

Session 2

A Holy Land



Some people refer to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (IOPT) as the Holy Land. But what does that mean? 'Holy' has two meanings. It can mean something that is special to God or dedicated to serving God. It can also mean something or somebody that is perfect or pure in God's eyes.

The Holy Land is important in the history and stories of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. These three religions are called Abrahamic religions because Abraham (or Ibrahim as he is called in the Muslim holy book, the Qu'ran) is important in their story, and Moses, David, and Solomon are also important figures in all three. Christians, Muslims and Jews all believe in one God who created the world and cares about people, and all three religions believe we should pray, worship God, and follow God's teachings. All three religions have special holy places in IOPT, especially in Jerusalem. In IOPT, 80% of people are Jewish, about 14% are Muslim and 2% are Christian. In Jerusalem you will find sites which are important to each of these religions.

The Al-Aqsa Mosque is the third most important site for Muslims after Mecca and Medina. It is a very old building. The Dome of the Rock is a shrine near to the Al-Aqsa Mosque. It has a beautiful gold dome. Muslims believe you shouldn't draw pictures of God or holy people, so the mosque and the Dome of the Rock are decorated with geometric patterns. Many Muslims believe that their most important prophet, Mohammed (peace be upon him), was taken up into heaven from Jerusalem and then returned to earth in Mecca after talking and praying with the prophets in heaven. Muslims also believe that Jesus was a prophet and that he spent his last days on earth in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was the site of a temple that was destroyed in 587 BCE (Before the Common Era), rebuilt, and destroyed again in 70 CE (Common Era). When it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, it is said that just one wall was left standing. This wall is said to be the same wall that stands in Jerusalem today. It is called the Western Wall, or Wailing Wall, and many Jews go there to pray. Some people write prayers and put the folded paper into cracks in the wall. Jewish people believe that Israel is the land that God promised them. The Hebrew scriptures hold the same stories as the Christian Old Testament.

Christians believe that Jerusalem is where Jesus preached, where he was taken after his arrest, where he was put to death, and where he rose again. There is a special church called the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the middle of Jerusalem, which is said to be on the site where Jesus died and was buried. A sepulchre is a small room or building where a dead body is laid. In Jerusalem, you can follow the Via Dolorosa, which means the 'sorrowful way', the path Jesus walked to the place where he was crucified.

Bethlehem is the town where the Bible says Jesus was born. Today, Bethlehem is a town in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. What other places in IOPT do you recognise from Christian Bible stories?

Bible Link Luke 10:25-28

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