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The Jerusalem Problem

By **KAI Noritake**

There are three main difficulties in achieving peace within Palestine. First is the security problem, second is the issue of returning refugees to their homelands, and third is the Jerusalem problem. The first difficulty is comprised of issues concerning national border demarcation, the suspension of military activity, the dismantlement of armed forces, and resettlement. The second is related to the some 3,700,000 refugees left behind after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, and the Six Day War. Although none of these problems can be easily solved, I will now attempt to discuss Jerusalem, the most intractable of the three issues.

According to Jewish history, in the 11th Century B.C., King David decided that Jerusalem would be the capital of the kingdom. During King Solomon's rule, the first temple was established, which became the focal place of Jewish worship. The first Jewish temple was, however, destroyed in the 6th Century B.C. by King Nabuchodonosor (known as Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible, and who also famously appears in the second opera, *Nabucco* by Giuseppe Verdi). Following this, many Jews were taken to Babylonia and the period of 'Babylonian Captivity' began. In the 1st Century B.C Herod the Great built a second temple, but this was destroyed by the Roman army in 70 A.D. As a result, the Jewish people lost their homeland and were scattered around the world as a diaspora.

Jordan came to occupy East Jerusalem and its wealth of historical artifacts as a result of the Arab-Israeli War. However, Israel took possession in 1967 and made it the capital in 1980. This decision was not accepted internationally, and foreign embassies have always remained located in Tel Aviv. Furthermore, Palestine suggested in 1988 that it intended to make Jerusalem its own capital city in the future. Although both sides cannot be accommodated, the situation doesn't necessarily mean that Jerusalem will be divided either.

According to Islamic teaching, Jerusalem is the city of such prophets as Abraham, Sulaiman (Solomon) and Jesus, and venerated as the place from where Mohammad rose up to the sky in order to meet God. This traditional legend of Mohammad ascending to meet God is as significant as the Jewish exodus from Egypt, or Christian belief in Mary: in other words, it is indispensable to Islamic doctrine.

The temple which Prime Minister Sharon visited on 28th September 2000 is located on a small plateau on Mount Moriah in eastern Jerusalem. There is a section of wall left on the western side of the base where the second temple once stood, later destroyed by the Roman army. Christians

somewhat scornfully call this the “Wall of Sorrow”, while the Jewish call it the “Western Wall”. According to Islamic teaching, it is thought that Mohammed ties his steed Al Borak to this spot when he ascended to heaven. The wall is also a symbolic place for Israel because upon their victory in 1967 the highlight was said to be the recapture of the Western Wall. Furthermore, structures of significance to Palestinians, such as the ‘Dome of the Rock’ and Al-Aqsa Mosque, exist in the area.

Traditionally, this small hill is considered to be the place where Adam was born, Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac, Jacob fought with an angel and Mohammed rose to heaven, and is therefore a significant place in both Islamic and Jewish teachings. For 2000 years, this area of several hundred square meters has been loaded with religious and political meaning for around a billion people world-wide and thus dividing it up is definitely impossible. It is indispensable holy ground for both Jew and Muslim. Of course, discussing the issue can’t be avoided when peace negotiations next take place, but reaching a solution will not be an easy task.

Regarding Christianity, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is divided into six sects: the Greek Orthodox Church, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Syrian Church and the Ethiopian Church. It is said that problems often arose with regard to management and administration. On the other hand, a number of humorous stories also exist. When a French man visiting the sepulchre asked the priest whether the tomb was empty, the priest is said to have answered “if He were present here, I doubt that we would be”. On another occasion, on the day before the Pope’s visit to Jerusalem in 1964, the French newspaper Canard Enchaîné ran a headline that a telegram had just arrived at the Vatican from Jerusalem saying “No need to come, we have found the body.”

The humorous meaning can be found in the suggestion that if Christ’s body had been found after his crucifixion and subsequent resurrection, then Christianity could not have arisen and spread overseas.

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