Book Reviews


In Muhammad’s Grave, Leor Halevi uses a rich selection of sources to compose a multi-faceted picture of the funerary practices cultivated by Muslims in the opening centuries of the Islamic era. The study not only provides a finely-textured description of a religiously and socially central set of ritual practices, but also offers a prism for the examination of much broader questions involving the emergence of Islamic identity, the interrelation of different types of sources, and the competition of various groups to define Islamic norms. This book provides a much-needed corrective to the abstract and textual nature of much of the debate over the nature of early Islam, plunging the reader into a thoroughly imagined and painstakingly documented material world. Its textual sources, as well, are both diverse and well-chosen; for instance, rather than limiting himself to normative sources addressing the protocol of interment and funeral prayers, Halevi mines biographical dictionaries for accounts of a wide variety of individual burials. Each chapter functions as a self-enclosed study, two of which have previously been published as journal articles, but the book coheres as a well-integrated and cumulatively powerful whole. The subjects examined include grave markers, corpse washing, shrouds, ritual wailing, funeral processions and prayers, and the erection of tombs.

The book’s most effective chapters are those that combine textual evidence with studies of material culture. Halevi’s discussions of the material and symbolic dimensions of grave inscriptions and shrouds provide illuminating insights into the spiritual and social worlds of early Muslims, whose preferences did not always reflect the conventions embraced by textualist classical Islam. Careful study of these artifacts provides a frame of reference completely independent of the more widely-studied textual sources, and often (at least in the case of the gravestones) much more precisely datable. The voices of hadith transmitters and early jurists emerge as specific strains of piety within a much larger range of early Islamic practice. For instance, the gradual emergence and prevalence of Qur’ānic inscriptions on tombstones reflect crystallizing Islamic identity and ideals, while contrasting with early scholarly reservations about the erection of grave markers and the recitation of the Qur’ān in cemeteries. Pietist reservations about the acceptance of government largesse and emphasis on the purchase of shrouds from licit wealth, both manifest in the hagiographic literature, are balanced by surviving shrouds bearing sumptuous caliphal ṭirāz bands. Halevi takes a measured and somewhat
noncommittal approach to the authenticity of ḥadīth and the dating of sources, carefully discerning echoes and engagements among a wide range of early sources rather than constructing bold arguments about origins or chronological development. While he does not provide a free-standing and comprehensive account of his own attitudes towards such issues as the chronology of the canonization of the Qurʾān, he does make many observations that will contribute to the debate on this and other issues. One could take issue with some of his individual observations (for instance, he describes a 7th-century C.E. grave inscription as having “no distinctive Islamic formulas,” although it begins with the basmala); nevertheless, the overall picture is rich and compelling.

Gender recurs as a pervasive theme of the book, usually (and usefully) integrated into a spectrum of concerns rather than isolated as a separate field of inquiry. Halevi’s discussion of funerary wailing highlights the social value and deep embeddedness of women’s ritual practices, while acknowledging that the point of view of female wailers ultimately eludes reconstruction. By decentering the textual traditions of ḥadīth specialists and jurists, he is able to recover the activities of other agents—including women and artisans—from the margins. He also sees distinctive attitudes towards gender as key to emerging Islamic identities. Discussing early grave inscriptions, which (unlike their pre-Islamic predecessors) refer exclusively to paternal descent, he argues provocatively that “[p]erhaps conversion to Islam implied, more than a confession of faith, a shift in social orientation toward a post-conquests culture dominated by patriarchal ideals” (p. 20). With respect to the scholarly disciplines of law and ḥadīth, Halevi sees a concern with the circumscription of women’s public mobility and visibility as pivotal to the early Kufan tradition (in contrast to a more relaxed Medinese approach). Rather than reflecting the influence of Mesopotamian Jews and Christians, as some authors have argued, Halevi sees this concern as both distinctive and new. Typically, he does not speculate on its origins or rationale, but simply examines and critiques interpretations that would explain it as extrinsic to Islam. He draws on Jewish and Christian sources to place Islamic trends in a broader context, without recourse to simple assumptions about “influence” or “borrowing.”

Another theme that interweaves multiple chapters is the centrality of material wealth and social distinction, both as a theme evoked and problematized by the normative sources and as a prominent dimension of the material record. In some cases, as with the erection of sumptuous tombs for the wealthy and powerful (as well as for some pious dead), the austere ideals of the scholarly tradition contrast somewhat predictably with the more exuberant contributions of craftspeople, rulers, and other social actors. In other cases, as in the chapter on shrouds, Halevi demonstrates that early scholars did not always adhere to an ascetic or egalitarian ideal. Rather, a “triumphant early Islamic economic ethos” was reflected in widespread support for the use of multiple shrouds (a large expenditure in an age of relatively rare and costly textiles) and of adorning the deceased with opulent fabrics and garments. Here again, Halevi suggests that the early Islamic ideal diverges substantially from a well-established late antique Jewish and Christian ideal.