle that God does not change the condition of a people until they change themselves (Quran 13:11). Therefore, Rahman reads the Holy Land as a test of human agency, where success or failure is contingent upon spiritual integrity rather than ethnic or political entitlement.

Sayyid Qutb: The Land as a Moral Arena

Sayyid Qutb, in his renowned *Fi Zilal al-Qur’an* (In the Shade of the Quran), offers a politically resonant interpretation, portraying the Holy Land as a moral arena in which divine justice is implemented. While Qutb affirms the sanctity of the physical land, he stresses that it can only be inherited by those who establish divine order and justice. In his commentary on Surah Al-Ma’idah (5:21-26), he states: “*The land is sacred only when it becomes a place where God’s law is upheld. Otherwise, it is simply a piece of earth*” (Qutb, 2003, Vol. 6, p. 212).

Qutb’s interpretation resonates with his broader ideological framework that prioritises the implementation of Shari’ah as the accurate measure of legitimacy. In this sense, the Holy Land becomes not only a historical site but a litmus test of Islamic governance and morality.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Sacred Geography and Cosmological Order

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a leading voice in Islamic philosophy and Sufism, emphasises the metaphysical and cosmological dimensions of the Holy Land. Nasr views sacred geography as an essential feature of the Islamic worldview, where certain lands act as vertical links between heaven and earth (Nasr, 2002). He asserts that the Holy Land is not only blessed due to its prophetic significance but also because it serves as a point of divine manifestation and spiritual elevation.

For Nasr, the sanctity of the land is part of the divine order (cosmos), reflecting the spiritual hierarchy that permeates all existence. He writes, “*The Holy Land is a mirror of the celestial world, a place where divine light shines through more clearly than in other places*” (Nasr, 2002, p. 134). This aligns with Quranic references to the land as “blessed” (*barakna fiha*), elevating the discourse beyond legalism or political theology to a more mystical and symbolic plane.

5.3. Points of Convergence and Divergence

Despite the diversity of interpretations, both classical and contemporary scholars agree on several core points:

- The Holy Land is a divinely blessed region with historical and spiritual importance.
- Its inheritance is contingent upon moral righteousness and divine approval.
- It serves as a stage for prophetic missions and a symbol of covenantal responsibility.

However, divergence emerges in how this sanctity is understood:

- Classical scholars emphasise literal geography, historical fulfilment, and legal consequences.
- Contemporary scholars tend toward symbolic interpretations, universal ethics, and political or mystical readings.

This evolution reflects broader shifts in Islamic thought—from jurisprudence-centred exegesis to more philosophical and sociopolitical theology.

6. Historical and Modern Political Relevance of the Holy Land in the Quranic Context

The Quran's portrayal of the Holy Land as a sanctified, divinely ordained territory has inspired significant political, spiritual, and territorial discourse across both historical and modern periods. From its identification with ancient prophetic communities to its centrality in contemporary geopolitical conflicts, the Holy Land—primarily understood in Islamic tradition as the region surrounding Jerusalem and Palestine—occupies a complex space that intertwines theology with politics. This section examines the historical significance of Quranic references to the Holy Land and their contemporary political implications, particularly regarding Muslim identity, colonial legacies, and the Israel-Palestine conflict.

6.1. Historical Context: Divine Promise, Prophetic Mission, and Islamic Legacy

The concept of the Holy Land (al-ard al-muqaddasah) in the Qur'an is deeply embedded in the history of divine revelation and prophetic mission. The conventional Islamic interpretation situates this sacred geography within the spiritual trajectory linking the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Mecca, and Jerusalem, grounded primarily in Surah Al-Isra (17:1). However, a closer textual and contextual analysis suggests that this verse does not explicitly mention Muhammad or establish Mecca as the location of al-Masjid al-Haram. Rather, it may be more accurately understood within the continuum of divine communication involving Moses and the Children of Israel—a reading that offers a radically different understanding of the Holy Land's theological role in Islam.

6.1.1. Reconsidering the Traditional Link Between Muhammad and Jerusalem

The standard exegetical tradition, represented in the works of al-Tabari (1987), Ibn Kathir (2003), and al-Qurtubi (2006), asserts that the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey (Isra' wa Mi'raj) from Mecca to Jerusalem, as referenced in Qur'an 17:1, established a direct spiritual link between the two sanctuaries. Jerusalem, therefore, became the first qibla and the second holiest site in Islam. Yet this interpretation depends on extra-Quranic narrations (hadith and sira) rather than the linguistic or contextual evidence of the Qur'anic text itself.

