

MID-EAST e-NEWS

FREE

Subscribe by email to
receive this every 2
weeks!

An electronic journal of the Middle East, for those who want to be informed.

Issue No. 44 Texas

June 30th, 2005

<http://www.morethantourists.com>

Contexts 1

Historical

Jerusalem – Muslim Conquest 1

Iraq's Ruins 2

Religious

Islam – Traditions 2

Life of the Prophet 2

Topical

Islamic Interface - Sunnis 3

Calendar

This Month in the Middle East 4

Welcome

A new government in Lebanon, led by an anti-Syrian coalition of Maronite Christians (Michel Aoun), Druze (Walid Jumblaat) and Sunni (Saad, son of assassinated Rafik Hariri), has 62% of the vote, with 35% to Hezbollah and other Shia. Nevertheless the presidency is reserved for a Christian (currently Emile Lahoud, who is pro-Syria) and the Speaker of parliament for a Shiite, with Nabih Berri reelected after already serving 13 years. Syria insisted that Lahoud be re-appointed last fall, forcing a change in the constitution. This began the process of the 'Cedar Revolution,' which has already seen Syria leave Lebanon.

Email your responses to pkclark@pmbx.net & check the web for back issues.

Jerusalem – the Muslim Invasion

After the defeat of the Byzantine army at the Battle of Yarmouk in 637 AD, the capture of Jerusalem was inevitable. In 638 the Bishop of Jerusalem was Sophronius, and it was he who surrendered the city to the Muslim Caliph Omar. The Caliph issued a proclamation granting Christians (and Jews) freedom to live in the city if they chose, or to leave in peace. Jews were now able to have homes in the city, for the first period since being banished by Hadrian in 135.

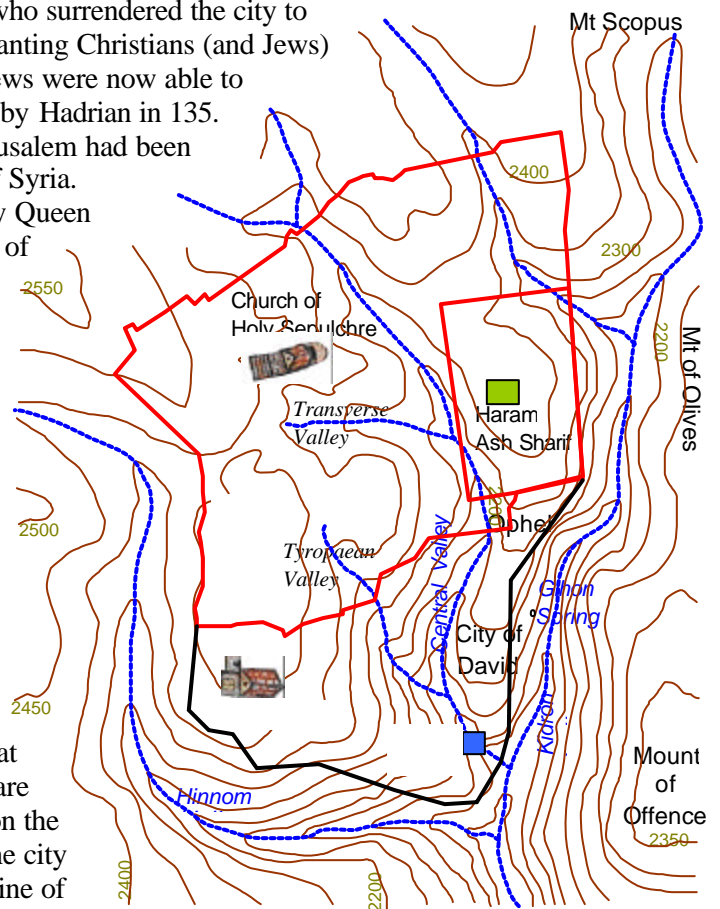
Twenty-five years before the Muslim invasion, in 613, Jerusalem had been captured by the Sassanids of Persia during a general invasion of Syria. They had destroyed a number of the Christian buildings built by Queen Helena, including the Bethlehem Church of the Nativity. Many of the walls of Jerusalem were demolished by them, also. It was 17 years before Heraclius was able to raise an army, finally relieving Jerusalem in 630.

