

## BOOK REVIEW

### GEOGRAPHICAL DIMENSIONS OF ISLAMICJERUSALEM

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008  
128pp. £29.99. ISBN 9781847186331

**To the untrained** eye, Islamicjerusalem would seem a perplexing and intriguing term in the sense of its unusual integration of the adjective and the noun, as well as the meaning of the term itself. The allusion here is in fact to one of the oldest cornerstones of the monotheistic civilisation and faith, *Bayt al Maqdis* or the region of Islamicjerusalem defined by early and classical Islamic sources. One might be forgiven then, for mistaking the discipline as a novel and innovative one but its subject matter should surely and most definitely be defined as a revival of classical and traditional understandings that are at the heart of Islamic history.

*Geographical dimensions of Islamicjerusalem* is a series of essays which expound upon the significance of a region, rich with sacred history, brought to life by the devotion of its people to the land and obscured by the complexities of competing claims over its territorial identity. Each contribution to this collection of essays adds a new and different slant on the overarching theme of understanding the region in its physical and geographical capacity and the implications of this vital definition and clarification of its boundaries. The area of research is no doubt inspired by the fact that God favoured and chose some places over others. The companions of the early Islamic era were bequeathed with a strong sense of the world outside of their locality, and the region of

Islamic Jerusalem inevitably plays a vital role in the message conveyed through the core Islamic sources and ranks highly amongst those sights ordained as sacred.

*Islamic Jerusalem A New concept and Definitions* precedes the thematically focused essays which follow in the work. Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi begins with a background to the discipline and the meanings behind the new terminology. In particular, a definition of what is meant by the region of Islamic Jerusalem provides the foundational backdrop against which the region is presented throughout the work. Islamic Jerusalem studies as an academic discipline aims to fill the gaps in the knowledge and understanding of the region within modern scholarship.

In *Rediscovering the boundaries of Islamic Jerusalem*, Khalid El-Awaisi takes on the laborious task of demarcating the area surrounding the region in an attempt to map out and define Bayt al-Maqdis. This involves delving into classical historical and geographical accounts of scholars' understandings of the region of Islamic Jerusalem which is found to be distinctly different from modern day definition of the area. Al-Maqdisi and Al-Umari whose demarcations of the region El-Awaisi's work draws heavily upon, are two of the geographers to have set out the boundaries of the region, which other contemporaries can be seen to have taken for granted or as common knowledge. It is the in depth and analytical review of these early accounts which allows the author to depict these physical boundaries in such a rigorous way.

Defining the spiritual and physical connection between the region of Islamic Jerusalem and Makkah the birthplace of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad is the focus of Al-Ratrout's work, *Makkah and Islamic Jerusalem A Divine Prototype*. In this essay, the author argues for an often overlooked prototype of the 'Muslim holy place' further defined by a scientific approach and most importantly used to draw upon the two sites of Makkah and Islamic Jerusalem. The concept of a sacred relationship between the two holy places is one often overlooked, particularly in Western scholarship, whilst the research presents innovative and vital

findings which describe a close and significant link between Islamic Jerusalem and Makkah. The Qur'an and the Hadith primarily inform the findings of this work, thus inspiring the author's insistence on a divine prototype which links the two. Historically, the most obvious feature which unites the two sites is that of the *Qibla*, or a direction of prayer, giving both the Ka'bah in Makkah and Al-Aqsa mosque in Islamic Jerusalem a distinctly sacred and Muslim identity. Furthermore, the author applies an interdisciplinary approach in laying out the architectural and historical development of the two religious sites within these regions. The linguistic similarities between the names of both sites connote a religious and central role that the structures have had in Islamic history. What makes the findings of Al-Ratrout's research particularly intriguing are the many explanations as to why a combination of time and space factors have allowed such similarities to remain in the main unnoticed.

There is as much to be said about the distinctive features of the sanctuaries of Islam in spite of the similarities between them, which inform Abdullah Marouf's work *Al-Aqsa Mosque: Centre of Barakah, Centre of Holiness*. The Qur'anic terminologies used to describe important sanctuaries, highlight the linguistic and technical nuances associated with descriptions of the three sacred sites of Islam, Makkah, Madinah and Al-Aqsa. Here, Marouf uses Qur'anic evidences to draw important distinctions between the three through a deeply analytical consideration of the concepts of Blessed, Sacred and Holy. Why these subtle but vital differences matter, is the author's concern. Marouf's essay is an important example of why the idea of sacred space is seminal to the study of the region of Islamic Jerusalem.

Robert Schick's *Geographical Terminology in Mujir Al-Din's History of Jerusalem* presents useful findings which further add to the important task of defining the region. The region has throughout been referred to by many names Mujir Al-Din's history is specific to the Mamluk period and describes the areas around Jerusalem which he considers to be most noteworthy. Schick expounds upon and summarises the work of Mujir Al-Din in an important and

categorical way. The different names of Jerusalem its administrative boundaries and its merits are discussed in Shick's paper. The importance of such a vital centre of religious, cultural and political activity becomes clear through this detailed portrayal of the region.

Why does Islamic Jerusalem matter and what status have the Islamic scriptures afforded it? Abd Al-Fattah El-Awaisi in this essay demonstrates how the region has come to be understood by those of the great monotheistic traditions as one of rich spiritual and historical import tied closely with the lives of the Prophets. To this end, the terminology of the Qur'an best expounds upon its virtues and is drawn upon here to introduce the authors understanding of the physical and geographical boundaries which are encompassed by what the Qur'an describes as *Barakah*. El-Awaisi further elaborates and presents groundwork on the theory of *Barakah*, wherein the blessed land is covered by three circles which expand from the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the centre of *Barakah*.

**This series of essays** covers an array of in depth and unique perspectives on the region of Islamic Jerusalem. These extend from an introduction to the field of Islamic Jerusalem Studies itself and the research previously conducted therein, to the close structural and spiritual proximity of the epicentre of the region, Al-Aqsa to that of Makkah and Madinah. Within the pages of this work, there is something refreshing to be found in this unique perspective over a disputed territory exhausted and lost in the midst of conflict, debate and the failure of those in power to bring serious or constructive solutions to the front. Meanwhile, as a collection of essays, it is an essential read for scholars within the field of Islamic Jerusalem as well as those interested in the region more generally because it serves as a good example of the level of serious and rigorous study required to unearth and rediscover what the classical Islamic sources have to say about the region. For the reader, delving deeper into the field will surely come to show how worthwhile and praiseworthy such an endeavour is in itself.

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