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## A Comparative Study of the Concept of City and Urbanization in the Quran and the Bible

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### Abstract

Today, the issue of urbanization has become a fundamental phenomenon of our time, and consequently, urban research and studies have expanded. However, it should be noted that the city and urbanization, albeit not in their current form, have a very long history. In past religions and faiths, the concept of the city and urban life has had special importance and validity, and especially in the sacred texts of religions, many verses and commandments have been mentioned in connection with this concept. There is no doubt that the approach of holy books in relation to the subject of urbanization plays a decisive role in shaping urban beliefs and thoughts among religious communities; because, these texts are considered the main and fundamental source of religions, and the thoughts and behaviors of followers are rooted in them. The present study addresses this issue and intends, while examining the views of the three great and ancient religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity according to their sacred and heavenly books, to analyze their views on urbanization. It also intends to compare the views of these three religions regarding the concept of urbanization. The results of this research show us that the concept of city and

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urbanization is evident in the heavenly books of all three Abrahamic religions, and many verses and commandments have been mentioned regarding it.

**Keywords:** City, Urbanization, Religions, Heavenly Books, Old Testament (Torah), New Testament (Gospel), Quran.

**Introduction**

"A city is a place that is more or less central in terms of residence, business, and administrative facilities, and is recognized as such administratively." (Mosaheb, 2004 AD/1383 SH: 1511)

Although studying and examining this concept has become very common today, the truth is that the history of human life in cities is very long. To the extent that some sources mention the history of the formation of cities and urban life to be 7,000 years before Christ (Pour Afkari, 2004 AD/1383 SH: 3).

The emergence of the city and the conditions that led to its creation are undoubtedly one of the most significant periods in human history. "The emergence of the phenomenon of the city and urbanization is as important as the occurrence of the Industrial Revolution in the modern era." (Brook, 2010 AD/1389 SH: 27) The emergence of the city is one of the most important periods in human history, and without it, civilization and progress would not exist. And if we say that without civilization, the possibility of the emergence of the city would not exist, it means that the city and civilization are deeply dependent on each other and have a close relationship (ibid.).

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The importance and validity of the concept of city and urbanization are significant because they have led to major changes in the dimensions and aspects of human life and have played a major role in its evolution and development. But does this concept also reflect in the holy books, which, apart from religious values, have historical values, and more importantly, what statements and contexts have the divine books considered? In examining the holy books, we clearly realize that the history of the existence of the city and urbanization in human societies is much older than what historical books have mentioned. The Old Testament or the Torah considers a history much earlier for the establishment of cities, as we read in this books that the first city was built by the first humans. The concept of urbanization and its history are also mentioned in the books of the Gospel and the Quran, and in these books, many verses and commandments are mentioned in connection with it. In this study, an attempt has been made to examine the views of the three ancient religions, based on their holy books, regarding their views on issues related to the city and urbanization. Therefore, it can be stated that the main purpose of this study is to examine the views of the divine books of the three religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity regarding the city and urbanization and to compare them in terms of written verses.

#### **1. Research Method**

Given the nature of the subject, the research method in this study will be descriptive-analytical. In this way, the researcher tries to first describe and explain the subject, and then the dimensions of the concept of city and

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urbanization in the Quran and the Old and New Testaments will be explained and analyzed.

It is evident that the method of data collection in this research is primarily library-based and documentary. The source used is solely the religious texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, including the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Quran.

**2. Significance and Necessity of the Research**

It must be stated that the concept of city and urbanization is a fundamental concept in social and human studies, and researchers in these fields have always paid attention to it. In general, the city is a common concept in the three holy books of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Quran as the basis and main source of the three great and ancient religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Examining contemporary concepts and issues in these writings allows us to investigate and scrutinize the attitude and reflection of those issues directly and without interpretation, explication, or perception, and free from interpretations and expressions. Religious texts are the most reliable source for understanding religious truths and, while expressing divine and spiritual values, are also historically significant and valid. Given what has been said, it is necessary to explore human issues and problems in these books and to study and examine the opinions and thoughts contained in the holy books.

