

6 The symbolism of Jerusalem in early Islam

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As soon as the invading Muslims captured Jerusalem in 638 CE, they laid claim to its religious heritage. Their veneration of the city led many Muslims to make pilgrimages to visit its holy sites and to create literature in praise of them. Judging from a variety of later Muslim testimonies, the rituals that were performed on the Temple Mount area ranged from *wuquf* rituals (the customary prayer-while-standing that is part of the pilgrimage ceremony in Mecca) to prayers and liturgical readings associated with specific sites (Elad 1995; Hasson 1996). This veneration may be first displayed in the partly-legendary story of caliph 'Umar b. al-Khattab's trip from Medina to negotiate the terms of the surrender of Jerusalem. 'Umar, escorted by Sophronius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, toured the many holy sites in the city, and made a point of going up to the Temple Mount area and leading his followers in cleansing it from the manure and dirt that was thrown there, as the story goes, by Christians in order to desecrate it.¹ A few decades later, the fifth caliph, Mu'awiya, who was also the founder of the Umayyad dynasty (r. 661–680 CE) that ruled the Muslim world between 661 and 750 CE, chose to be crowned in Jerusalem (al-Tabari 1987, 6), even though he belonged to one of the most prestigious and powerful families of Mecca. His successors spent lavishly to adorn the horizon of Jerusalem, in particular the Temple Mount area, with distinctively Islamic structures, and they regarded that achievement as the height of their mission to spread the message of Islam.²

The two most notable examples of Umayyad sanctification of Jerusalem as one of Islam's holiest cities are the Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa mosque. The Dome of the Rock, which was completed in 692 CE, was built by order of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705 CE). The Aqsa mosque was completed around 710 CE by order of 'Abd al-Malik's son al-Walid (r. 705–715 CE). Although the Dome's architecture is heavily influenced by the architectural style used for Christian churches and martyrums in Palestine (Grabar 1959; Chen 1999), the inscription inside of it, which dates to the time of its first construction, shows the obvious signs of an emerging new religion, the religion of Muhammad; the building was subjected to major renovations and partial reconstructions over the centuries.³

As for the Aqsa mosque, it conveys an unambiguously Islamic message. This leads to two questions: why did the early Muslims cherish and promote the religious symbolism of Jerusalem, and why did two powerful caliphs who left their marks on the formation and spread of Islam as a religion invest so much wealth in the city?⁴

It is often taken for granted that the Muslims' reverence for Jerusalem stems from two episodes in the career of the prophet Muhammad.

The first is his Night Journey (*isra'*) to Jerusalem and Ascension to Heaven (*mi'raj*). It is believed that Muhammad was transported by night from Mecca to Jerusalem on a heavenly stallion-like creature—named *al-Buraq*—where he prayed on the Temple Mount and then ascended to Heaven to meet with God. Although it has been believed since the later Middle Ages that these legend-stories in connection with Jerusalem are true, early Muslim scholars were not at all in agreement regarding the reality of the two experiences, their sequence, and whether or not they occurred in Jerusalem. Some scholars dissociated the two events as separate incidents and did not accept them as real; with particular reference to the Qur'anic material (verse 17.1), there was a disagreement as to whether it was Muhammad's soul or body that made the trip and whether that experience was in Jerusalem, since the Qur'anic text refers simply to an "Aqsa mosque" without any further clarification. Most of those who asserted that Muhammad could have seen Jerusalem—making the connection between the Aqsa mosque and Jerusalem's Temple Mount area—admitted that the vision was in the form of a dream.⁵

The second episode is the adoption of Jerusalem by the Muhammad movement as the first direction of prayer (*qibla*) until the Ka'ba in Mecca was chosen as the final *qibla*. The issue of the direction of prayer (*qibla*) is somewhat similar to that of the Night Journey and Ascension. The reference in the Qur'an 2.142–152, especially the lines *Turn then your face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque. Wherever you are, turn your faces in its direction* (Q. 2.144), does not identify Jerusalem nor allude to it in any way as the first *qibla*, and nowhere else in the Qur'an is there a mention of Jerusalem as the first *qibla*. Yet the practice of praying toward Jerusalem is described in a number of sources, mostly *Sira* (Life and Career of the Prophet Muhammad) books and Hadith collections. There is, however, a disagreement as to where and when the practice started and for how long it remained in effect.⁶

What can be inferred from these observations is that Jerusalem's significance in the first century of Islam did not yet derive exclusively from its association with any episode in the career of Muhammad; the Night Journey and Ascension legends, in particular, were still very fluid narratives and thus could not have been the foundations upon which early Muslims based their veneration of Jerusalem.

The Muslims' veneration of particular towns and regions led to the development of a genre of religious literature called *Fada'il*, meaning

"religious merits."⁷ Generally, such works were authored by scholars who came from the town or region about which they wrote; almost all *Fada'il* works on Mecca were authored by residents of the city, and likewise with other regions. Jerusalem obviously received its share of these *Fada'il* works. The first examples were written by minor scholars, which is also the case throughout the *Fada'il* works, suggesting that the genre did not establish itself among the notable religious sciences until a much later time—in the case of Jerusalem, until the period of the Crusades.

