

ISLAMICJERUSALEM IN THE WRITINGS OF HERIBERT BUSSE

RANA ABU-MOUNES
University of Aberdeen

ABSTRACT: *The history of Islamicjerusalem has been tackled from both differing perspectives and points of view throughout the centuries for many and diverse reasons. The objective of this article is namely to seek to trace the notions of the German Orientalist, Heribert Busse, through some of his publications written from the 1980's until the first decade of the third millennium. This article examines some of his views on the following themes: Busse and the Muslim History and its sources; the al-Aqsa Mosque, and the Night Journey of the Prophet Muhammad. It was found out that Busse's approach has been selective in accepting and rejecting information; and that his approach in dealing with the history of Islamicjerusalem does not reflect a comprehensive understanding of the primary Muslim texts which is a pitfall of some western schools of thought. It has concluded that Busse attempts to cast doubt on the authenticity of the early Muslim sources regarding most of the issues of the first Islamic conquest of Aelia (Islamicjerusalem) and to undervalue the importance of such sources relating to the period of the conquest, is part of his efforts to undermine the significance of Islamicjerusalem in Islam, and presenting the history of Islamicjerusalem from a single point of view.*

KEYWORDS: *Orientalism, Heribert Busse, Muslim history, Al-Aqsa.*

Introduction

The history of Islamicjerusalem¹ has been tackled from both differing perspectives and points of view throughout the centuries for many and diverse reasons. This region² has always been of major concern for Jews, Christians and Muslims.³ It could be said that its religious significance has been one of the main factors that has led the followers of all three monotheistic religions to make strenuous efforts to take over the region by any means. It is

arguably more difficult to adopt a neutral approach in such a case where various religious interests meet and clash.

Many Arab and Muslim scholars and researchers regard the history of Islamicjerusalem and its associated events as an indisputable issue for this region only occupied a minor place in studies which discuss the history of the early Islamic period in general. Consequently, this has opened the door for many writers to start doubting events directly or indirectly related to this subject, some of them even describing Islamic history as legend and myth.

However during the last two centuries, Orientalists who focused on the Muslim history in general and Islamicjerusalem history in particular, have published an extensive literature on the subject.⁴ These scholars have tended to deal with the matter particularly from a historical and theological point of view. Indeed, someone reading the available literature on Muslim history in general and Islamicjerusalem history in particular may easily believe that some of the Orientalist scholars who have written about Islamicjerusalem seem to be rejecting or at least underestimating Muslim sources and accounts.⁵ Consequently, the need for a discussion of the arguments of some modern Orientalist researchers, with particular attention to those who deny the authenticity of events related to Jerusalem from an Islamic point of view appears to be pressing.

Modern studies about Islamicjerusalem may be divided into two different schools (Al-Tel 2003, 19). The first school tends to cast doubt upon the authenticity of the early Islamic sources and overall denies their importance, such as the German Orientalist Heribert Busse, whereas the writers of the second school acknowledge the authenticity of the early Islamic sources in general, yet mention it in only a few brief lines or pages (Al-Tel 2003, 19). Furthermore, it should be noted that the region of Islamicjerusalem under Muslim rule in Orientalists sources has been subject to much alteration and distortion” (Abu-Munshar 2007, 2).

It is vital to the Islamic Jerusalem to gain a better understanding in a more holistic and detailed manner of what has been obscure for a long time, especially because of the “distortion”, “falsification” and “alteration” which Islamic Jerusalem history has suffered from (El-Awaisi 2007, 134). Moreover it is the responsibility of academics to explore the past experiences objectively in order to give a better understanding to the present moment as well as the future. The researcher believes in the importance of the studies and researches that shed light on the issues which raise many discussions and disputation.

This article will therefore seek to trace the notions of the German Orientalist, Heribert Busse, through some of his publications written from the 1980's until the first decade of the third millennium. In his writings, Busse particularly seems to have focused on Jerusalem from an “Islamic point of view”, which has provoked a heated debate among some of his critics (e.g. El-Awaisi 2007; Abu-Munshar 2007; Athamnah 2000; Al-Tel 2003). This article will therefore examine some of his views on the following themes: Busse and the Muslim History and its sources; the al-Aqsa Mosque, and the Night Journey of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Approach of Heribert Busse

Islamic Jerusalem holds a special status for all Muslims and nations. Many verses in the Qur'an (e.g. 17:1; 7:137; 21:69-71; 21:81; 34:18) emphasised the connection between Islamic Jerusalem with many Prophets and with the concept of *Barakah*⁶. Even though Muslim armies, as Armstrong states, did not conquer Jerusalem until 638 CE, some six years after the Prophet's death, Islamic Jerusalem has been regarded holy by Muslims from the very beginning, since it had been the first Muslim *qiblah* i.e. direction for prayer (Armstrong 1997, 10).