**3. Conceptual and Lexical Framework**

Enoch: It is mentioned in the Old Testament that the first city was built by Cain. Although, given the small population at that time, this seems very

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strange. Nevertheless, it is mentioned in the Book of Genesis that Cain built a city and named it Enoch. Enoch was the name of Cain's son, and he was born while Cain was building the city, so Cain named the city after his son: "Cain made love to his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch." (Genesis, 4:17)

**Cities of Refuge:** In the Book of Numbers in the Torah, God commands Moses to establish and designate cities of refuge. The purpose of designating cities of refuge was so that if a person unintentionally and accidentally committed manslaughter, they could take refuge there, safe from the revenge and blood-feud of the victim's relatives, and in due course, a fair trial would be held to address their situation. According to God's command, there should be six cities of refuge, three in the land of Canaan and three others on the east side of the Jordan River (Numbers 35:9-10). The designation of cities of refuge is not limited to Moses and his time; it is mentioned in the Old Testament that God instructs Joshua to designate cities of refuge. According to God's command, when a murderer enters these cities, they must first recount the story to the elders of that city. After that, the elders of the city will provide a place for that person to live until their case is addressed in due course. Importantly, the law concerning cities of refuge was not exclusive to the people of Israel; the lives of strangers, travelers, and residents of other cities were also safe in the cities of refuge, and no one had the right to harm them (Deuteronomy 4:41-43).<sup>1</sup>

**Storage Cities:** Some cities were also considered as centers and sources for the preservation and storage of important and essential items and reserves.

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1. This topic is also mentioned in Deuteronomy 19:1-13 and Joshua 20:1-10.

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These reserves consisted of ammunition, war materials, as well as grain and provisions. It is stated in the Old Testament that the establishment of these types of cities was by the command of King Solomon (2 Chronicles 8:1-6). In the Book of 1 Kings, we read that after building the house of God, Solomon proceeded to repair and rebuild the cities of his kingdom and also established storage cities (1 Kings 9:10-21).

Jerusalem: Numerous verses mention the city of Jerusalem<sup>1</sup>. In the Torah, it is stated that Jerusalem is the city of God, and God has chosen it from among all the cities of Israel to put His name on it. According to the verses in the Torah, the city of Jerusalem will never be destroyed because God dwells there and always helps that city and its people. This meaning is explained in the Book of Psalms: "His tent is in Salem, his dwelling place in Zion." (Psalm 76:2)

And also: "God sits enthroned in Jerusalem and is sovereign over all the nations. Let all people revere His great name, for He is holy." (Psalms, 99:2 and 3)

In the book of Isaiah, we also read that God issues His commands in Jerusalem: "The Lord will issue his instructions from Jerusalem." (Isaiah, 2:3)

Despite this, the people of Jerusalem turned to sin, and God decided to punish them. In the book of Ezekiel (from the Old Testament), God compares Jerusalem to a prostitute who betrays her husband (Ezekiel, 16:31-34). Eventually, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, marched on Jerusalem with all his forces and besieged the city for two years. During this time, due to the siege and widespread famine, the people decided to create a

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1 . *Bayt al-Muqaddas*

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breach in the city wall and escape through it. However, the Babylonian army noticed this plan, entered the city through the same breach, and conquered Jerusalem. The Babylonians arrested Zedekiah, the king of Judah, gouged out his eyes, and beheaded his entire family (Jeremiah, 52:1-11). According to the verses of the Old Testament, the Babylonian soldiers destroyed the walls of Jerusalem, set fire to the house of God and the great houses of the city, and took its people into captivity. Ultimately, nothing remained of all that glory and splendor but a burnt ruin. In the Old Testament, while narrating these events, it is explained that the events that occurred were a punishment that had to befall Jerusalem; at the same time, it prophesies that Jerusalem will be rebuilt in the future: "Jerusalem will once again be inhabited, and old men and women, each with a staff in hand because of age, will sit in the city's public squares. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing in the streets." (Zechariah, 8:4 and 5)

In 538 BC, when Cyrus the Great, the great and powerful Iranian king, conquered Babylon, he ordered the Jews to return to Jerusalem (2 Chronicles, 36:22-23) and rebuild it. Despite this decree, only a few Jews took advantage of this privilege, and most of them engaged in trade and commerce in other lands. As a result, Jerusalem never regained its former glory and prestige (Mohammadiyan, 2001 AD/1380 SH: 729) and of all that pomp and glory, nothing remained but a narrative and a memory.