In this chapter I will examine the earliest Muslim work on the *Fada'il* of Jerusalem in order to identify how the early Muslims recognized and celebrated the sacredness of Jerusalem, how the process of Islamizing the city was achieved, and how it later changed as a result of the capture of the city by the Crusaders. The work that I will be discussing is *Fada'il Bayt al-Maqdis* (literally, the Merits of the Holy House) by al-Walid b. Hammad al-Ramli al-Zayyat (d. 912 CE); the original text is now lost, but it has been almost completely preserved in later works on the same subject.

Al-Ramli and his work

Fortunately, the *Fada'il* of al-Ramli can be reconstructed with great precision as to its size, scope, and arrangement on the basis of two later texts on the same topic written by scholars from Jerusalem: *Fada'il al-Bayt al-Muqaddas* (The Merits of Jerusalem) by Abu Bakr Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Wasiti (d. after 1019 CE), who served as the main preacher (*khatib*) at the Aqsa mosque, and *Fada'il Bayt al-Maqdis wa-l-Khalil wa-fada'il al-Sham* (The Merits of Jerusalem and Hebron, and the Merits of Syria) by Abu al-Ma'ali al-Musharraf b. al-Murajja al-Maqdisi (eleventh century CE), who made a moderate reputation for himself as a transmitter of Hadith.⁸

Al-Ramli came from the town of Ramla, southwest of Jerusalem. He was known in the learned circles of his time as a scholar, albeit a minor one; his other profession was selling olive oil, inferred from his epithet *al-Zayyat* (the oil-seller). He traveled in Syria and visited such cities as Damascus, Jerusalem, and Tiberias to study Hadith, although his main passion was popular history.⁹ The assessment of al-Ramli by the Damascene scholar Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi (d. 1348 CE) also points to him as an amateur scholar. Al-Dhahabi describes al-Ramli too as having been very pious (*wakana rabbaniyyan*) and adds that he knew of no negative charge against him. But then al-Dhahabi remarks that al-Ramli did his share of transmitting poorly authenticated *hadiths* (al-Dhahabi, 14:79). In the opinion of al-Dhahabi and other medieval critics, popular subjects like storytelling and *Fada'il* attracted minor scholars who often confused factual history with myth, which disqualifies Hadith accounts disseminated in such contexts, since these minor scholars would not have the expertise to distinguish authentic accounts from forged or untrustworthy ones.¹⁰

The earliest ascription of the work to al-Ramli comes from the same al-Dhahabi. Yet, inferences about its existence can be found in the works of al-Wasiti and Abu al-Ma'ali, both of whom acknowledge that al-Ramli had a book in which he collected traditions regarding the *Fada'il* of Jerusalem (al-Wasiti, 51–52, no. 78; and Abu al-Ma'ali, 98, no. 99). Therefore, there is no reason to doubt that al-Ramli had authored a work on the *Fada'il* of Jerusalem.¹¹ Moreover, all surviving accounts regarding the sanctity of Jerusalem that were related on the authority of al-Ramli were passed down via one chain of transmission: al-Ramli → al-Fadl b. Muhajir al-Maqdisi → 'Umar b. al-Fadl b. Muhajir al-Maqdisi, which also indicates that we are dealing with an authored text.¹²

Al-Ramli's work was al-Wasiti's principal source; he is quoted for 118 accounts, constituting more than 70 percent of al-Wasiti's *Fada'il*. With respect to Abu al-Ma'ali, he quotes al-Ramli for 110 accounts, slightly more than 25 percent of his material on the merits of Jerusalem, which implies that al-Ramli's work was also a major source for him. What is worth mentioning here is that 24 accounts out of the 110 quoted from al-Ramli by Abu al-Ma'ali do not appear in al-Wasiti's text, so that al-Wasiti did not quote the complete work of al-Ramli. This can be attributed to two possible causes. First, it can be argued that al-Wasiti meant to show that he was not simply copying a previous work, but rather composing his own, so he included reports from other sources. As for Abu al-Ma'ali, his travels for education brought him into contact with a wider network of scholars and information; moreover, his work was not limited to the merits of Jerusalem, but includes reports on the merits of Hebron and greater Syria.

In his accounts on the *Fada'il* of Jerusalem, al-Ramli quotes 37 informants, most of whom were from Syria and Palestine; of these he most frequently quotes four, all of whom came from Jerusalem and the surrounding area. These informants were the following.

Ibrahim b. Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Firyabi. His father, Muhammad, was a well-known scholar of Hadith who moved the family from Iraq to the coastal Palestinian town of Caesarea, where he died in 821 CE. Al-Firyabi moved from Caesarea to Jerusalem and established himself there as a teacher of Hadith. He died some time around the year 860 CE. Al-Ramli quotes 41 accounts from al-Firyabi, whom he almost certainly met in Jerusalem.

Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b. al-Nu'man al-Saqati. He originally came from Nishapur in northeastern Iran; he resided in Jerusalem and visited Damascus where he studied Hadith and other subjects with some of the local scholars there. He died in Jerusalem in 881 CE. Al-Ramli transmits 23 accounts from al-Saqati, and must have met him in Jerusalem. Moreover, it appears, as can be determined from the works of al-Wasiti and Abu al-Ma'ali, that al-Saqati developed a particular interest in the *Fada'il* of Jerusalem. Besides the 23 accounts transmitted from him by al-Ramli, 43 other accounts are quoted in the works of al-Wasiti and Abu al-Ma'ali, 40 of

which are passed down by one person from Jerusalem, named Muhammad b. Ibrahim b. 'Isa al-Maqdisi. This suggests that al-Saqati might have even authored a work on the topic.

Abu al-Qasim 'Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammad b. Mansur b. Thabit b. Istanbiyadh al-Farisi al-Khumsī. Little is known about al-Khumsī except what can be deduced from the stories he transmitted. They relate to the condition of the Aqsa mosque in the Umayyad and early 'Abbasid periods, suggesting that al-Khumsī's family had inhabited Jerusalem since the time of 'Abd al-Malik and were involved in the service of the Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa mosque. It is very likely that their great ancestor Istanbiyadh was brought to the city as a Persian slave, inferred from the *nisba* al-Khumsī al-Farisi; *al-Farisi* indicates Persian descent, and *al-Khumsī* is derived from *khums*, the tax that early Muslim caliphs levied for the state from military spoils (which included slaves), a practice that was started by the prophet Muhammad. This indicates that, like several other slaves, al-Khumsī al-Farisi was brought to the Temple Mount area by the Umayyads to serve in its upkeep (Elad 1995, 51–52). Al-Ramli transmits from al-Khumsī ten accounts, nine of which feature in their line of transmission the names of al-Khumsī's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather (Elad 1995, 17–18; Mourad 1996, 37–38).

Abu 'Umayr 'Isa b. Muhammad Ibn al-Nahhas al-Ramli. He was a native of al-Ramla and was well known in the Hadith circles of Syria and Palestine as a trustworthy scholar; it is said that many students of Hadith journeyed to Ramla to study with him. He died in 869 CE. Al-Ramli likely knew Ibn al-Nahhas in Ramla, as he transmits from him six accounts.

Besides these four informants who came from Jerusalem and its environs, al-Ramli received some of the accounts of Jerusalem's sacredness by corresponding with a scholar in northern Syria who, in al-Ramli's opinion, had access to important information that could not otherwise be found. This scholar was Ahmad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Hawti al-Jabali (d. 894), a resident of the coastal town of Jabala in northwestern Syria. The fact that he was in correspondence with scholars also demonstrates that al-Ramli was indeed composing a book, and not simply collecting material for no apparent purpose.

The dependence of al-Ramli on 37 informants shows that the traditions about the sacredness of Jerusalem were in circulation in the eighth and ninth centuries CE, although they were primarily disseminated by local scholars, in particular those residing in and around Jerusalem (Mourad 1996). Some of these scholars, especially the five identified above, seem to have developed a specialty in the *Fada'il* of Jerusalem, or at least were known to have access to valuable stories about its sanctity.

Al-Ramli must have finished assembling most of the reports for his book early in the second half of the ninth century CE, which can be deduced from the obituary dates of his informants, most of whom died between 855 and 881 CE (Mourad 1996, 38–39).

The religious symbolism of Jerusalem according to al-Ramli's *Fada'il*

The text of al-Ramli provides us with some information about the religious symbolism of Jerusalem and the foundations upon which the early Muslims based their perception of the city's holiness. Al-Ramli begins with the famous *hadith* that establishes three places as the only destinations of pilgrimage: "The Messenger of God said: 'You shall only set out on pilgrimage for three mosques: the sacred mosque (in Mecca), my mosque (in Medina), and the Aqsa mosque (in Jerusalem)' " (al-Wasiti, 3–4, no. 1).¹³ As if in order to explain why Jerusalem merits inclusion in such a prophetic pronouncement, al-Ramli then states that Jerusalem's significance originated with the Temple that once stood there. He relates, among other accounts, the following story regarding the circumstances of the construction of the Temple:

When God ordered David to build the Temple (*masjid Bayt al-Maqdis*), he asked, "O God, where should I build it?" God said: "In the spot where you see the angel raising his sword." He (David) saw him (the angel) at that spot, so he proceeded with setting up the foundations and building the walls. But when the walls reached a certain height, they collapsed. David asked God: "You commanded me to build for you a house (*bayt*), but when it reached a certain height you caused it to collapse!" God replied: "O David, whom I made my deputy (*khalifatī*) among my people, why did you take the land from its owner without restitution? A son of yours will build it instead." So when Solomon's succession came, he negotiated with the owner of the land to buy it . . . , and built (the Temple) . . . Then Solomon appointed from the Israelites ten thousand reciters [to recite the Torah], five thousand during the day and five thousand during the night. Not a single hour passes, whether at night or day, without having someone worship God in it.

