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The Importance of Jerusalem among Abrahamic Faiths as a Tool for Inter-Faith Dialogue and Peace

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Abstract- The Abrahamic faiths also referred to as Abrahamic religions, consist of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These religions commonly lay claim to the fact that they all originated from Abraham. They therefore contest that they are directly linked to Abraham. The earliest of the Abrahamic faiths is Judaism, closely followed by Christianity, while the most recent is Islam. The study attempts to examine the importance of the city of Jerusalem to the Abrahamic faiths. To a large extent they all claim some level of relationship with Jerusalem. It is the aim of this study to examine how their common relationship with Jerusalem can engender inter-faith dialogue and unity which stands out as one the major concerns in the world today. The study employed historical and sociological methodology in its investigation. It is recommended that the Abrahamic faiths should appreciate the fact that their relationship with Jerusalem should be explored as a formidable panacea for establishing unity and inter-faith dialogue. The city of Jerusalem should be seen as a symbol of unity rather than that of hatred, war and morbid enmity.

Keywords: abrahamic faiths, dialogue, inter-faith, jeru-salem, peace, tool.

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I. INTRODUCTION

There are varied definitions of the word religion. However, they all converge at the point of religion referring to belief in "the supernatural". It is instructive to assert that religion has a span of influence in almost all aspects of man's life. The importance of religion to man is manifest in his mode of practice. The word religion, according to Omoregbe (2012), derives from three Latin words as its roots: "*Ligare*" (meaning to bind), "*relegare*" (meaning to unite, to link together) and "*religious*" (meaning relationship). This, according to him, means that "religion is essentially a relationship; a link established between two persons, namely, a human person and a divine person believed to exist". This depth of relationship is expressed by most religious adherents. Thus, there are different religious groups prevalent in the world. However, this paper sets to examine the import of Jerusalem to the Abrahamic faiths.

What then is the Abrahamic faith or Abrahamic religions? Abrahamic faith or Abrahamic religion, according to Smith (2012), "is religions that share the

patriarch Abraham in their lineage, although he plays different roles in different Abrahamic religions". He further asserts that Christianity, Islam and Judaism are all considered to be Abrahamic religions, because Abraham appears in the religious texts of all these faiths. On the strength of this, he opined that, more than half of the world's population is believed to identify with Abrahamic faith.

The main Abrahamic faith: Christianity, Islam and Judaism have outstanding similarities. They are monotheistic, thus believe that God is a "transcendent creator-figure and the source of moral law". Their claim of a direct lineage to Abraham is exemplified in the fact that: the bible, which is the basic text of Christianity (especially the Old Testament), lays claim to a relationship with Abraham. The Islamic tradition believe that Muhammed, an Arab, is the descendant of Abraham's son, Ismeal. While, the Torah, a basic text believed by Judaism, records that Abraham is the ancestor of the Israelites through his son Isaac, born to Sarah, through a promise.

The main objective of this paper is to examine the area of convergence between the Abrahamic faiths. The paper will therefore focus on the import of Jerusalem in Abrahamic faith. The attempt, in this regards, is to examine the importance of Jerusalem to the three religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This will engender inter-faith dialogue and peace, which are part of the panaceas for peaceful co-existence and sustainable development.

II. THE GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE CITY OF JERUSALEM

The city of Jerusalem stands at latitude 3146 North and longitude of 3514 East (Peters, 1985). Other variant names are Yerushalayima, Al – Quds. Jerusalem is also described as standing on a rocky plateau, and bounded on the East by the valley of the Kidron and by the Wadi Er Rababi (or valley of Hinom) on the West and South. The city of Jerusalem has its municipal boundaries as East Jerusalem (predominant Arab). It refers to the part of the city annexed in 1949 by Jordan, and administered by Israel since 1968. The city is currently the capital and administrative seat of government of the state of Israel. The city is said to have been named by King David when he made it the Jewish

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capital. In BCE 1500, King David captured the city from the Jebusites and named it Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews (Jordan, 2012).

III. THE HISTORY OF THE CITY OF JERUSALEM

Around the 10th Century BC, David was elected King by all the tribes of Israel. He moved his capital from the traditional Canaanite site of power located at Hebron to the Jebusite fortress on Mount Zion. According to Kark and Oren-Nordheim (2001), King David, then “declared the surrounding twelve acres along the Southern slope of Mount Moriah as the city of David” According to them, part of the site was already walled, and the Israelites completed the job. The climax of the entire affair was when King David brought the Ark of the Covenant to the new city of Jerusalem. This, no doubt solidified the city’s symbolic power. The king further bought the threshing floor from the Jebusite King to build the temple. The completion of the temple, however, fell on his success –son Solomon.