When examined critically, the Qur'an nowhere explicitly states that al-Masjid al-Haram is located in Mecca, nor that the "servant" ('abdihi) in 17:1 is Muhammad. The immediate continuation of the surah—"And We gave Moses the Book and made it a guidance for the Children of Israel" (Qur'an 17:2)—implies thematic continuity with Moses rather than a shift to the Prophet Muhammad. Thus, the "journey by night" (asra bi-'abdihi laylan) may symbolically represent the journey of Moses and the Israelites from oppression toward divine liberation, a central motif throughout the Qur'an (Rahman, 1980; Nasr et al., 2015).

6.1.2. The Divine Promise and the Holy Land in Mosaic Context

Under this reinterpretation, the "blessed precincts" (allathee barakna hawlahu) surrounding al-Masjid al-Aqsa should be viewed through the lens of the Mosaic covenant. The Quran repeatedly describes the Holy Land as divinely sanctified and promised to the righteous descendants of Israel:

"O my people, enter the Holy Land which Allah has decreed for you, and do not turn back lest you become losers" (Qur'an 5:21).

This framing suggests that divine blessing (barakah) and sanctity (qudusiyyah) are conditional upon moral obedience, not ethnic or geographic inheritance. The Holy Land thus becomes a theological signpost of covenantal responsibility. Within this schema, al-Masjid al-Aqsa symbolises the locus of divine-human encounter—where prophets such as Abraham, David, Solomon, and Jesus operated—not as a physical monument but as a sacred ideal representing divine presence and moral order (Asad, 1980; Faruqi, 1991).

6.1.3. Islamic Legacy Through Continuity of Revelation

By reading Surah Al-Isra (17:1–2) as part of the Mosaic continuum, the Islamic claim to the Holy Land rests not on geographical inheritance but on spiritual continuity. Islam, as the final dispensation, affirms all previous revelations and re-centres the message of monotheism, justice, and submission to God (tawhid, 'adl, and islam). The verse's reference to "His servant" can then be interpreted generically, encompassing all prophets who served God's purpose in guiding humankind. In this sense, the Holy Land functions as a shared space of prophetic mission rather than an exclusive possession of any one community.

This theological shift aligns with the Qur'anic emphasis that God's favour is not bound to any nation but to righteousness:

"The land belongs to Allah; He causes to inherit it whom He wills of His servants, and the end is for the righteous" (Qur'an 7:128).

Consequently, the Islamic legacy regarding the Holy Land is universal and moral, not territorial or ethnonational. It calls for adherence to divine law and ethical stewardship over the earth—principles consistent across the Abrahamic tradition.

6.1.4. Reassessing Al-Masjid al-Aqsa and the "Blessed Precincts"

If the "Farthest Mosque" (al-Masjid al-Aqsa) in Qur'an 17:1 is understood not as a physical mosque structure in Jerusalem but as a metaphorical or theological construct, it could symbolise the remote sanctuary of divine communion—the spiritual "distance" traversed in revelation rather than geographic travel. The description of its surroundings as "blessed" corresponds to the repeated Qur'anic emphasis on the lands of the prophets (Qur'an 21:71; 34:18), encompassing the broader region of the Levant (ash-Sham) as the "land of blessings."

This symbolic interpretation also avoids the anachronism of associating al-Masjid al-Aqsa with a later historical building. The earliest known mosque structure in Jerusalem postdates the Qur'an by several decades, further supporting a non-literal reading (Duri, 1987; Firestone, 2008).

6.1.5. Implications for the Islamic Conception of the Holy Land

This reanalysis reframes the Islamic understanding of the Holy Land from a geographic-territorial locus to a spiritual and moral ideal—a site of revelation, guidance, and accountability. The "Divine Promise" is not of land ownership but of moral stewardship. This interpretation harmonises with the Qur'an's broader message: divine favour is contingent upon justice and faith, not lineage or location.

Accordingly, the Prophet Muhammad's mission should not be viewed as geographically tethered to Jerusalem through the Isra', but as the universal continuation of the prophetic covenant encompassing all previous messengers. The Holy Land thus remains sacred within Islam not because of physical linkage but because it represents the culmination of God's guidance to humanity.

6.2. Colonialism, Nationalism, and Competing Claims

The rise of European colonialism and Zionist nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries radically altered Muslim perceptions of the Holy Land. The Balfour Declaration (1917) and subsequent British Mandate of Palestine introduced a new political paradigm that clashed with traditional Islamic views of the land as an indivisible part of the Muslim waqf (endowment).