(al-Wasiti, 6–7, no. 5; Abu al-Ma'ali, 12, no. 4)

Clearly, this story is a collage of biblical narratives, especially 2 Samuel 7:1–17 and 24, 1 Kings 5:5 and 8:17–21, and 1 Chronicles 21:15–22.1 and 22.6–10. In the case of 2 Samuel 7:1–17, David is told through a prophecy that he is not to build the Temple, but a son of his will build it, and the prophecy is retold to be fulfilled in 1 Kings 5:5, 8:17–21, and 1 Chronicles 22.6–10. As for 2 Samuel 24, which is restated in 1 Chronicles 21:15–22.1, David builds an altar for God on the site where the angel of God, sent to destroy Jerusalem, was standing with his sword unsheathed; the biblical account places this incident in the context of the plague that struck Jerusalem.

Al-Ramli further specifies why David was prohibited from building the Temple:

God revealed to David: "You shall not build the Temple (*masjid Bayt al-Maqdis*)." He said: "But God, why?" God replied: "Because your

hands are polluted with blood." David asked: 'O God, but wasn't that in your service?' God replied: "Yes, even though it was."

(al-Wasiti, 7–8, no. 6; Abu al-Ma'ali, 15, no. 7)

This legend of David's hands being polluted with blood because of his fighting in the name of God is encountered in 1 Chronicles 22:7–9. But certain details in these stories indicate that they depended on biblical exegesis; for example, the comment that God reprimanded David for taking the land without restitution (1 Chronicles 21:25 states that David paid "six hundred shekels of gold by weight for the site"), and that God replied to David's complaint that shedding blood was in God's service with "even though it was."

Another theme that is addressed in al-Ramli's *Fada'il* relates to the benefits of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. According to the following report, when the construction of the Temple was completed, Solomon made a prayer that was intended as a blessing to those who come to it:

When the prophet of God Solomon, peace be on him, finished [the Temple's] construction, he ordered the slaughtering of three thousand heifers and seven thousand goats. Then he prayed, saying: "O God, when a sinful person visits it [the Temple] forgive his sin, and when a sick person visits it heal his sickness." No one visits the Temple but receives the blessing of Solomon's prayer.

(Abu al-Ma'ali, 92, no. 87)

This narrative, which is clearly lifted from Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8:22–53, concludes with a rather interesting comment, obviously not found in the biblical account, again attesting to exegetical glosses made on the text. It uses the future tense to bestow a certain validity on Solomon's plea for blessing that is associated with the site, irrespective of whether or not the Temple stands there, as if the Temple were synonymous with the Temple Mount area. Hence, what the Muslim redactor meant by quoting this prayer of Solomon is that its value is not time-restricted, and therefore, the "current" visitor to the Dome of the Rock receives the blessing of Solomon's prayer.

Moreover, the pilgrim is encouraged to visit Jerusalem as part of the pilgrimage, for it bestows a level of purity that cannot be attained otherwise. According to Ibn 'Abbas (d. 687 CE), a cousin of Muhammad and one of the major early Muslim authorities on Hadith and Qur'anic exegesis: "He who makes the pilgrimage [to Mecca], prays in the mosque of Medina, and [prays] in the Aqsa mosque in one season, is purified from his sins as if he has just been born" (Abu al-Ma'ali, 161, no. 215).

Leaving aside the issue of authenticity, further accounts in al-Ramli's *Fada'il* share the theme of the importance of pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the need to avoid all those practices that might compromise the experience.

For example, al-Ramli relates that the pilgrim to Jerusalem must avoid visiting Christian sites:

He who visits the Temple of Jerusalem should also visit David's prayer place on the eastern side, and pray in both of them. He should too submerge himself in the spring of Siloam [Sulwan], because it comes forth from Heaven. But He should not enter the churches nor buy for himself a dwelling-place because the sin in [Jerusalem] equals one thousand sins [elsewhere] and the good deed equals one thousand good deeds [elsewhere].

(al-Wasiti, 44, no. 61; Abu al-Ma'ali, 249, no. 374)

The popular practice of pilgrimaging to Jerusalem, sometimes on the way to Mecca or back, received a categorical rejection and condemnation from a few later Muslim scholars such as the Damascene theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE), who also argued that praying in Jerusalem is legitimate only if it takes place in the Aqsa mosque (Ibn Taymiyya, 7–17). Ibn Taymiyya was undoubtedly reacting to what he considered unorthodox popular practices. But obviously this was not yet a concern for al-Ramli and his sources, nor for al-Wasiti and Abu al-Ma'ali who quoted the previous account from al-Ramli.

To return to the question of the Temple's sanctity, al-Ramli provides one basis for it: the presence of the Rock (*al-Sakhra*). As if to explain the reason David and then Solomon chose that particular site upon which to build the Temple, al-Ramli relates several accounts regarding the Rock's sacredness, one of which has God praising it as His earthly throne:

It is written in the Torah that God said to the Rock of Jerusalem: "You are my earthly throne. From you I ascended to heaven. From beneath you I spread the earth, and every stream that flows from the mountains originates from underneath you."