During the Byzantine period the walls had been maintained, and largely followed the route established by Hadrian. How well they had been rebuilt after the Sassanid invasion is not known, but the Muslims were already encamped around Bethlehem in 634, and the danger was evident, so one would expect a thorough reconstruction effort. The Muslims were identified by the name of one of their tribes, Saracen, and the Christians in Jerusalem would not have been aware of the religious character of their opponents.

One interesting feature of Jerusalem over this period is the transfer of the name of Zion from the initial "City of David" on the same ridge as Moriah, to the western hill. Zion, at least by the time of the Crusaders (450 years from the time we are now considering) was the name given to the area of Jerusalem on the ridge below (south of) the citadel. Today Zion stands outside the city walls, but in the 7th Century the walls were still located on the line of the ancient Agrippan walls.

The Mosque of the Dome of the Rock was constructed over the exposed bedrock on Mount Moriah. This rock can still be seen inside the mosque. Muslims identify this location as the point from which Muhammad ascended into heaven, even as their traditions identify Jerusalem as the destination of the prophet's 'night journey'.

Jerusalem was a significant city for Islam during the 7th & 8th Centuries, being close to Damascus, the Umayyad capital, but during the Abbasid dynasty (750-1100) it was neglected, ignored by their capital in Baghdad. It remained predominantly a Christian city. Records indicate that during the 8th Century the Umayyad tax on the Patriarchate was an annual "580 solidi" in gold. Expenses on buildings (300 solidi) and personnel (500 solidi) were less than this.



Iraq's Ruins

It is being reported that many of Iraq's archaeological sites are being disturbed, and valuable artifacts being removed. In this photo-journal I want to illustrate some of the ruins of Iraq's Babylonian period.



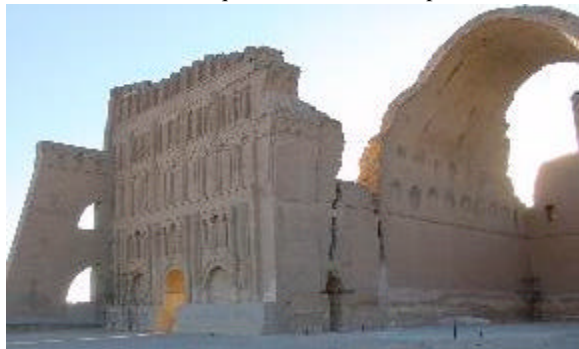
These mounds projecting from under the desert sand are the remnants of walls, eroded through exposure to the elements.



Similar walls, once uncovered show how the sand had protected the lower layers of brick.



The ruins of a Ziggurat, an ancient temple site, of which a number exist in Iraq, in various states of preservation.



The magnificent brick ruins of Khorsabad, Iraq

History of Islam

Importance of Traditions

The Qur'an records what were said to be the spoken words of Muhammad. In many cases these are so vague that traditions have sprung up that provide additional details - often with little substantiation - about these events. One example is Muhammad's 'Night Journey.'

One single verse mentions this, at the opening of Sura 17: *Glory be to Him who carried his servant by night from the holy shrine to the distant shrine, the precincts of which We have blessed, that we might show him some of our signs. He is the One who hears, the One who sees.*

Other writers, particularly al-Zamakhshari (d.1144) explain that "by night" means that the 40-day journey happened overnight; "from the holy shrine" is said to refer to Mecca, since another account mentions "the apartments near the Ka'aba... Gabriel came to me with the steed Buraq." The destination is identified as Jerusalem when it is linked with Sura 53: *And he revealed to his servant what he revealed... He had seen him also another time, near the Sidrah-tree, which marks the boundary... His eye turned not aside, nor did it wander: For he saw the greatest of the signs of his Lord.*