Although Busse explicitly acknowledges the significance of Jerusalem in Islam (Busse 2003, 2), he, at the same time, tries to refute this idea by highlighting a number of points, such as the fact that it is not directly mentioned by name in the Qur'an (Busse

2003, 2). He argues that the Muslim tradition has “created” an image of Jerusalem that combined Jewish and Christian elements with specifically Islamic ones (Busse 2003, 2). This article thus attempts to study the approach of Heribert Busse to the historical and theological aspects of Islamic Jerusalem. However, his work on the history of Islam and Muslim in general is excluded unless it is pertinent to these aspects.

Heribert Busse, Professor at the University of Kiel is one of Europe's most renowned scholars in Middle Eastern Studies and Comparative Religion. His work on Islamic Jerusalem appears to have been conducted from a number of angles, based on -as he claims- an Islamic point of view⁷. In his articles, Busse addresses the Night Journey of Prophet Muhammad, the first Muslim conquest of Jerusalem and ‘Umar as a conqueror, and the relationship between Solomon’s Temple and the Ka’bah as well as between the cities of Jerusalem and Makkah.

In order to obtain a thorough study of Busse’ writings on Islamic Jerusalem, the researcher will analyse five of his articles on the subject matter to determine his approach and methodology. Most of the writings of this German Orientalist are either in German or English. However, it was difficult to find an English equivalent to some of his German articles on the subject matter. This research exclusively concentrates on a variety of Busse’s English articles in this regard. These are: “Umar’s Image as the Conqueror of Jerusalem” (1986), “Jerusalem and Mecca, the Temple and the Kaaba: An account of their interrelation in Islamic times” (1986), “Jerusalem in the Story of Muhammad’s Night Journey and Ascension” (1991), “The Destruction of the Temple and its Reconstruction in the Light of Muslim Exegesis of Surah 17:2-8” (1996) and “Jerusalem” (2003).

Busse and the Muslim History and its Sources

Although there are many details in the history of Islamic Jerusalem which are considered as postulates because of the agreement among Muslim and non-Muslim narrations, Busse still seems to ignore the facts and consensus among historians much of the time.

This is clear when he claims that what is narrated by the Islamic sources about the first Muslim conquest of Aelia is a legend created by Muslim historians in order to give the city a holy Islamic character (Busse 1986, 161). Busse attempts to highlight the differences in the Muslim accounts in order to show that the early Muslim historians had no consensus on the subject matter, therefore justification enough to identify all those accounts as myths and legends.

Many researchers (e.g. such as al-Tel and Athaminah) have however examined the different names and dates that are related to the first conquest of Islamicjerusalem and arrived at a convincing conclusion over the confusions over names and dates rather than questioning the occurrence of the event itself. There is indeed a disagreement and contradiction among the Muslim narratives and sources with regards to the real date of the conquest, as historical accounts have reported different dates generally extending between the years 15-17 A.H/ 636-638 A.D. This can certainly cause some inaccuracies, errors and contradictions about the exact dates of many events, nevertheless some might evaluate these inaccuracies as “a natural phenomenon” in the writing of history (al-Tel 2003, 119). This, however, would not necessarily lead to the complete rejection of these accounts resulting in the belief of uncertainty of their occurrence. The issue of Umar’s visit at the time of the first Muslim conquest has the consensus of early Muslims (e.g. al-Waqidi and al-Tabari) and non-Muslim (e.g. Euty chius and Theophanes) historians and was not previously contested issue.

While Busse rejects the Muslim accounts of the conquest of Islamicjerusalem as myth and legend, he simultaneously seems to utilise them in order to present some of his opinions with a great degree of finesse, in that way appearing to establish conclusive facts. For instance, Busse puts forth that “according to Islamic tradition the conquest of Jerusalem took place in autumn 636, following the decisive battle on the Yarmuk which was fought on Rajab 12th, 15 A.H. (August 20th, 636 A.D)” (Busse 1986, 149). Busse starts his article with this sentence as if there was consensus

among historians. Whereas if we look at the works of Muslim historians as is presented by al-Tel we can easily notice that as he states “Islamic narratives and sources seem to disagree and actually contradict one another with regards to the real date of the conquest as they report different dates extending between the years 15-17 A.H 636-638 A.D” (Al-Tel 2003, 109).