(al-Wasiti, 69, no. 111; Abu al-Ma'ali, 106, no. 113)

Not only did the earthly rivers spring from underneath the Rock, the heavenly rivers do as well: "From underneath the Rock spring four of the rivers of Paradise: Jaxartes (*Sayhan*), Oxus (*Jayhan*), Euphrates (*al-Furat*), and Nile (*al-Nil*)" (al-Wasiti, 68, no. 110; and Abu al-Ma'ali, 106, no. 112). These accounts have a clear biblical foundation and reflect the kind of Jewish legends regarding the Rock's sanctity that were produced following the destruction of the Temple, leaving the Rock its only remaining part.¹⁴ In the particular case of the four rivers tradition, there is an obvious allusion to Genesis 2:10–14, where the river that flows out of Eden divides into four rivers when reaching the Garden of Eden: Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates (the only variation is that in al-Ramli's text the river Nile replaces the Tigris). Moreover, the theme of water flowing out of the Temple is

also encountered in the Old Testament, in Ezekiel 47. So it is not far fetched to conclude that the Rock/Temple becomes the earthly Eden, inasmuch as the Temple's most holy section, the Holy of Holies, was believed in biblical times to be God's dwelling place, which was located exactly above the Rock.

The intense sanctification of the Temple Mount area, especially the Rock, in early Islam must have raised some doubts on the part of a group of Muslim scholars, concerning whether or not it is an imitation of Jewish practices and is therefore not sanctioned by the teachings of Muhammad. Either anticipating such worries or in order to directly challenge them, al-Ramli relates the following report, which assures Muslims that Islam validates the veneration of the Rock:

'Ubada b. al-Samit and Rafi' b. Khudayj were asked: "You hear what people say about the Rock; is it true so we accept it, or is it something that originated from the people of the book, in which case we should reject it?" Both of them replied: "By God, who in his right mind doubts it [the Rock's holiness]? For God almighty, when he rested in Heaven, said to the Rock of Jerusalem: 'Here is my abode and the place of my throne on the Day of Judgment. My creation will be rushed to it. Here is Heaven to its right and Hell to its left, and I shall erect the scale in front of it.'"

(al-Wasiti, 70–71, no. 115; Abu al-Ma'ali, 109, no. 121)

Indeed, the issue of visiting sacred sites outside the Temple Mount area generated controversy among early Muslim scholars. It is reported, for example, that when the Hadith scholar Mu'ammal b. Isma'il (d. 822 CE) visited Jerusalem from Basra (Iraq), he hired a guide to take him to other holy sites. His son brought to his attention the fact that when the celebrated Hadith scholar Waki' b. al-Jarrah (d. 812 CE) came to Jerusalem from Kufa (Iraq), he refused to do a tour and worshiped only in the Temple Mount area. Mu'ammal answered his son by saying, "Each person does what he pleases" (Elad 1995, 307).

To go back to the tradition quoted above, both 'Ubada (d. 655 CE) and Rafi' (d. 693 CE) were among Muhammad's companions. Even if one doubts the authenticity of this report, especially in light of the fact that both men were not known to have met in Jerusalem ('Ubada resided in Palestine following the Islamic conquests, and Rafi' is not known to have ever visited the city or Palestine), it nevertheless validates and legitimizes the Muslims' sanctification of the Rock. After all, these companions were the only recourse to the teachings of Muhammad; at least this is the pretense for regarding them as irrefutably trustworthy.

The inclusion of the preceding stories, and similar ones, were therefore intended by al-Ramli as background information for 'Abd al-Malik's decision to construct the Dome of the Rock. Al-Ramli argues that 'Abd

al-Malik's motives were to shield the Rock as well as the pilgrims who come to pray there:

Raja' b. Haywa and Yazid b. Sallam said: "When 'Abd al-Malik ordered the construction of a dome over the Rock of Jerusalem, and a mosque, he came from Damascus to Jerusalem and sent letters to his governors throughout his realm that the caliph has ordered the construction of a dome to shelter the Rock of Jerusalem so that the Muslims would not be exposed to the heat or cold [when they visit it]."

(al-Wasiti, 81–83, no. 136; Abu al-Ma'ali, 58–61, no. 47)

Raja' (d. 730 CE) and Yazid (d. c. 730 CE) were the two officials entrusted by 'Abd al-Malik to supervise the construction of the Dome of the Rock, with powers to spend as much money as necessary to finish the task. What their joint report attests to is that Muslims and possibly other monotheists (Jews in particular) were already making pilgrimages to Jerusalem, and going to the Temple Mount area to worship at the Rock. 'Abd al-Malik was told of these worshipers' suffering, especially in the winter season, so he ordered the Dome to be built to cover the holy Rock and as a protection for them.