#### **4. Urbanization in the New Testament**

In the New Testament (the Gospels), there are fewer verses that refer to the subject of urbanization than in the Quran and the Old Testament (the



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Torah). However, this book also contains references to this concept, which will be mentioned:

Bethlehem: In the Gospels, attention is paid to the value and prestige that famous men bring to cities. Accordingly, what makes a city famous and great is not its high walls and beautiful houses, but the people who can add to its greatness. Just as the birth of Jesus in the small town of Bethlehem added to its importance and prestige, and it was no longer an obscure city. In the Gospel of Matthew, we read: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel." (Matthew 2:6)

From such allusions and similar instances, the contemplation and perspective of this divine book become clear. Generally, in comparison with the other two books under discussion, the New Testament places more emphasis on divine and ethical considerations than on historical and narrative dimensions. Although the Old Testament, by relying on the narration of stories and the detailed explanation of battles and events, narrates the life of the prophets and the spread of religion in human society, the New Testament focuses on the ethics and Christian character of Jesus and the admonitions of his companions, supporters, and disciples.

Jerusalem: We have previously mentioned the importance of the city of Jerusalem in the Old Testament, a city that was referred to as the "City of God." In the New Testament, this city does not have the same status and position that the Old Testament attributes to it; rather, it is introduced as the place where prophets and God's chosen ones were killed. In the Gospel, we read that Jesus foretold his death in this city, because in his opinion, it was impossible for God's prophets to be killed anywhere other than in the city of



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Jerusalem! In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' words about Jerusalem are expressed as follows:

"Indeed, today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, I must continue on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet of God to be killed anywhere other than in Jerusalem! O Jerusalem, O Jerusalem, city that murders prophets, city that stones the prophets God sent to you." (Luke 13: 33 and 34)

These are the words of Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. It is after entering this city that, according to his own prophecy, he is crucified in Jerusalem. The bitter narrative of the death of God's chosen one, mentioned in the Christian holy book, is sorrowful and mournful. The subject of this writing is not, of course, a description of the events written in the first four books of the New Testament, but mentioning this point is a reminder of the bitterness and ominousness of the city of Jerusalem in this book; because after the death of Jesus Christ, the pressure on his supporters intensifies, and some of his followers are forced to leave Jerusalem.

#### **5. Research Background**

Extensive research has been conducted regarding the re-reading of concepts related to the city and urbanization, in each of which, references and opinions of the holy books are evident. Fortunately, the researcher of this study has benefited from some of those researches in expressing the purpose, which are mentioned in this section:

Naghizadeh (2014 AD/1393 SH) in a study entitled "Islamic City and the Method of Using Holy Texts" while paying attention to the immortality and universality of holy books, emphasizes that one should not look for details

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and examples of the city and urbanization (such as dimensions, sizes, spaces and forms and shapes) in them. What this researcher states in his study regarding the concept of the Islamic city in the Holy Bible is that in divine books one should look for identifying principles and criteria that can have their own specific instances in all times. The conclusion that this research has stated is that the Islamic city is not limited to a specific body or time or specific social groups, but what plays a role in defining the Islamic city is the people of the city and their beliefs, their performance and behavior, and the current and applicable regulations in it."

Farjam et al. (2011 AD/1390 SH) conducted a study titled "The Social Concept of the City from the Perspective of Islamic Texts and Teachings," exploring the characteristics and features attributed to the city through the lens of Islamic texts and teachings. The authors selected the following sources for their research: the Quran, *Tafsir al-Mizān*, *Tafsir Nemooneh*, *Tafsir Javan*, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, *Nahj al-Faṣāḥa*, *Ṣaḥīfa al-Sajjādīyya*, and *Uṣūl Kāfi*. The results of this study indicate that the Islamic worldview outlines specific characteristics and conditions for human settlements. In fact, Islam focuses more on articulating a specific concept of urban living than on providing a specific physical structure for the city. This concept is defined by factors such as comprehensive security, freedom of expression, sustainability and interaction with the environment, ethical commerce, and the absence of falsehood and sin.