The displacement of Palestinians and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 created a profound sense of injustice and dispossession in the Muslim world. The Quranic ideal of the Holy Land as a space of divine justice, peace, and righteousness seemed undermined by military occupation and ethnic conflict. Muslim thinkers and theologians began to revisit the Quranic verses not just for spiritual meaning but for political guidance.

For instance, the idea that the land is promised only to the righteous (Quran 21:105) was invoked by modern scholars, such as Sayyid Qutb, to argue that a valid claim to the land lies not in genealogy or nationalism, but in adherence to God's law. He wrote: "It is not for a race to inherit the earth, but for a moral community to establish God's will" (Qutb, 2003). Thus, political claims over the Holy Land are often theologically framed in terms of ethical legitimacy.

6.3. *The Holy Land in Modern Islamic Political Discourse*

Contemporary Islamic political thought has variously interpreted the Quranic view of the Holy Land in response to modern realities. The land remains a symbol of unmitigated unity, and its occupation is frequently depicted as an affront to Islamic sacredness and sovereignty. Several key themes emerge in this discourse:

Theological Resistance and Liberation Theology

Some Islamic movements, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, utilise Quranic references to frame resistance to occupation as jihad in defence of a sacred trust. Their political manifestos often cite verses such as Quran 5:21 and 17:1 to underline the land's Islamic identity and to justify political resistance as a religious obligation (Tamimi, 2007). This mirrors earlier Christian liberation theology in Latin America, where religious texts were mobilised in opposition to colonial and imperial dominance.

Interfaith Sensitivities and Shared Sacredness

Other scholars, especially those engaged in interfaith dialogue, emphasise the Quranic acknowledgement of the Children of Israel and the shared Abrahamic claim to the land. Scholars such as Tariq Ramadan have advocated for a pluralistic view of the Holy Land, proposing that its sanctity necessitates cooperation rather than conflict (Ramadan, 2009). This position advocates mutual recognition of spiritual ties rather than exclusivist claims.

Jerusalem as a Symbol of Islamic Revival

Jerusalem (Al-Quds) serves not merely as a historical capital or a religious city, but as a symbol of Muslim resilience and unity. Its portrayal in political discourse often transcends geography, becoming a rallying point for Islamic identity. The frequent invocation of Surah Al-Isra in Friday sermons and political rhetoric reflects this symbolic role (Peters, 1985).

The Al-Aqsa Mosque, mentioned directly in the Quran, has become a powerful visual and rhetorical emblem of this political theology. It is viewed not only as a place of prayer but as a site of ongoing struggle between divine will and worldly injustice. As such, the Holy Land represents both a theological test and a political cause.

6.4. *Quranic Neutrality and Ethical Universality*

While political movements have drawn extensively from Quranic imagery, it is essential to note that the Quran itself does not endorse territorial expansion or religious nationalism. The emphasis remains consistently on ethical behaviour, justice, and spiritual piety as prerequisites for divine favour. Quran 24:55 states: "Allah has promised those among you who believe and do righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession [to authority] upon the earth..."

This verse highlights the Quran's conditional promises—land and authority are given as outcomes of faith and righteousness, not inherent entitlements. Thus, while modern political readings may stress the Quran's utility in legitimising resistance or territorial claims, the text remains unambiguous in its moral expectations.

7. The Holy Land and Eschatology in the Quran

The Holy Land holds not only a historical and spiritual significance in the Quran but also an eschatological dimension. Islamic eschatology—the study of the end times—features the Holy Land,

particularly the region surrounding Jerusalem (Al-Quds), as a focal point of final events, divine justice, and messianic return. While the Quran does not offer a detailed eschatological map, it presents thematic elements that Islamic tradition and classical exegetes have expanded upon. These elements include references to divine inheritance, resurrection, judgment, and the climactic struggle between truth and falsehood, which Islamic eschatologists often place in or around the Holy Land.

7.1. Quranic Foundations for Eschatological Significance

Several Quranic verses link the Holy Land with divine inheritance and ultimate justice. Surah Al-Anbiya (21:105) states: *“Indeed, We have written in the Psalms, after the [previous] mention, that My righteous servants shall inherit the land.”* This verse, while broadly interpreted, is frequently cited by exegetes to suggest a divine eschatological promise—namely, that righteousness, not genealogy or power, determines the ultimate ownership of the land.

Ibn Kathir, a classical commentator, interpreted this verse in conjunction with Psalm 37:29 to affirm a future in which the earth, and by extension the Holy Land, will be ruled by those who uphold divine values (Ibn Kathir, 2003). The Quran consistently establishes the theme that land and power are transitory and that divine justice will ultimately prevail: *“That is the [final] outcome of those who fear Allah”* (Quran 28:83). These verses are read in Islamic eschatology as referring to the eventual triumph of the faithful in the Hereafter and potentially in this world.