This Rock that 'Abd al-Malik meant to shield was, according to al-Ramli, the exact location of Abraham's binding of Isaac:

It is written in the Torah that God said to Abraham: "O Abraham." He replied: "Here I am." [God said:] "Take your only son, the one you love, go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there on one of the mountains that I shall show you." His [God's] saying *the land of Moriah* means Jerusalem, and *one of the mountains* means the Rock. . . .

(Abu al-Ma'ali, 115–116, no. 137)

This accurate recital of Genesis 22 is meant to count among the many sacred events associated with the site; needless to say, the association of the location of Abraham's binding of Isaac with that of the Temple was made long before the emergence of Islam, probably as early as 2 Chronicles 3:1 (Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah).¹⁵ In other words, it highlights the Rock's many layers of sanctity.

So far we have seen that the biblical dimension, as is evident in the heavy dependence on biblical narratives, was for al-Ramli and his sources the most notable factor that accounts for their understanding of the sanctity of Jerusalem, and this undoubtedly extends to the way early Muslims perceived Jerusalem's sacredness. The next task is to examine what al-Ramli and his sources say about the association of Muhammad with Jerusalem and its significance in relation to the biblical dimension. Al-Ramli was certainly aware of a number of variant reports regarding Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension; most of what he reports relates to the former. What is interesting about his text is that although the association was important,

it was not the reason for the Muslims' sanctification of Jerusalem. For al-Ramli and his sources, that is, for local scholars in Jerusalem and Palestine, these episodes in the career of Muhammad do not make Jerusalem sacred, but rather are powerful testimonies attesting to its sacredness. What confirms this view is that the few accounts that al-Ramli quotes regarding the Night Journey and Ascension occur toward the end of his text.¹⁶ If he believed them to be superior to the biblical accounts, it seems very likely that he would have placed them first. After all, later works on the *Fada'il* of Jerusalem, from the Crusades period onward, begin their display of the city's sacredness with the stories about the prophet Muhammad, clearly making the case that these are the foundations for Jerusalem's importance in Islam.

It might be argued that by placing the stories about Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension last in the text, al-Ramli was simply adhering to the chronological order of things, and not necessarily showing any preference regarding the significance of the material. Although one cannot entirely dismiss this objection, it does not seem to have been the case. There is only one unique mention of the Qur'anic verse 17.1 (*Glory to Him who made His servant journey by night from the Haram mosque to the Aqsa mosque*), which is the only Qur'anic verse that is often interpreted as a reference to the Night Journey. The way al-Ramli conveys the meaning of this verse, according to a popular storyteller from Jerusalem, suggests that he considered this sole Qur'anic testimony to refer to the future transfer of Muhammad's bones from his burial place in Medina to Jerusalem on the Day of Judgment:

Khalid b. Hazim said: "Once al-Zuhri came to Jerusalem. I showed him the holy sites, and he prayed in all of them. I said to him: 'We have here an old man who narrates to us from the books; his name is 'Uqba b. Abi Zaynab, let's go and listen to him.' We went there and sat down. He was telling stories about the religious symbolism (*fada'il*) of Jerusalem, and kept going on and on. Al-Zuhri, annoyed by this, [interrupted the old man] and said: 'Old man, aren't you going to mention what God has said [in the Qur'an]: *Glory to Him who made His servant journey by night from the Haram mosque to the Aqsa mosque*' (Q. 17.1).' The old man became angry with al-Zuhri and said [to him]: '[The verse means that] the Hour will not come until the bones of Muhammad are transported to it [Jerusalem].' "

(al-Wasiti, 102, no. 165)

Al-Zuhri (d. 742 CE) was a famous scholar of Hadith who developed a specialty in the traditions about the life and career of the prophet Muhammad. He was attached to several Umayyad caliphs, and produced at their request stories about Muhammad and early Islam, all of questionable authenticity. 'Uqba b. Abi Zaynab was a popular preacher in Jerusalem; the medieval biographical sources know nothing about him, which indicates that he was

not at all recognized in the scholarly circles. What is shocking about this report is that 'Uqba makes no connection between *Qur'an* 17.1 and Muhammad's ever being in Jerusalem. Even if 'Uqba was not a distinguished religious scholar, this suggests that the legends concerning Muhammad's Night Journey to Jerusalem and Ascension from it to Heaven were still fluid around the beginning of the eighth century CE, at least as far as popular preachers in Jerusalem and its area were concerned. Thus, again, they could not have been the foundation upon which Muslims' veneration of the city was established.

Moreover, we know from later sources that more than one site in the Temple Mount area was identified as the exact location from which Muhammad ascended to Heaven. One such spot was a few meters outside the Dome of the Rock building, on top of which, not earlier than the eighth century CE, a small dome with supporting columns was erected and named Dome of the Ascension (Elad 1995, 48–50 and 73–76). Thus the identification of the Rock as the exact site from which Muhammad ascended to Heaven must have come much later than that.