Sharifiyan et al. (2016 AD/1395 SH) in a study entitled "An Analysis of the Concept of City and the Pillars of Urbanization from the Perspective of the Holy Quran" examined this concept using verses from the Holy Quran. According to the results of this research, the Holy Quran considers the city

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as the place where the sovereignty of God is realized on earth, formed around the axis of the *Walī* (guardian/leader) and the gathering of the Ummah (community) around the *Walī Allāh*. Therefore, urbanization means accepting the sovereignty of the Book of God and His *Walī* on earth, which requires spatial gathering and settlement around the axis of the *Walī*.

The present study endeavors to comparatively and analytically examine the concept of city and urbanization in the holy books of Abrahamic religions, drawing upon the findings and results obtained from previous research, and ultimately clarifying their points of convergence and divergence.

#### **6. Urbanization in the Old Testament**

The subject of city and urbanization is an important topic in Judaism, as many verses in the Torah (the holy book of this religion) address this concept. In the Old Testament, we encounter the changes and transformations in the social life of the Israelites. This book explains that after leaving Egypt and conquering the land of Canaan, the Israelites transitioned from a nomadic and pastoral lifestyle to a sedentary and urban lifestyle (Joshua, 1: 10-11).

This reached its peak when the Israelites had captured important cities such as Jerusalem and settled in them. One of the important points that the Old Testament refers to is the connection and relationship between the greatness and glory of cities and the power and majesty of kings. These cities were under the complete control of the kings, so much so that they would give them to each other on various occasions or even bequeath them to their children as inheritance. For example, in the twenty-first chapter of the second book of Chronicles in the Torah, we read: "When Jehoshaphat died,

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he was buried in the royal tomb in Jerusalem, and his son Jehoram became king of Judah. His brothers, the other sons of Jehoshaphat, were: Azariah, Jehiel, Zechariah, Azariahhu, Michael, and Shephatiah. Their father had given each of them valuable gifts of silver, gold, and jewels, as well as fortified cities in Judah. But he gave the kingdom to Jehoram, because he was his firstborn son." (2 Chronicles, 21:1-4)

Although it was the power and wealth of the kings that led to the construction of great cities, it was the presence of God-fearing and God-loving people that blessed and prospered these cities and caused them to grow and flourish. Conversely, the presence of wicked people would lead the city to ruin. In the book of Proverbs, referring to this issue, it says: "By the blessing of the upright the city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is overthrown." (Proverbs, 11:11)

**7. The City from the Perspective of the Holy Quran**

The city and urban life have a desirable and special place in the religion of Islam. The reason for this can be found in the Quran, as the principle and foundation of this religion. The attention of this heavenly book to the city is such that one of the surahs of this book is named "The City" (al-Balad). In the Quran, it is explained that God has blessed the earth and has also determined the sustenance of cities and settlements. This is mentioned in Surah *al-Fuṣṣilat*: "And He placed on the earth firmly set mountains over its surface, and He blessed it and determined therein its [creatures'] sustenance in four days equally, for all [who] ask." (al-Fuṣṣilat/10)

Mecca: The city of Mecca holds immense importance and value for Muslims because it houses the House of God (*Ka'ba*) and the Qibla

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(direction of prayer) for Muslims. In the blessed Surah *al-Baqarah*, it is mentioned that the House of God in Mecca was built by the chosen prophet of God, Abraham, and his son Ishmael: "And when Abraham and Ishmael were raising the foundations of the House, (Abraham prayed), "Our Lord, accept (this) from us. Indeed You are the Hearing, the Knowing." (al-Baqarah/127)

In many verses of the Quran, the importance and status of this holy city are emphasized, to the extent that in Surah *al-Balad*, an oath is sworn by this city: "I swear by this city [Makkah]; and you, [O! Ibrahim], are a resident of this city."