In 597BCE, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured Jerusalem, forcing all the skilled and wealthy inhabitants into exile in Babylon. He installed a regent, Zedekiah. However, the Babylonians came again in 586 BCE and sacked Jerusalem, destroyed Solomon’s temple and forced the remaining Jews into exile. In view of this experience, Philipp and Rieniels (2006) submitted that, ‘nothing remains of the original temple; therefore any understanding of the temple’s original layout relies on detailed Biblical descriptions.

Another attempt was made at rebuilding the temple. In 516 BCE, King Darius I rebuilt the temple. Cyrus the great, conquered Babylon at this time and ordered that exiled Jews can return to their native land if they so wish. The city of Jerusalem went through series of attacks and counter attacks until the coming of the Romans. During the reign of Herod, he expanded the size of the Temple mount.

In the early seventh century, there was conflict between the Byzantine armies and the Sassanid’s who were vying for the control of Jerusalem. The Byzantines surrendered the city of Jerusalem peacefully to the zealous armies of Islam who had gained ground in the South.

Abu-Mannah (2012), maintained that, the new Umayyad rulers of Jerusalem decided to “build their grandest religious buildings on the slope of Mount Moriah. The Temple mount is now the home of the ‘Dome of the Rock’ and Al-Aqs Mosque”. There arose an abrupt end to the four and a half centuries of Muslim rule in Jerusalem during the crusades. The crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099, and they dramatically reshaped the city. Adrian (2001) argued that the first priority of the crusaders was to “embellish existing

churches and to rededicate Islamic buildings to other uses”. This mandate was followed as the “Augustinian Monastic Order converted the ‘Dome of the Rock’ into a church”. The first monarch of the short – lived Christian kingdom, Baldwin I of Edessa, also turned the al-Aqs Mosque into his palace. There was also an urban planning mandate to turn Jerusalem into a unique capital of Christendom.

The Muslims took over Jerusalem again in 1188. There was a treaty between Saladin who took over Jerusalem at that time and Richard I of England. They agreed that Jerusalem would remain a Muslim city, where Christian’s pilgrims will be welcome, but taxed (Philip and Rieniels, 2006).

In early 13th century, the city of Jerusalem was recaptured by the crusaders again. Abu-Mannah (1990), concluded that after “ten years, Turkish invaders put a final end to Christian rule in Jerusalem. The Mamluks, a powerful caste of Muslim soldiers, seized power for themselves and ruled Egypt and Syria, including Jerusalem, until the dawning of the Ottoman Empire”. Finally, in 1917, the city surrendered to the British.

From 1917 to 1946, all of Palestine was under British control and Jerusalem for the first time after the crusaders, became a national headquarters/capital. The United Nations in 1947, voted for the division of Palestine into the Jewish and Arab state. They accepted that Greater Jerusalem should be an internationally administered zone. And a year following, Jerusalem was “proclaimed the capital of modern state of Israel”(Kark and Oren-Nordheim, 2001). In 1967, Israel began to administer all of Jerusalem after a war with surrounding Arab states.

The economy of Jerusalem is built more on government functions, constructions and tourism. Tourism remains the major source of income for the city of Jerusalem.

a) Importance of Jerusalem to the Abrahamic faith

The Abrahamic faith: Judaism, Christianity and Islam believe that Jerusalem is important to them. According to them, their faith started here. They have chosen Jerusalem as their holy land (Jordan, 2012). According to Jordan (2012), the three religions came from one family, that is, the family of Abraham. The Jews believe that the ancestor of the Israelites is Prophet Abraham. The Muslims believe that his son Ishmael is the traditional ancestor of the Arabs. While the Christian tradition described him as the “father in faith” (Romans 4). This further suggests that the three religions came from the same source (Hunter, 2012). These religions account for more than half of the world’s total population today.

It is important, on the strength of the aforementioned, to consider, the importance of Jerusalem to the Abrahamic faith. This will be considered as follows:

b) Importance of Jerusalem to Judaism

The city of Jerusalem bears a strong religious significance to Judaism. The first temple built by King Solomon in 10th century BCE was located in Jerusalem. This has made the city to serve as the political and spiritual nexus of Judaism. In AD73, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans who expelled the Jews from the land (Jordan, 2012). In spite of this, it had been the Jewish capital since BCE 1500, when King David captured it from the Jebusites.

Apart from the above significance of Jerusalem to Judaism, it should be noted that the Jews see Jerusalem as their focal point of prayer. This means that, “the Jews when they pray, wherever they are on the surface of the earth, face towards Jerusalem. In Hebrew, The focal point of prayer is referred to as Misrach” (Jordan, 2012).

It should also be noted that, the city was named Jerusalem by King David when he made it the Jewish capital. The implication of this is that, Jerusalem is the location of the most sacred site of Judaism, the Temple Mount. This is where the two temples were located, thus the city served as the center of Judaism.

In the prayer of an average Jew, Jerusalem features prominently. And he or she feels the heart with hope and the soul with longing. It is also seen as the eternal Jewish city.