The last point to be revisited is the issue of 'Abd al-Malik's building of the Dome of the Rock. Al-Ramli tells his readers about how the first Temple was built by Solomon, but does not say anything about its destruction. Interestingly, however, he quotes through one of his sources the famous prophecy of Jesus—which we also find in Matthew 26:61 and John 2:19—that the Temple will be destroyed:

The disciples said to the Messiah: "O Messiah of God, look at this Holy Temple, how beautiful it is." He replied: "Amen, Amen! Truly I say to you that God will destroy the stones of this mosque because of the sins of its people."

(al-Wasiti, 60, no. 95; Abu al-Ma'ali, 230, no. 340)

Al-Ramli then quotes another prophecy, originating possibly from a *midrash* on Isaiah, attributed to the quasi-legendary figure Ka'b al-Ahbar (a companion of caliph 'Umar who converted to Islam from Judaism) that 'Abd al-Malik will be the person to rebuild the Temple over the Rock: "It is written in the Torah: 'Yerushalaym—meaning Jerusalem and the Rock, which is known as the Temple—I shall send you my servant 'Abd al-Malik to build you and embellish you.' " (al-Wasiti, 86, no. 138; Abu al-Ma'ali, 63–64, no. 50). Again, leaving aside the issue of the authenticity of this report, which is said to have been made by Ka'b al-Ahbar, who died long before 'Abd al-Malik reached adulthood (Rabbat 1989), one wonders whether at some point during the construction of the Dome of the Rock some Muslim and Jewish groups in Palestine became convinced that 'Abd al-Malik was indeed rebuilding the Temple, which necessitated that such a prophecy be fabricated and circulated. Moreover, a number of medieval sources argue that 'Abd al-Malik wanted the Dome of the Rock to be used

as a pilgrimage site, either along with or in lieu of the Ka'ba in Mecca (Elad 1992). In other words, the superiority of Mecca to other sacred cities in early Islam was not yet fully established (Robinson 2005, 95–100), and such reports attest to attempts on the part of Muslim groups to position Jerusalem favorably.

The transformation in the perception of Jerusalem's sanctity

The primary emphasis with respect to the religious symbolism of Jerusalem, as seen in the case of the text of al-Ramli and his sources, as well as other pre-Crusades compilations on the *Fada'il* of Jerusalem, was placed on the town's biblical heritage—principally as the town that housed God's Temple and as the location of the binding of Isaac. The association with Muhammad was made, but it was not yet the focal point of these works. Starting in the period of the Crusades, there is a clear attempt on the part of Muslim scholars to dissociate Jerusalem, albeit gradually, from its non-Islamic heritage. This process sidelined the biblical dimension and emphasized Jerusalem's association with Muhammad and notable Muslim figures. Once central, the biblical aspect became an afterthought.

The *Fada'il* of Diya' al-Din al-Maqdisi (d. 1245 CE) provides the first example of this transformation. Diya' al-Din was originally from Jerusalem, but his family fled the city when it was captured by the Crusaders in 1099, and moved to Damascus. At the time, the Muslim religious establishment, at the instigation of the political establishment, struggled to rally the Muslims to the defense of Islam and Muslim land. Jerusalem's sacredness could no longer be explained on the basis of its biblical history; rather, this time the "liberation" of Jerusalem required exclusively Islamic legends attesting to its sanctity. There was thus a heavy emphasis on what were perceived to be direct references or allusions to it in the Qur'an and Hadith, including the prophet Muhammad's legendary Night Journey and his Ascension to Heaven, and the several major Muslim figures who visited and prayed in the city, such as caliph 'Umar. In the case of Diya' al-Din, Jerusalem's biblical heritage was completely eliminated, and the city's holiness derived exclusively from particular references to it in the Qur'an and from episodes in the life of Muhammad. One other theme that he emphasizes is the apocalyptic: how Jesus will descend in Jerusalem to kill the Antichrist, how creation will be rushed to Jerusalem for the Day of Judgment, how Mecca and Medina will be brought to Jerusalem at that time, and so forth. This apocalyptic theme is already found in the *Fada'il* of Abu al-Ma'ali and to a lesser extent in al-Wasiti; it is a marginal theme in al-Ramli's work (only seven accounts). It is also encountered in scattered reports relating to the role of Jerusalem at the end of time in such apocalyptic texts as Nu'aym b. Hammad's *Kitab al-Fitan* (Book of Calamities). Therefore, it is clear that in the pre-Crusades period, Jerusalem's apocalyptic role was but one dimension that accounts for the city's sacredness in Islam; the dominant dimension being its biblical

heritage. By excluding the biblical accounts, Diya' al-Din gave the apocalyptic dimension much greater prominence.