A further verse (Quran 13:62) refers again to the vision: *We made you a vision which we showed you only for a test to men and the accursed tree in the Quran. We put them in fear but it only adds to their heinous error.*

Even Ibn Ishaq's 'Life of the Prophet' (8th Century) expresses uncertainty: *The matter of the place of the journey and what is said about it is a searching test... wherein is a lesson for the intelligent; and guidance and mercy and strengthening to those who believe.*

Three paragraphs from Ibn Ishaq's Life of Muhammad are quoted alongside.

Ibn Ishaq's Life of the Prophet

I was told that al-Hasan al-Basri [A.D. 642-728] said that the Apostle of God said: "While I was sleeping in the Hijr [a porch close by the Ka'ba] Gabriel came and stirred me with his foot. I sat up but saw nothing and lay down again. He came a second time and stirred me with his foot. I sat up but saw nothing and lay down again. He came to me a third time and stirred me with his foot. I sat up and he took hold of my arm and I stood beside him and he brought me out to the door of the shrine and there was a white animal, half mule and half donkey with wings on its side with which it propelled its feet, putting down each forefoot at the limit of its sight, and he mounted me on it. Then he went out with me, keeping close by my side."

In his story al-Hasan continued, "The Apostle and Gabriel went their way until they arrived at the shrine at Jerusalem. There he found Abraham, Moses and Jesus among a company of the prophets. The apostle acted as their leader in prayer... Then the Apostle returned to Mecca and in the morning he told the Quraysh what had happened. Most of them said: 'By God, this is a plain absurdity!'... At this many Muslims gave up their faith; some went to Abu Bakr and said "What do you think of your friend now, Abu Bakr?" Abu Bakr replied that they were lying about the Apostle. But they replied that he was at that very moment in the shrine telling the people about it. Abu Bakr said: "If he says so, then it must be true."

"Abu Bakr then went to the Apostle and asked him if these reports were true, and when he said they were, he asked him to describe Jerusalem to him... Whenever Muhammad described a part of it, Abu Bakr said: "That's true. I testify that you are the Apostle of God."... and then the Apostle said: "And you, Abu Bakr, are the witness to truth."

Reference

Peters, F.E. 1985. Jerusalem. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.

Islamic Interface

Two weeks ago we looked at the issue of whether some part of the Islamic militancy these days is a civil war between different Islamic factions. We covered the tension between Sunni and Shia in some particular regions, but I promised to return to the topic of conflict within the Sunni sect. As news reports frequently assert, with more than a degree of truth, Sunni groups find it difficult to work together. In Iraq this difficulty at first stood in the way of them agreeing about who their 15 members of the Constitution Committee would be. It also meant that instead of an additional 10 “advisors” they eventually submitted 13 names. (All of these were an allowance made to them by the elected representatives to ensure Sunni participation in the process, since so few Sunnis voted in January.)

Sunni-Sunni violence seems to have a variety of causes, so it might be best at first to enumerate them, and give examples:

Struggles for Independence

- u in Indonesia’s northern Aceh province Sunni Muslims have been struggling for independence from the Sunni government, which they consider to be too secular.
- u In Syria and Turkey Kurds continue to struggle against the governments for improved civil rights. In Turkey this involves some incursions from Iraq’s Kurds, and has met with a harsh response from the Turkish government. Syria’s Kurds have demonstrated over the past year.

Attempts to Overthrow the Government

- u in Saudi Arabia the Salafists (‘Wahhabi’) condemn the Saudi Royal family as corrupt (Osama Bin Laden speaks out strongly against them) and seek their overthrow.
- u in Egypt (and elsewhere) the Muslim Brotherhood agitates for a return to an earlier form of Islam, rejecting attempts to compromise with modernism which they see as decadent.
- u Fundamentalist separatists continue to challenge governments in the central Asian republics of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.
- u In Yemen the government has recently put down an uprising by al-Houthi who was leading a rebellion from the mountains. (He was killed on Sept. 10th, 2004, after a 10-month campaign by the army.)
- u An Algerian rebellion against the government began after an election that would have put a fundamentalist political party in power. Their tactics have involved the attacks on buses and other vehicles traveling through the countryside, and the murder of the occupants.