This raises the question of the methodology in historical inquiry; if “the historian is to let the text speak for itself or merely let history speak for itself” (Buaben 1996, 320). In this case, Busse does not seem to have allowed history to speak freely for itself, but rather he is very selective. One of his flaws is that he tends to cast doubt on many of the classical Muslim traditions, and attributes less credit to contemporary Muslim historians (Busse 1996, 1). Consequently he seems to be relying quite often on his own conjectures.

At the same time, Busse appears to have shown a tendency of ignoring or belittling Islamic thought and sources by attributing them to pre-Islamic practices or accusing them of dependence on certain foreign sources, such as Persian, Greek, or Roman. In one of his articles he concludes that the interpretation of the Qur’anic chapter 17:2-8 “has been dominantly adopted from the Biblical account as it has been developed in Rabbinical and Patristic literature, adjusting it as to bring it in line with the Muslim creed” (Busse 1996,16). Also he maintains that many stories with a biblical background are undoubtedly situated in Jerusalem and some of these stories have been included in the holy book of the Muslims (Busse 2003, 2).

With this approach, Busse seems to have been rather selective choosing only to paint a negative picture of the Qur’an exegesis firstly, by stating “Something seems to be missing at the beginning of 17:2” (Busse 1996, 2). Secondly, he completely ignores the more objective sources (e.g. Ibn Kathir, Ibn al-‘Arabī) and depends exclusively on foreign researchers to extract his outcomes. He verifies his opinions by referring to Richard Bell, Regis Blachere, and Rudi Paret whom he claims gave short comments on it in their

“respective” translations of the Qur'an. Furthermore, he criticises one of the healthy phenomena in dealing with Qur'anic texts identifying it as a weak point in the field. For instance, he focuses on the differences between the exegetes, such as al-Zamakhsharī, al-Qurtūbī, and al-Baydawī's interpretations of the same phrase which demonstrate simulating and robust argument reading these texts. Busse again has followed in the footsteps of many Orientalist in depending on sources not specialized in the topics he deals with, such as Angelika Neuwirth, as a source for examination of Surah 17:2-8 (Busse 1996, 2).

One of the points that captured the researcher's attention while reading Busse's article is that he mentions that “the only reliable and independent report on the siege of Jerusalem by the early Arab conquerors is the Greek-Orthodox patriarch of Jerusalem Sophronius” (Busse 1986, 150). One wonders why he asserts this so strongly. Several questions should be asked. What is his intension in using the word “only”? to whom is Sophronius considered to be the most reliable reporter and lastly in what way can he be regarded as independent or not. The researcher finds a similar approach in another article when he says “Richard Bell, Regis Blachere, and Rudi Paret in their “respective” translations of the Qur'an” (Busse 1996.1). Again why does he take these for granted and question the Muslim sources? Surely a better argument could be developed by quoting sources from all sides of the debate.

Busse and the al-Aqṣā Mosque⁸

Busse tries, in his articles, to maintain a link between the al-Aqṣā Mosque and the Jewish Temple and between the Temple and the Ka'bah (Busse 1996 and 1986). The objective, as he maintains, is “to back their [Muslim] claim to the Temple Mount (al-Ḥaram al-Sharif), whose buildings are, in their [Muslim] opinion, the true successor to the Temple” (Busse 1996, 1), and to give an outline of the subject, full treatment, and a more comprehensive study of the sources (Busse 1986, 236).

Busse comes up with conclusions which, from an Islamic and Muslim point of view, appear to be rather unacceptable and illusory. He moreover tends to repeat these arguments in several of his articles, so much so that they are established as facts for later researchers. One of Busse's main arguments in this regard is that Muslims have not only "occupied" the site, but rebuilt the Temple in its original splendor and shape (Busse 1996, 17). Also he furthermore alleges the presence of three main similarities between the "Jewish" temple and the Ka'bah. First, the temple and the Ka'bah have a common foundation in Semitic religion. Second, after the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, two successors arose: the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Muslim Ḥaram al-Sharif "which occupies the site previously occupied by the temple". Third, a transfer of traditions occurred from the Temple to the Ka'bah via the Ḥaram al-Sharif or the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in order to make the Ka'bah a sanctuary equal to the Temple or even superior to it (Busse 1986).