The biblical heritage could not be a problem, or to put it more accurately, could not become a problem as long as the Muslims' control of Jerusalem was not at risk. The Crusaders wrested Jerusalem from Muslim hands, and it was not regained for almost a century, until Saladin recovered the city in 1187; even then it was not completely Muslim-controlled until the Mamluks ended any Crusaders' presence in the Near East in 1291. While the city was lost, the propaganda that sought its liberation could not have depended or been based on aspects of Jerusalem's sanctity that are "shared" with other monotheists. In other words, the politicians and religious scholars were not interested in promoting Jerusalem's holiness on the grounds that Jews, Christians, and Muslims find it equally sacred. The emphasis on an exclusive Islamic dimension was all that mattered, so that Muslims were being asked to liberate a holy place that was exclusively theirs. This makes it easier to understand why Ibn Taymiyya was so irritated by the emphasis on the "exclusively Islamic" sanctification of Jerusalem at the expense of the other sacred city, Mecca. His *Qa'ida fi ziyarat Bayt al-Maqdis* was intended to clarify, once and for all, that all the traditions regarding Muhammad's association with Jerusalem are legendary, originating from the wild imaginations of story-tellers (Hasson 1996, 374).

Conclusion

As the work of al-Ramli shows, Jerusalem was perceived by the early Muslims as one of Islam's holiest sites, and this situation persisted well into modern times. The city's biblical background was the initial reason for this perception of sanctity, and several legends converged into the creation of a myth that over time became constitutive of the Muslims' veneration of Jerusalem. There the Temple of God once stood. There the binding of Isaac took place. There the most holy Rock stands. And from there the prophet Muhammad journeyed by night and ascended to heaven—although this last theme did not enjoy much authority in the early period. With the advent of the Crusades, Muslim scholars gradually shifted their focus and began to highlight a much more exclusivist heritage for Jerusalem: a purely Islamic one. This meant that Jerusalem's sanctity has to derive entirely from the sources of the Islamic religion, the Qur'an and Muhammad's life and career (*Sunna*). They, and no other sources, were held as the basis on which Jerusalem's sanctity is to be conceived.

Notes

- 1 On 'Umar's journey to Jerusalem, see Busse 1984.
- 2 On Umayyad architectural undertakings in Jerusalem, see Rosen-Ayalon 1996.
- 3 On the main inscription from 'Abd al-Malik's time, see Grabar 1996.

- 4 On caliph 'Abd al-Malik, see Robinson 2005.
- 5 For a discussion of the various views regarding the Night Journey and Ascension, see al-Tabari 1999, 7: 3–17; and the article on "Mi'raj" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, 7: 97–105. On the Ascension, see also van Ess 1999.
- 6 For example, Abu Dawud says it lasted thirteen months (Abu Dawud, *Sunan*, Book 2, n. 507), whereas al-Bukhari says it went on for sixteen to seventeen months (al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, Book 2, n. 39).
- 7 This genre was not actually limited to places, as a number of *Fada'il* works were written to celebrate particularly significant Muslim figures or groups.
- 8 The expression *Bayt al-Maqdis* in the title of al-Ramli's work has exactly the same meaning as the Hebrew *bayt ha-miqdash* (The Holy House), which was initially a reference to the Temple, then to the Temple Mount area following the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE; it was applied to the entire city of Jerusalem in the Islamic period. The other name that early Muslims used for Jerusalem was *Ilya'*, from the Latin *Aelia*, that is, Aelia Capitolina, the name the Romans gave to Jerusalem after the Bar Kochba revolt and the destruction of the city in 131–132 CE. The currently-used Arabic name, *al-Quds*, derives from *Bayt al-Maqdis*. There is no difference in meaning between *Bayt al-Maqdis* and *al-Bayt al-Muqaddas*; the grammatical rule is that when the definite article *al-* is introduced, the *d* in *maqdis* (holy) is emphasized and this necessitates a change in the short vowel that it carries (*dda* instead of *di*).
- 9 On al-Ramli as a transmitter of historical narratives, see Mourad 2000.
- 10 On popular historians and their evaluation in medieval Islamic scholarship, see Robinson 2003.
- 11 Elad (1991, 48–49) was the first to suggest that al-Ramli must have authored a book on the *Fada'il* of Jerusalem. The reference in al-Dhahabi was found later, and came to confirm his position.
- 12 The only partial exception, which in fact further confirms this conclusion, is the quote in the *Fada'il* of al-Raba'i (d. 1052 CE), which features the following transmission: al-Ramli → al-Fadl b. Muhajir al-Maqdisi (al-Raba'i, 26, no. 50).
- 13 The *hadith* is similarly related by Abu al-Ma'ali, but via an informant other than al-Ramli (Abu al-Ma'ali, 82, no. 70). For an analysis of this prophetic tradition, see Kister 1980.
- 14 As early as the year 333, the anonymous Christian Pilgrim from Bordeaux noted that the Jews come every year to the Temple Mount to anoint the pierced stone (*Itinerary from Bordeaux to Jerusalem*, 22).
- 15 In Genesis 22:2, God orders Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on a mountain in the land of Moriah. In Genesis 22:14, this mountain becomes known as the Mount of the Vision of the Lord. For more on Mount Moriah and the Temple Mount area, see the article by Y. Eliav in this volume.
- 16 This is where al-Wasiti places them. Abu al-Ma'ali also quotes them toward the end of his accounts on the sacredness of Jerusalem.

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