

BOOK REVIEWS

Sacred Place and Sacred Time in the Medieval Islamic Middle East: A Historical Perspective. Daniella Talmon-Heller, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). Pp. 290. \$125.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781474460965

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Daniella Talmon-Heller's *Sacred Place and Sacred Time in the Medieval Islamic Middle East* is a timely investigation of the history of two important case studies for understanding pre-modern Muslims' practices of sanctifying space and time. Studies focusing on sanctity of space and time in pre-modern Islamic history have a venerable place in modern scholarship (space perhaps more so than time), but over recent decades the focus has more often been on famous pilgrimage centers and times such as Mecca and the hajj, Medina, Jerusalem and the Great Mosque of Damascus. Talmon-Heller's book instead draws attention to two relatively understudied instances of sacred space and time. The first part of the book offers a study of the shrines in Syria, Palestine and Egypt associated with a particular relic, the head of al-Husayn ibn 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (killed in 680); the second part discusses the history of practices associated with the month of Rajab, mostly in Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Talmon-Heller offers two interesting justifications for presenting these case studies (p. 2). First, she argues that "[w]hile the practice of the hajj at the Meccan Sanctuary and the rites of fasting throughout Ramadan were fairly standardised at an early stage, there was much more leeway for devotional creativity at non-consensual shrines of saints and martyrs, and during Rajab"; and secondly, she notes that whereas legal texts may discuss the hajj and Ramadan in far more detail, historical, biographical, geographical and travel works actually treat other practices to a greater extent. The first of these justifications may be particularly open to debate, but it remains the case that Talmon-Heller's approach offers an interesting and fresh perspective on long-studied questions.

The content of the book is largely developed chronologically, taking readers to the end of the Mamluk period. There are also eight brief excursions along the way, dealing with peripheral but interesting topics ranging from donations to mosques and shrines to the emergence of the Islamic lunar calendar. The introduction and a couple of prefatory chapters provide some discussion of existing scholarship and theoretical approaches to the sanctification of space and time as well as an outline of key Arabic terms and concepts. For me at least, the book's first part on the shrines associated with al-Husayn's head was the more interesting and significant of the two. Here Talmon-Heller takes us from the varying ideas about what happened to his head after it was apparently displayed in Damascus following al-Husayn's killing, through to its appearance in Ascalon in the Fatimid period, and its transferal to Cairo at the time of the Crusaders' siege of Ascalon in 1153, providing details about the subsequent history of its shrine in both cities. Throughout, a number of themes are central to the discussion, including the importance of debates about the "authenticity" of the relic and the places associated with it; the possible connection between al-Husayn's shrine in Ascalon and pre-Islamic veneration of martyrs at the site; the potential of al-Husayn to be a figure important to the Isma'ili Fatimids who could nonetheless be used to shape a message that could be understood by all Muslims; and the broader context of the veneration of Alid shrines among Isma'ilis, other Shi'a and Sunnis in the pre-modern period. Talmon-Heller understands the history of shrines for al-Husayn's head within the model of martyrs whose commemoration was used to legitimize ruling dynasties but (and were perhaps especially useful because they) attracted particularly widespread veneration.

The part on Rajab reads more like a narrative of the emergence of particular rites and practices associated with that month, although some interesting conclusions are drawn from this narrative (see esp. pp. 221–26). The suggestion that, by the Ayyubid/Mamluk period, Mecca was both an Eliadean "centre of the world" and a Turnerian "center out there" is nicely made (pp. 222–23). There is also an important

conclusion (on p. 224) that concerns about the legitimacy and appropriateness of the practices that emerged in association with Rajab can be found throughout Sunni discourse, but not within Imami texts.

Some aspects of the book's argument are really good and offer an important foundation for future studies of sacred space and time in the pre-modern Islamic world. I have already mentioned that the section on the shrines for al-Husayn's head is generally more effective and interesting: the points Talmon-Heller makes there about the potential for exclusivity and inclusion in the development of narratives associated with shrines are well worth taking away. She is also really good at stressing the interplay between time and space in the emergence of ideas about sanctity and rites. There is a particularly interesting discussion of Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 1328) understanding of the relationship between sanctity of time and place (see esp. p. 116): he thought it a much greater problem to venerate illegitimately a place than to perform an act of veneration at a time not specifically sanctioned.

Most of the more questionable aspects of the book's approach come in the section on Rajab. Talmon-Heller does explain, on page 5 of the introduction, her decision to focus on Rajab's veneration mostly in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk worlds: to give coherence to the book by using as far as possible the same authors who discussed the shrines of al-Husayn's head. This decision certainly does give a sense of cohesion, but it left some slightly confusing sections (at least to me). It was sometimes unclear, for example, to what extent the term "Fatimid" was being used as a chronological marker or as something more meaningful heuristically. Much of the discussion in the chapter entitled "Rajab under Fatimid Rule" is addressed to practices and debates within the Fatimid empire, but then an author like the Baghdadi Sunni 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166) is brought in as the pivot for the discussion of fasting during Rajab (pp. 171–73). The book's broad sweep does also mean that many topics of great interest are either left aside or dealt with fairly briefly, although there is of course a payoff here as the book offers interesting synthesis and conclusions drawn from a study of the bigger picture.

On the whole, *Sacred Place and Sacred Time in the Medieval Islamic Middle East* offers an effective study of the combination of political motivations and widespread enthusiasm behind the creation, maintenance, and development of places and practices associated with sacred places and times. I fully recommend it to anyone interested in the history of these issues in the pre-modern world.

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Slavery and Islam. Jonathan A. C. Brown, (London: One World, 2019). Pp. 430. \$40.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781786076359

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Several works on slavery in the Islamic world were published in 2019, including Bernard K. Freamon's *Possessed by the Right Hand* and Mary Ann Fay's edited volume, *Slavery in the Islamic World*. What distinguishes Jonathan A.C. Brown's contribution to this scholarship is its central question: how are believing Muslims supposed to make sense of Muhammad as both a moral exemplar and a slave owner?

Brown begins the book by positioning himself as a practicing Muslim for whom this question did not feel particularly relevant until ISIS emerged in 2014. ISIS' enslavement of minority religious groups in Iraq impelled a flurry of debate within and outside the Muslim community about the Qur'an and the Prophet's stance on slavery—the question suddenly became urgent, and it defied easy answers. Brown tackles the question using a combination of history, law, and philosophy. He states his argument clearly in the Introduction to the book: "Not everything that we label 'slavery' in history was always wrong in every time and place" (p. 5). This argument is bound to make readers uncomfortable. Brown acknowledges that slavery is an uncomfortable topic and that "the study of history is inherently destabilizing" (p. 8). Nevertheless, he insists that we consider the topic seriously.