As they consider it a symbol of a future time of peace. It is also a “symbol of Zionism, a hopeful yearning to be free”. It is believed by most Jews that Muslims, Christians, Jews and all people, should be welcome in Jerusalem, regardless of their faith.

It is the city of attraction as most Christians all over the world undertake holy pilgrimage to various spiritual sites to strengthen their faith and understanding. This further adds to its significance to Judaism, as it plays host to such pilgrimages.

c) Importance of Jerusalem to Christianity

No doubt, most Christians generally believe that Jerusalem is central to most events of the New Testament. Apart from this, it is traditionally believed that most events in the childhood and adulthood life of Jesus Christ took place in Jerusalem. Furthermore, it was in Jerusalem that Jesus Christ was tried, put to death and rose again. These events are given prominent considerations by the Christian faith since they stand as the main pillars that give credence to the Christian belief. They are definitely spiritual distinctive on which the Christian faith hinges.

The emperor Constantine accepted/adopted Christianity in the fourth century. When the mother, Queen Helena, visited the city of Jerusalem, it was then decided that the holy sites associated with the last days of Jesus Christ were then identified.

The city of Jerusalem also served as the site where great churches were built; most notable of them

was the Holy Sepulcher. This attracted many pilgrims to the city. It is also on record that Jerusalem provides accommodation for the growing Christian community and pilgrims. There were also prayer facilities in the city of Jerusalem. Apart from this, Jerusalem then served as a place where wealthy Christians built monasteries, convents, hospices, churches and chapels. However, the Christian rule ended in 638 CE when the Muslims conquered Jerusalem. However, in the 12th century, Christian rule was again restored in Jerusalem through the crusaders, who then established the Latin Kingdom. This lasted for another century.

d) The importance of Jerusalem to Islam

Apart from Judaism and Christianity, Islam as one of the Abrahamic faith, holds the city of Jerusalem in great esteem. Islam believes that Jerusalem served as the destination of Prophet Mohammad's night journey and ascension (Isra and Mi'raj). Apart from the significance associated with Jerusalem, Muslims believe that the first Muslims directed their prayer towards the city of Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem is regarded by Muslims as Islam's third holiest place after Mecca and Medina.

It is also commonly believed by the Muslims that Jerusalem was where Prophet Mohammed was taken to heaven; hence the 'Dome of the Rock' is built here. This is regarded as one of the greatest achievements in the history of architecture. The 'Dome of the Rock' is of great importance to Muslims, because they claim that it has the foot prints of Prophet Mohammed (Abu-Mannah, 2012). They believed that when you go inside the 'Dome of the Rock' you will find both the footprints and fingerprints of Prophet Mohammed. According to them, the prophet made these imprints before he ascended to the sky. This further reminds them of the story of the “Night Journey”, and as they go into the “Dome of the Rock” they are reminded of the story of the “Night Journey” hence they are closer to the prophet.

The Muslims believe that the “Night Journey” is situated in Jerusalem. According to them, the prophet was instructed to go on a journey at night with a winged horse and an angel called Gabriel. Their argument is that the blessing of five prayers a day came from here. They are always desirous to be closer to where the story originated. The Muslims are said to face Jerusalem in prayer, hence it was called the first of the Qiblahs (the direction of prayer). It was only later that this direction was changed and redirected to the Kabah in Mecca, but this did not diminish the importance of Jerusalem among the Muslims (Abu-Mannah, 2012).

It is believed by the Muslims that there is a spiritual link between all the prophets and faiths. According to Abu-Mannah (2012), it was in Jerusalem that prophet Mohammed met past prophets and led them in prayer. The prophet is quoted as saying that “A

Journey should not be taken (with the intention of worship) except to three mosques: the sacred Mosque in Mecca, my Mosque in Median, and the Masjid al-Aqsa (the furthest mosque) in Jerusalem" (Abu-Mannah, 2012). This could be commonly argued as one of the reasons why most Muslims hold Jerusalem in high esteem.

IV. CONCLUSION

The place of Jerusalem in all the Abrahamic faiths has been articulated above in order to appreciate the immense importance of inter-faith dialogue and peace both in Nigeria and the world as a whole. It is obvious, from the foregoing that they all hold the city of Jerusalem in high esteem. This goes to highlight the relationship between the Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is instructive to note that they all lay claim to some level of connection to Jerusalem. The writer therefore believes that this could be explored as a formidable tool in building the right inter-faith dialogue and unity among the Abrahamic faiths. Consequently, entrenching peace in the Middle East in particular, and the world in general.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The acknowledgement of the Abrahamic faith of the significance of Jerusalem should orchestrate the value of co-existence among the adherents of Abrahamic faith.
- The city of Jerusalem should be acknowledged by adherents of Abrahamic faith as playing the principal role of highlighting some of their historical distinctive.
- The need for inter-faith dialogue and peace is further orchestrated by their connection with Jerusalem.

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