Busse and al-Isra' wa al-Mi'raj

The Night Journey and Ascension happened during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. According to Muslim faith, he is believed to have travelled to Islamic Jerusalem during the night from al-Masjid al-Haram in Makkah, and ascended from there to the highest of Heavens. Nor argued that "Islamic Jerusalem is the only land which serves as a medium of the relation between earth and Heaven" (Nor 2006, 3). He added that the Night Journey shows the importance of Islamic Jerusalem as the mediator between humankind and the Creator (Nor 2006, 3).

Although Busse is one among those writers who agree that Jerusalem is the intended interpretation in the Qur'an 17:1 (Busse 1991, 25; Busse 2003, 3), however, he argues that the terms Isra' and Mi'raj meant essentially the same thing, i.e. a heavenly journey (Busse 1991, 37). He also mixes various issues up and tries to divide them into parts based on his opinion and ignoring the view of Muslim scholars, he concludes that al-Isra' and al-Mi'raj are two words with identical meaning. Moreover he separates the journey into three categories: the ascension (Mi'raj); the journey to Bayt al-

Maqdis; and finally the journey to Bayt al-Maqdis and the ascension as if it differs from the preceding parts. Busse furthermore seems to imply that the books of history and *ḥadīth* misunderstand or at least misread the reports received from the Prophet.

Although accepting that the Night Journey was to Jerusalem, Busse rejects the whole meaning and purpose of Isra' and Mi'raj as a fabrication merely to serve various purposes: the legitimizing of the five daily prayers, the strict prohibition on the drinking of wine; the permission for bleeding (Ḥijāma), and function as a vehicle for the adoption of Christian teachings (Busse 1991). It must be noted that many of the alleged purposes for the journey, have not been linked with this journey in the Islamic sources; for example the prohibition of wine happened many years after the Night Journey, only after the migration to Madina. This is reflected in that all the verses are recorded only in Madani chapters (Qur'an 2:219; 4:43; 5:90).

Moreover, the argument that the prophets whom Muhammad met on his way to Jerusalem and to *al-bait al-ma'mur* (in the heavens) is recognised the superiority of Islam. He further adds that one of the major purposes of the story was to inform the Muslim believers of the secrets of Heaven and Hell. He concludes that the idea of including Jerusalem in the number of Muslim holy places by declaring the Temple Mount (i.e. al-Aqsa Mosque) is the goal of Muhammad's Night Journey and his prayer in Jerusalem and his Ascension from there have superseded the other aspects of the story of Isra' and Mi'raj (Busse 1991, 39-41). Thus, again according to Busse the story was fabricated to give justification to various Muslim claims and by asserting this idea he questioned a belief absolutely fundamental to Muslims. Moreover on the contrary, another scholar, Karen Armstrong, disagrees with these conclusions by presenting other interpretations of this journey states that rather it symbolised the Muslims' conviction of continuity and solidarity with the older faiths. The flight of their Prophet from the Ka'bah to the Temple Mount also revealed the transference of Mecca's holiness to Jerusalem, al-Masjid al-Aqsa

(Armstrong 1996, 225). She added that there was a divinely established connection between the two cities (Armstrong 1996, 225).

Conclusion

In short, Busse's approach in dealing with the history of Islamic Jerusalem does not reflect a comprehensive understanding of the primary Muslim texts which is a pitfall of some western schools of thought. This study has arrived at many important conclusions. On one hand, Busse attempts to cast doubt on the authenticity of the early Muslim sources regarding most of the issues of the first Islamic conquest of Aelia (Islamic Jerusalem) and to undervalue the importance of such sources relating to the period of the conquest, thus undermining the significance of Islamic Jerusalem in Islam, and presenting the history of Islamic Jerusalem from a single point of view. He not only cast doubt on the authenticity of the early sources, but also attempts to deny the historical fact of Caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab's visit to the region of Islamic Jerusalem. Busse claims that the Muslim conquest is embellished with imaginary myths and legends, and that consequently there remain few authentic accounts from this stage ignoring the fact that these accounts are supported by many written by non-Muslims, some despising Umar and the Muslims such as Theophanes.

It has been clear that Busse's approach has been selective in accepting and rejecting information. For example, he is amongst the few non-Muslim writers who accept that Jerusalem is the intended interpretation in the Qur'an for the Night Journey. However, at the same time, he argues that the terms Isra' and Mi'raj mean essentially the same thing, i.e. a heavenly journey and proceeds to question the reasons why it was fabricated. Busse is also selective when explicitly acknowledging the significance of Jerusalem in Islam, tries at the same time to refute this idea by highlighting many points such as that it is not mentioned by name in the Qur'an.

