
*Muhammad's Grave* explores how seventh and eighth century Muslim pietists produced funeral codes that both contributed to the creation of unique communal and confessional identities and provided specialized conduits for social change. In all religious systems, death marks a moment of profound transition that serves as a focal point for intense legal, ritual, literary, and theological activity. Aside from caring for a body that is itself in flux, both in terms of its own decay and its passage from the physical world to something more uncertain and intangible, such concentrated, hermeneutical activity seeks to mend the multiple ruptures in the social fabric that threaten communal stability. Employing a vast range of archaeological data, theological tracts, poems of lament, obituaries, and objects of material culture collected during the formative period of Islam, Leor Halevi demonstrates this very process of repairing the social fabric ultimately serves to establish a distinctly Muslim tradition of death, burial, and afterlife over and against similar Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian rites, which in turn fashions a new social order.

Each chapter organizes the discussion of death codes around a particular theme, which is then woven into broader arguments that reveal how intricate exchanges between popular practice and orthodox responses to that practice sparked social and religious change. Chapter One takes into account archaeological evidence drawn from tombstones. Halevi notes tombstones dating back to the seventh century bear no quintessential “Islamic” marks, such as Qur’anic inscriptions. The fact that Qur’anic inscriptions only appear later in the eighth century suggests a gradual formalization of religious belief and practice as Muslims strove to distinguish their dead from other monotheistic corpses. Halevi also demonstrates the increase in Qur’anic inscriptions on tombstones in the eighth century indicates a growing belief in the efficacy of Muslim scripture in prayers for the
dead. This increased concern for marking graves and praying for the dead was both tolerated and countered by jurists who had little enthusiasm for public memorials for the deceased. In addition to indicating shifts in the religious landscape, tomb inscriptions also pointed to profound changes in gender relationships. Halevi maintains that in the century prior to the Prophet's death, individuals were linked to both maternal and paternal ancestors; in Islamic times only patriarchal lineages were listed. A careful tracking of tomb markings, therefore, reveals fundamental changes in social patterning, religious belief, and practice spawned by inter- and intra-religious debate.

Moving from tombstones to corpse cleansing in Chapter Two, Halevi maps the range of bathing practices stretching across the Mesopotamian environment, and argues that strict social codes regarding the washing of a dead body evolved from local custom or familial practice. For example, Malik did not mandate one form of corpse washing, and he allowed for wives to wash husbands and vice versa. The author theorizes, however, that with the development of more clearly defined marriage and divorce laws, in which husbands are liberated from wives once the women die, but wives are still chained to dead husbands for a period of four menstrual cycles, women were only permitted to wash women and men were only allowed to wash men. Halevi’s argument that pietists severed all aspects of intimacy between husbands and wives at the moment of death, however, does not address the question of why wives would not be allowed to wash dead husbands, if they were indeed indebted to them for four months post mortem. While the author mentions later in the book that Shi'ites did allow for this practice, he leaves unanswered the question why Sunnis would have banned wives from this final intimate act that was legally theirs. That said, Halevi's assertion that both gender identity and the proscriptions safeguarding unrestricted minglings between the sexes shadowed a dead body well into the grave is convincing, and proves persuasively how the decidedly human endeavor of caring for and burying the dead gradually took a uniquely Islamic form that penetrated all aspects of life—and beyond.

In one of the most provocative sections of the book, Halevi addresses questions surrounding the pure or impure nature of the corpse. Is a major ablution mandated after a corpse washing because of the body's impurity? The Sunnis argued all Muslims (including the dead ones) must be inherently pure, despite their decaying flesh; therefore, no major ablution would be required. The Sunnis are clearly reacting against Jewish laws on contagion while embracing Muslim theological understandings of *fitra*, the pure