Chapter 7

The Gate of Peace

Rights to the Holy Land—
a Theological Reexamination

The contemporary bone of contention between Jews and Muslims and the poisonous stem that constantly inflames their relationship is the Arab-Israeli conflict. At the root of this historical dispute are the conflicting claims of Jews and Arabs to possession of a territory east of the Mediterranean, which the Jewish people regard as ’Ēretz Yisraël, or the Land of Israel, and the Arab people call Filastīn, or Palestine. This land became a distinct geographical, historical, and political entity for the first time when the Israelites settled there about 3,000 years ago. Later, during the eleventh and tenth centuries BCE, they founded a kingdom with Jerusalem as the site of the First Temple and King Solomon’s capital. In 70 CE, the Romans destroyed the Jewish state and the Second Temple and most of its Jewish inhabitants were killed or exiled.

Thereafter, for nearly 2,000 years, this land was ruled by a succession of foreign conquerors that treated it as a tiny, remote, colonial province in their empire. Five centuries after the destruction of the Jewish kingdom, with the Arab conquest in 638–640 CE, a good part of the country’s population was Arabized and Islamized. Then, the Jewish community, which survived the exile, became a minority in their own land. This status has dramatically changed in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century with the large-scale immigration of Jews to their ancient biblical homeland and its British occupation from Turkish Ottoman hands in 1918. Thereafter, Allied promises to the Arabs bore fruit with the creation of independent states in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon,
and the unexpected formation in 1921 of the Kingdom of Transjordan. Consequently, nearly four-fifths of the territory that was to have been the Jewish homeland, granted by the Balfour Declaration of 1917, was handed to the Arabs. What remained of ʿĒretz Yisraēl / Palestine was now about 10,000 square miles shared by both Arab and Jewish communities. With the final creation of the State of Israel in 1948, the relations between these neighboring communities turned into a full-blown conflict that has yet to be resolved.

The emergence of a Jewish state in the very heart of the Arab-Muslim world has resurrected old antagonisms, the most ancient of which are the conflicting claims to the disputed land of ʿĒretz Yisraēl / Palestine. What makes this conflict so bitter is its theological foundation, where the two antagonists, the two children of Abraham, hold on to uncompromising divine-sanctioned ideologies. The radical among them, who are blind to any possibilities of peaceful resolution, are entrenched in positions that are grotesque and delusional—the annihilation of their neighboring enemy. Unfortunately, zealotry sets the tone and dominates the scene.

Although the conflicting traditions have inherent divergences associated with this historical conflict, is it possible to converge the traditions into a place of understanding and mutual respect? What are the Jewish claims to the Land? What is the Qurʾān’s position? Is a reasonable compromise feasible? To answer these questions, we need to navigate through history, from modern back to ancient times.

The Rights to the Land—the Jewish View

The question of who has the right to the Land has always been in dispute. The claim of the Jewish people to the Land is based on six arguments: legal validity, historical attachment, occupation through wars, settlement and conquest, contractual purchase, and divine promise. The following review is instructive given the official position of the Palestinians that denies any Jewish historical links and Jewish sovereign rights to the Land. Let’s review the Jewish arguments:

1. Legal Validity—International legal recognition of the Jewish claim was granted on four separate occasions: The first is the Balfour Declaration of 1917, when the British declared “sympathy with Zionist aspiration” and committed themselves to support the creation of a “National Home” for the Jewish people in Palestine. The second one is when The League of Nations Mandate adopted the Balfour Declaration and incorporated it into the Mandate Agreement. The third one took place in 1947, when the United