Busse does not abide by scholarly objectivity; his writings are simply polemic in many ways. He selected and used the evidence to support conclusions determined in advance. In deed one can see bias even from the titles used. For example in “Omar’s Image as The Conqueror of Jerusalem”, he gives the impression to the reader from the beginning that what he/she is going to read is questionable. In addition, he keeps repeating many words with negative connotation and shows his bias and subjectivity by using such words as “legend”, “allegedly”, “versions of the fall” and many others.

Studying the writings of Heribert Busse has lead the researcher to agree with El-Awaisi in his argument that Orientalists have tried to underestimate generally the relevance of the Qur'an and Hadith to the thinking of Muslims and particularly the importance of Islamic Jerusalem within the Qur'an and Hadith (El-Awaisi 2007, 134). This has been particularly true for Busse who throughout his writings has tried to underestimate the writings of Muslim scholars and regard them much of the time as myth and legend, and at the same time accepting non-Muslim accounts as the authority. For such a troubled important pivotal region such as Islamic Jerusalem one sees that the background of the author may play a large part in their interpretation of its history and importance to other faiths. This would need further investigation in the case of Busse, but it must be noted that mutual respect amongst scholars is essential whatever their background.

As is the case with many issues, one has to be aware of the background of the problem; the long standing misunderstanding caused by the Orientalist approach is a major factor. As noted earlier, one should let history and the texts speak for themselves. In the spirit of fairness, it should be said that even some contemporary books on Islam by Muslim authors suffer from similar shortcomings. Certainly, not all Western writings on Islamic history have the same degree of bias. There are even a few that could be classified as sincere efforts by non-Muslims to portray the history of Islam and Muslims in an impartial objective light.

Therefore the study recommends, scholars from different backgrounds should continue to contribute and participate in conferences and debates which open the channels for academics on both/all sides to debate more easily and effectively. The works of Arabic and Islamic students of Orientalism must aim at scrutinising and criticising their own studies. At the same time they should be prepared to take the lead in presenting their history and other subjects as they are in reality objectively and accurately without addition or decrease by doing so take the next step in depicting their selves before others do that in their behalf. Mutual respect and trust are necessary.

Bibliography

- Abu-Munshar, M. 2007. *Islamic Jerusalem and its Christians*. London: Tauris Academic Studies.
- Athamina, K. 2000. *Filastin Fi Khamsat Qurun*. Beirut: Palestine Studies Institute.
- Armstrong, K. 1996. *A History of Jerusalem One City, Three Faiths*. London: Harper Collins Publisher.
- Armstrong, K. 1997. 'Sacred Space: The Holiness of Islamicjerusalem', *Journal of Islamicjerusalem Studies*, vol.1, no. 1
- Azzam, S 1980. *Jerusalem: the key to world Peace*. London: Islamic Council of Europe.
- Buaben, J. 1996. *Image of the Prophet Muhammad in the West: A Study of Muir, Margoliouth and Watt*. UK: The Islamic Foundation.
- Busse, H.
1986. Omar's Image as The Conqueror of Jerusalem. *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*. Vol. 8: 149-168
1986. Jerusalem and Mecca, the Temple and the Kaaba. An account of their interrelation in Islamic times. In M.Sharon (ed). *The Holy Land in history and thought; papers submitted to die International Conference on the Relations between the Holy Land and the World Outside It*. Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers.

1991. Jerusalem in the Story of Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension. *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*. Vol. 14: 1-40.
1996. The Destruction of the Temple and its Reconstruction in the Light of Muslim Exegesis of Surah 17:2-8. *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*. Vol. 20: 1-17.
2003. Jerusalem. *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*. Leiden: Brill. Vol. 3: J-O. Bstn
- El-Awaisi, A. 2007. *Introducing Islamic Jerusalem*. Dundee: Al-Maktoum Institute Academic press
- Nor, R. 2006. Islamic Jerusalem: The Land of the Night journey and Ascension. *Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies*. Vol. 7.
- Al-Ratrout, H. 2004. *The Architectural Development of Al-Aqsa Mosque in Islamic Jerusalem in the Early Islamic Period Sacred Architectural in the Shape of 'The Holy'*. Dundee: Al-Maktoum Institute Academic Press.
- Al-Tel, O. 2003. *The First Islamic Conquest of Aelia (Islamic Jerusalem): A Critical Analytical Study of the Early Islamic Historical Narratives and Sources*. Dundee: Al-Maktoum Institute
- Al-Waqidi, M. nd. *Futuh al-Sham*. ND: Al-Maktabah al-Tawfiqiah