

Masjid al-Aqsa

The name 'Al-Aqsa mosque' translates to 'the farthest mosque' and is the third most holy place in Islam. It was here that in around 621 CE the Prophet Muhammed (s.a.w.) came on the night journey from Makkah riding on the Buraq. Note that the whole sanctuary on which the mosque is located is regarded as sacred to Muslims and known as Haram Sharief.

The event of the night journey to Jerusalem is mentioned in Surah al-Isra (also known as Surah Bani-Israeel) in the Holy Quran: "Glory be to the One who took His Slave for a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the furthest Mosque, whose precincts we have blessed."
[17:1]

Masjid al-Aqsa is no ordinary masjid. The Prophet (s.a.w.) dedicated a great deal of his life nurturing the Sahabah (Companions) to appreciate the excellent qualities of Masjid al-Aqsa. Some of the reasons why Masjid al-Aqsa should form an important aspect of a believer's dedication is that it is:

- The first qiblah for Muslims;
- The station of al-Isra and al-Mi'raj;
- The second house of Allah built on earth;
- The place where hundreds of Messengers of Allah (swt) are buried;
- The place where many Sahabah are buried;
- A place where miracles were shown by Allah's will;
- A place which Allah (swt) Himself calls a 'blessed place';
- Referred to directly and indirectly, 70 times in the Holy Quran;
- The place where angels have descended with Allah's message;
- The only place on earth where all the Messengers of Allah prayed at the same time led by the Prophet Muhammed (s.a.w.)
- The only Masjid mentioned by name in the Holy Quran apart from the Ka'bah

Mihrab of Masjid al-Aqsa

This marble structure is the mihrab of the present al-Aqsa mosque. The mimbar (pulpit) on the right was donated by the Jordanian government after the original (which was a gift from Salahuddin Ayyubi) was destroyed in a fire started by a fanatical Zionist in 1967.



Masjid al-Aqsa is the second house of Allah created on earth: Abu Dharr (r.a.) reported that he asked the Prophet (s.a.w.) "O Prophet of Allah, which Masjid was built first on earth"? The Prophet (saw) replied, "The Sacred Masjid of Makkah". Abu Dharr (r.a.) again asked, "Which was next"? The Prophet (saw) said, "The Masjid al-Aqsa". Abu Dharr (r.a.) further asked "How long was the period between the building of the two Masajid"? The Prophet (saw) said, "Forty years". Apart from these, offer your prayers anywhere when it is time to pray, although excellence is in praying in these Masajid". [Sahih al-Bhukari].

The original Qibla, Masjid al-Aqsa

During his time in Makkah, the Prophet Muhammed (s.a.w.) used to pray towards Bait-al-Maqdis (Jerusalem), with the Ka'bah in front of him. When he migrated to Madinah, he prayed towards Jerusalem for 16 months, but he hoped it would be changed to the Ka'bah.

Allah (swt) then revealed the following verse in the Holy Quran in Surah al-Baqarah: "Verily, We have seen the turning of your (Muhammed's) face towards the heaven. Surely, We shall turn you to a Qiblah (prayer direction) that shall please you, so turn your face in the direction of Al-Masjid Al-Haram (at Makkah). And wheresoever you people are, turn your faces (in prayer) in that direction." [2:144].

During Dhuhr prayer or it was said that it was Asr, the Prophet (s.a.w.) had led his

Companions in praying two rak'ahs , when he was commanded to face towards the Ka'bah, so he turned around towards the Ka'bah. The mosque where he offered this prayer became known as the mosque of the Two Qiblahs (Masjid Al-Qiblatain). It uniquely contains two mihrabs, one in the direction of Bait-al-Maqdis and the other towards Makkah. This took place halfway through the month of Rajab in 2 AH, two months before the great battle of Badr.

While it was a day of joy for the Muslims, it was a day of mourning for the Jews. The Muslims had now become completely independent of them and a prophecy in their old books had been fulfilled that the last of the great prophets would change the orientation of the religion of Allah from Jerusalem to the Ancient House of Ebrahim (a.s.). Their elders went as a body to the Prophet (s.a.w.) and said that if he would change his orientation back to Jerusalem, then they would follow him. Allah (swt) revealed in the Holy Quran in Surah al-Baqarah:

“And if you brought to those who were given the Scripture every sign, they would not follow your qiblah. Nor will you be a follower of their qiblah. Nor would they be followers of one another's qiblah. So if you were to follow their desires after what has come to you of knowledge, indeed, you would then be among the wrongdoers.” [2:145]