(al-Balad/1 and 2)

According to the word of God in the Holy Quran, the city of Mecca is called the city of peace and security and is recognized as a reference for religious matters. In the blessed Surah *al-Baqarah*, this is explained as follows: "And [mention, O! Muhammad], when We made the House a place of return for the people and [a place of] security; and take, [O! Believers], from the station of Abraham a place of prayer; and We charged Abraham and Ishmael, [saying], "Purify My House for those who perform *Tawāf* and those who are staying [there] for worship and those who bow and prostrate [in prayer]." And [mention] when Abraham said, "My Lord, make this a secure city and provide its people with fruits - whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day." [Allah] said. "And whoever disbelieves - I will grant him enjoyment for a little while; then I will force him to the punishment of the Fire, and wretched is the destination." (al-Baqarah/125 and 126)

In the blessed Surah Ibrahim, the request of Prophet Abraham to God for Mecca to be secure is also mentioned: "And [mention, O Muhammad],

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when Abraham said, "My Lord, make this city [Makkah] secure and keep me and my sons away from worshipping idols." (Ibrahim/35)

### **8. Urbanization and Committing Sins**

Although God has determined the sustenance of people in cities and blessed them, if servants forget God and follow the path of disbelief and idolatry, nothing but divine punishment awaits them. This is a point that is mentioned in Surah *al-Nahl*: "And Allah presents an example: a city which was safe and secure, its provision coming to it in abundance from every place, but it denied the favors of Allah. So Allah made it taste the garment of hunger and fear for what they had been doing." (al-Nahl/112)

It is also stated in Surah *al-Hajj*: "And for how many a city did I prolong enjoyment while it was committing wrong. Then I seized it, and to Me is the [final] destination." (al-Hajj/48) The mentioned verses clearly confirm that although there are cities that are safe havens for servants and believers due to the blessings of pious people, committing sins by the inhabitants of a city leads to divine punishment for the city's residents. In other words, it is not the cities themselves or living in them that prevents divine punishment, but rather what is mentioned in the Muslims' holy book, the Quran, is that the unpleasant and oppressive behaviors of the people living in the city lead to divine retribution. In Surah *Saba'*, God also refers to sinful people in the city and says that their punishment will be a lesson for other servants: "And We placed between them and the cities which We had blessed [many] visible cities. And We determined therein the stages [of travel], [saying], "Travel safely in them by night and day." But they said, "Our Lord, increase the distance of our journeys," and wronged themselves, so We made them

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narrations and dispersed them in total dispersion. Indeed in that are signs for every patient, grateful [servant]." (Saba'/18ñandñ19)

#### **Conclusion**

This paper briefly reviews the concept of the city and urbanization in Abrahamic religions based on sacred texts and attempts to present, with a general and cursory look, the dominant paradigms regarding the concept of the city in these books. From what has been said, we realize the history and references existing in the written verses of the heavenly books of the three religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

The Old Testament carefully considers the fact that kings endeavored to build cities to demonstrate the power and wealth of their state and land. From a historical perspective, this book views the subject of the city and urbanization, and the early kings of Judah also built many cities. The more magnificent these cities were built, the more the glory and greatness of the king was manifested. The Torah states that the first city was built by Cain, the eldest son of Adam, and the name of that city was "Enoch."

The separation and distinction of cities is also one of the issues that the Old Testament (Torah) refers to. These include cities of refuge, which were solely for the residence of criminals who had unintentionally committed murder, and storage cities, which were used to store essential materials.

This book also refers to the greatness and splendor of the city of Jerusalem. According to the verses in the Torah, Jerusalem is a city where God dwells, from where He governs the world and reigns over it. However, the sin and disobedience of the people of Jerusalem caused God's wrath, and their punishment was the fall of Jerusalem, which was carried out by the



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Babylonians. Finally, after years of captivity of the people of Jerusalem and the destruction and ruin of that city, Jerusalem was rebuilt once again by the Persian king.

However, in the New Testament (Gospel), it is noted that the validity and glory of cities is due to the good people who live in that city as Jesus made the small town of Bethlehem, his birthplace, famous. But the New Testament (Gospel) has a different view on this matter, and the book's view on the position and greatness of Jerusalem is not in agreement with the Old Testament. In comparison to the Torah, in this book, Jerusalem is not the house of God, but rather the place where prophets are killed; the city where the Christian prophet, Jesus, was also crucified.

In the holy book of Muslims, there are verses that address the subject of urbanization and relate to this concept. The value and importance of urbanization in this book is such that one of the chapters of the Quran is named "The City" (*al-Balad*). The verses of this book also address the importance and high status of the city of Mecca, referring to it as a city of peace and security, a city that is the *Qibla* (direction of prayer) for Muslims and where the House of God (Kaaba) is located.

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