7.2. The Struggle Between Truth and Falsehood (Haqq vs. Batil)

Another key Quranic theme with eschatological resonance is the ongoing struggle between haqq (truth) and batil (falsehood), which Islamic tradition locates both metaphorically and geographically in the Holy Land. Surah Al-Isra (17:81) proclaims: *“And say: ‘Truth has come, and falsehood has perished. Indeed, falsehood is ever bound to perish.’”* Although universal in tone, many exegetes interpret this verse as symbolically resonant with the historical and future conflicts in the land of the prophets.

In Islamic eschatology, the final battle—sometimes referred to as the Mahdi's Battle—is often projected to occur near Jerusalem or in the broader Levant region, known as Sham. This view originates from the Hadith literature rather than direct Quranic verses, yet it draws on Quranic themes of justice, divine will, and the purification of sacred spaces. The Holy Land is thus not a passive backdrop but an active agent in God's final judgment.

7.3. Inheritance of the Righteous: A Vision of Divine Justice

The Quranic eschatological vision ultimately culminates in the notion that the land—and by implication, the Holy Land—will belong to those who are righteous and morally upright. Surah Al-Nur (24:55) declares: *“Allah has promised those who have believed among you and done righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession [to authority] upon the earth...”*

This verse reinforces the idea of divine inheritance as an eschatological outcome, paralleling the inheritance of Paradise for the faithful. Several scholars, including Tafsir al-Qurtubi and Al-Razi, suggest that the inheritance of the earth in this context is both literal and metaphysical, indicating a fundamental transformation in global leadership as part of the end times and the eventual establishment of divine justice.

Moreover, the inheritance of the land by the righteous is not framed as an ethnic or nationalistic entitlement but rather as a universal, ethical standard that transcends lineage. In this way, the Holy Land becomes the symbolic and literal locus of divine justice—an eschatological terrain where faith triumphs over corruption.

7.5. Contemporary Implications of Eschatological Readings

Modern political and religious movements frequently reference these eschatological dimensions to bolster calls for liberation, reform, or resistance. For example, Islamic revivalist literature frequently cites the Quran's promises of divine justice to motivate collective action against perceived

tyranny or occupation. These interpretations, however, raise critical concerns about the instrumentalisation of eschatology for political ends.

Scholars such as Esposito (2002) caution against reading eschatological promises as political mandates, urging instead a spiritual and ethical interpretation. Nonetheless, the emotional power of eschatology, especially when tethered to a sacred geography like the Holy Land, continues to animate global Muslim consciousness.

8. Conclusions, Implications, and Future Research

This study reexamined the concept of the Holy Land (al-arḍ al-muqaddasah) within the Holy Qur'an through a close reading of verses associated with the prophetic traditions of Moses, Abraham, and other messengers. Contrary to conventional theological interpretations that link the Holy Land and al-Masjid al-Aqsa directly to the Prophet Muhammad and Mecca, this analysis concludes that the Qur'anic narrative does not explicitly support such an association. Rather, the verses consistently emphasise the journeys, missions, and divine promises connected to the Children of Israel and the prophets who preceded Muhammad, especially Moses.

In particular, Surah Al-Isrā (17:1), traditionally understood as referring to the Night Journey (Isrā wa Mi'rāj) of Prophet Muhammad, can be more coherently interpreted—when analysed in its broader textual and historical context—as a continuation of the story of Moses. The absence of any direct Qur'anic reference to Mecca as al-Masjid al-Haram within this verse further supports this alternative understanding. Thus, the Holy Land in the Qur'an appears as a sacred geography tied to divine revelation, moral testing, and covenantal history—primarily centred on the ancient lands of Palestine and its surrounding regions.

This reinterpretation has significant theological and hermeneutical implications. It encourages a move away from inherited exegetical traditions that project later Islamic developments back onto the Qur'anic text. Instead, it advocates for a contextual, historically grounded reading of the Qur'an that respects its internal linguistic coherence and narrative continuity.

Future research should extend this analysis by examining other verses that mention sacred geography, exploring how early Muslim commentators, influenced by Judeo-Christian traditions, may have reshaped original Qur'anic meanings. Comparative studies between the Qur'an and Biblical texts could further illuminate shared and divergent sacred geographies. Ultimately, such critical reexamination deepens our understanding of the Qur'an's theological landscape, reaffirming its focus on divine revelation across prophetic history rather than on geographical or sectarian particularism.

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