We should distinguish between political and religious conflict. Just as in the West political conflict does not necessarily arise from religious differences, so some of these issues exhibit political divisions. In the West these might be addressed from the political realm, but within Islam this distinction is very difficult to draw. Issues of conscience, of philosophy, are treated as religious issues. One group will see itself as adhering more closely to Islamic tradition, accusing another of not being true Muslims. Often the societies that are willing to consider Islamic law in light of contemporary society are the ones accused of heresy. Sunni Muslim groups, then, can be seen rebelling against their governments on this account, from Saudi Arabia to Algeria, Egypt, and Uzbekistan.

Comments

From some of your comments it seems that the *This Month* page is really appreciated. To work on it is enjoyable, and to know it is useful is rewarding.

I want to encourage you to go further than the snippets in the text boxes, since they do not provide much information, and may even be confusing if you do not remember the event.

The timeline may be best used to refresh your memory about events – you can refer to it months later. If the event is not familiar, then I would recommend a little more research. One way to do this would be to check the date of the event, and do a **search** on the BBC web page. Other news agencies might do just as well. (Yes, as we look at these sites we remember to distinguish between recording and interpretation!)

What the monthly timeline is unable to do is to properly record the *progress of change*. To some extent I try to remedy this with the **info** boxes (when there is space) beside the country name. *Cultural change* is also particularly difficult to record, since it is more gradual and less objective. A third issue is that is difficult to report on *good news*, not only because other sources do not report it, but also because it is less of an event than a process. When the citizens of Basra are reported as enjoying more of a night life (NYT, 6/26/05) it did not happen on that day, but has been developing for a period of time; or when a Qaim mosque preacher is quoted as being critical of Zaraqawi (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 6/20/05), it is not exactly headline news. This is an area that I want to pursue more effectively in future issues of e-NEWS.

In previous issues I have given recommendations about web sites and other resources of information. If you have the internet as a resource, I would recommend that when you find a site that answers your questions, you bookmark it (add it to your favorites). If this list gets too long, make folders for Israel, Middle East, Islam, News, or whatever topic you refer to often.

This Month

June	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T
Sudan					I.C.C. to investigate Darfur war crimes																5,000 refugees from S. walking home 435 miles								Tulabi released	
Asia				Muslim separatists meet over Philippine conflict									Bomb kills 14 in Kashmir school												4 bombs in Dagestan				10 Russian troops killed in Dagestan	
				Uzbek US embassy staff leave																					Kyrgystan to return Uzbek refugees					
Pakistan					Al Libbi transferred to US custody								Rape victim Mai held, travel banned (released on 16 th)																Rape acquittal overturned	
Afghan.					2 Taliban chiefs held								Kidnapped aid worker Cantoni released								20 militants killed by aircraft					178 Taliban killed in 3 days				
					Bomb at funeral kills 20, inc. police chief								Mortars kill 2 US at heli. base								Cholera outbreak kills 8								Chinook shot down, 16 dead	
Arabia					US warns of sanctions over slavery								Pardons for Oman coup																	S.A. releases wanted list of 36
					2 women on Kuwait council								Kuwait 1 st female cabinet minister																Iraq against insurgency	
Iraq					3 suicide bombs, pipeline sabotage								4 US die in attacks																	
					Baghdad operation-700 held								20 Iraqi sol																	
					10 Shia die by S-bomb nr Balad								Bomb kills 5 marines																	
													Sunnis-25 const. committee seats																	
													Security officers killed																	
													Bombs in Ramadi kill 5 US																	