Notes on the Islamic Toponymy of the Holy Land and Holy City

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What is generally known of Muslim sacred geography has been distilled into a very broad set of understandings. Most non-Muslims vaguely familiar with the outlines of Islamic civilization are aware of the reverence commanded by the holy cities situated in the Hijaz region of Arabia. Many are also aware, that like Mecca and Medina, the so-called haramayn of the Hijaz, the biblical Holy Land and its holiest city Jerusalem have a special place in the sacred geography of Islam. But these overarching views do not do justice to explaining Islam’s early engagement with the sacred space of Jews and Christians. I refer to the complex process by which Arab Muslims initially redefined the biblical landscape, be it by reshaping tales of biblical persons and events or by Muslims appropriating and redefining Jerusalem and the pre-Islamic Holy Land.1 What follows is a series of philological notes that draw attention to the toponyms by which the Muslim faithful came to define Jerusalem and beyond the city, the territory known to Jews as Erez Israel, and Christians as Terra Sancta. This modest study is drawn from an extended work in the making that bears the title “The Origins of Islamic Jerusalem: Forging Sacred Space in a City Holy to

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1 The stories of biblical personae are amplified in that genre of Arabic literature known as Qisas al-anbiya’ or “Tales of the Prophets.” Accounts specifically related to the Holy Land and Jerusalem are collected in a body of literature known as Fada’il, that is, works of praise (for Jerusalem and its surroundings). A most detailed treatment of this literature is O. Livne-Kafri’s “The Sanctity of Jerusalem in Islam [Hebrew].” Ph.D dissertation. The Hebrew University (Jerusalem, 1985) which was reworked into various articles ultimately appearing in his collected essays in Hebrew given the English title Jerusalem in Early Islam (Jerusalem, 2000). See also I. Hasson, “Muslim Literature in Praise of Jerusalem: Fada’il Bayt al-Maqdis,” Jerusalem Cathedra 1 (1981): 168–84 (part of a published symposium on the fada’il of Jerusalem) and his “The Muslim View of Jerusalem in the Qur’an and Hadith,” in The History of Jerusalem 638–1099, edited by J. Prawer and H. Ben Shammai (Jerusalem, 1996), 349–85. A broad assessment of different types of fada’il is found in E, Gruber’s Verdienst und Rang. Die Fada’il als literarisches und gesellschaftliches Problem im Islam (Frieburg im Brisgau, 1975). Fuller citations to primary and secondary sources are cited in a forthcoming project of mine dealing with the origins of Islamic Jerusalem.
Christians and Jews.” That project, soon to be completed, revisits a question first raised by scholars in the nineteenth century, namely: When and in what circumstances did the Holy Land and its holiest city, places long venerated by Christians and Jews and frequently visited by throngs of pilgrims, become hallowed loci for Muslims? What follows is a study of the various names employed by Muslims to signify Jerusalem and the Holy Land and the territorial scope reflected in the use of these place-names.

1 Defining the Muslim Holy Land and Holy City

For some five hundred years before the Arab conquest, the holy city and Holy Land were considered part of the ancient province of Syria, a vast area that encompassed much of the present day Levant. The Muslim conquerors of the seventh century CE referred to Roman-Byzantine Syria as Bilad (the Land of) al-Sham, or simply al-Sham. Explaining this name, medieval Arabic lexicographers proposed various etymologies. Some explanations are rooted in local custom and appear at first eminently plausible, though not at all suggestive of a distant biblical past, let alone an area of sacred geography. Other explanations which draw attention to the milieu of the ancient Israelites are, no doubt, the products of a vivid Muslim imagination, one that links the territorial expanse of Islamic al-Sham with the sacred resonances of its ancient predecessors.

In the first instance, Muslim scholars believed al-Sham to mean “The Left Hand Land,” or, “The Land to the North” based on the Arabic root sh-‘-m which gives rise to verbs meaning “to go left” or “go north” (tasha’ama and tasha’ama). As the medieval authorities put it, if one extends the left arm while facing the rising sun [presumably like Arabian Bedouins in search of their bearings] the arm and hand point northward (in the direction of what had been since ancient times an immense region ruled from Damascus). Some Muslim scholars even supply a specific locus from which to measure this geographical orientation. They report that al-Sham was so-named because the province was situated to the left of the Ka’ba, meaning it is due north of the sacred Muslim shrine in Mecca, the Hijaz settlement in which the Prophet Muhammad was born and in which he first began to preach. Another authority indicates improbably enough that the province was called al-Sham because the many bunched villages dotting its landscape resembled a series of shamat (Arabic root sh-y-m), facial “moles” of changing color. In his *Palestine under the Moslems*, a work

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