

## **Texts, Landscapes and Imagining the sacred: Constructing Narratives of Jerusalem**

Nimrod Luz

For: *Narrative Matters* 2014, the 7th Narrative Matters conference, 23<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> June 2014, University of Paris Diderot and the American University of Paris.

No place has inspired human passion for as long and as deeply as Jerusalem. Surely, no place has won more attention in the formation of monotheistic understanding in the ancient Middle East and in the religious thoughts of the three Abrahamic religions. In many respects the canonical religious status of Jerusalem in all three religions claiming it today has gone a long and meandering way until it was accepted as such. A new and intriguing phase is taking place in the last hundred years or so during which the sanctity of Jerusalem is played out and contested among two religious-national ideologies arguing the same territory. While the Israeli-Jewish-Zionist movement promotes an understanding of the Wailing Wall as the only tangible relic of the Jewish Temple the Palestinian-Islamic movement pushes forward the status of the site as the third most important Islamic sacred place and denounces prior Jewish connections to the site. Both national movements promote an understanding of the same sacred site as the most important national symbol in both sides respectively. In this paper I want to explore the ways the place is being understood, produced and constructed through the narratives of Israeli-Palestinian public figures. I am particularly interested in exploring the interplay between ancient texts and contemporary interpretations of the built environment as a way to construct a narrative that sustain and support the national struggle. In order to do so I conducted over 30 open ended interviews with local leaders (public figures, religious scholars, intellectuals) and conflated these ethnographies with texts and landscapes of the city in order to learn how they narrate the city, its past and present, and particularly its sacred role in the current national struggle. My theoretical concern is mostly with the question of how narratives construct a landscape and how narrating a certain built environment inspires a certain religio-socio-political understanding of a sacred site. Let us now very briefly sketch the way Jerusalem's sacred site is being narrated in Islam and then I will discuss a few theoretical points concerning landscape before delving into some of the narratives of the site among my interlocutors.

Kanan Makiy's *The Rock*, is a feast of textual analysis and imaginative hypothesis that promotes the idea that the Umayyad's construction of the Dome of the Rock

rests on the shoulders of Ka'b, a converted Jew that transformed former traditions and texts of the site into an Islamic shrine (2001). Using a plethora of ancient sources Makiya cobbles together, Southern Arabian folklore, the Bible, rabbinical literature and Quranic passages, in order to portray this majestic moment in which sacred texts are inscribed unto the landscape and a sacred site is being constructed. Surely, this is a key moment in the history of arguably the most iconic *Axis Mundi* (Eliade, 1959) in which the Muslims constructed their own monumental shrine and forever changed the Jerusalem cityscape. In this respect he is close to a recurring understanding of early Islamic sources. Whereas early Islamic texts often relates to the city's pre-existing Muslim heritage newer authors and narrations are growingly reluctant to do so. In his oeuvre dedicated to Jerusalem Mujir al-Din al-Ulaymi, a 15<sup>th</sup> century local author, is unenthusiastic (to say the least) to credit or share the Islamic sacred site with previous cultures of the city (al-ʿUlaymī, 1973; Little, 1995). In his mantle map of the city the Haram al-Sharif indeed serves as the pivotal center of the city and the most important Islamic site and landmark (al-ʿUlaymī, 1973; Luz, 2014). However, he cannot completely ignore texts and compounds that allude to pre-Islamic history of the site and briefly mentions them in passim. In a recent op-ed in its organization's journal, the charismatic leader of one of the factions of the Israeli Islamic movement, shaykh Raid Salah flagrantly denies all previous history or geography of the compound prior to the Islamic conquest of the seventh century: "The Aqsa Mosque is an Islamic, Arab and Palestinian property only! And no one save us, no matter who they are, has any right to the place, no right to the end of days! (Sawt al-Haqq, 2002 cited at Luz, 2004). Indeed while interviewing leading founders of the movement about the naissance and origin of the sanctity of the city and alluding to early Islamic texts (a genre known as Faḍa'il Bayt al-Maqdis) who openly discuss Jewish and Christian heritage of the city this myopia and denial of the canonic pre-Islamic texts was most often the case (Luz, 2013a, 2013b). So what is happening here? How can we explain these changing narratives and consequently the changes in the way the site is being perceived and narrated? In order to do so this paper looks at the complicated and dialectic relations of text and landscape.

### **Theoretical Context – Text, Landscape, space**

Landscape is surely one of the more vexing and therefore fascinating human creations. It is anything but self-explanatory, simple or innocent. Certainly, it is not a neutral arena in which social relations matter-of-factly or accidentally unfold. Landscape, as the argument goes, is not just simply out there to be studied as a natural phenomenon. It is certainly not 'nature' (Tuan, 1979). In this context, landscape is 'culture' before it is 'nature' (Schama, 2005, 5). The very word landscape in its cultural meaning entails the existence and work of human agents (Olwig, 1993). Hence, landscapes simply do not exist without human agents. Landscape is society's unwitting biography in which and through which ideas, codes of practice, religious norms and cultural standards take physical form. Therefore, landscape consists of physical phenomena but is not confined to the physical manifestations of objects. This is, perhaps, the most comprehensive medium through which societies and individuals have expressed their uniqueness, aspirations and status, among many other socio-political needs. Therefore, landscape is essentially a cultural praxis, as it is the outcome of a society's ideals, images and at times code of practice in a given time and particular geography. As such, cultural landscape is a highly politicized construction, sphere or process (Cosgrove, 1984). And (to state the obvious) it is certainly the product of human labor!

Landscape is a beguiling phenomenon: though manmade and perceived as a natural outcome of human labor, it is anything but natural. The formation of landscape is inexorably linked to politics, power structures and surely struggles over meanings and ownership. The creation or rather the construction of landscape is all about power and thus entails disputes and the use of force. Therefore, the construction of landscape is a continuous dialogue and indeed struggle between different forces. Landscapes carry signs and symbols which represent social norms, identity, memory, cultural codes, and surely the ways these were, and still are, fought and debated among different forces. It is indeed a text and hence susceptible as any other to many readings. Landscape is one of the most complex and intriguing signifying systems saturated with signs, symbols and meanings (Duncan and Duncan, 1998). Inevitably, as a signifying system it need be regarded and read as a text and therefore susceptible to all the dialectic and hermeneutic processes that are related to text analysis.

So, who gets to "author" the landscape? Who has the power of authority to write the landscape? Further, and more pertinent with the current paper, what are the meanings assigned and the symbolization and cultural codes that may be read and inferred through the built environment of Islamic Jerusalem? The overarching argument and indeed *raison d'etre* of this paper is that in order to understand better the complexities of this place, texts and landscapes need be examined not only in and of themselves but also by focusing on the ways they reciprocally influence each other. Of particular importance to my argument is Henri Lefebvre's model aptly named; the "production of place". (Lefebvre, 1991) This model defines three fields which interact in dialectical and reciprocal relations and create the ways space is being understood. The space which is physically experienced through our senses (lived space); the place of professional knowledge and understanding (conceptualized space) and the place which we interpret symbolically (representational space). We experience space and think of space but these experiences and understanding take place (literally) within a material space which effects our daily actions and perceptions. The social space is therefore not a neutral backdrop of human endeavors but rather constituted through different aspects, be they physical, cultural-political or symbolical. The theoretical approach is driven by my understanding that the city is always in a subtle and ever shifting interplay between society, community, culture(s) and the built environment. Following these understanding I explore the cultural-sacred landscape of Jerusalem and follow the various and ever changing ways it is lived, perceived and constructed by different authors and in numerous texts. Particularly, I look at the ways it is being narrated by members of the Islamic minority groups in Israel trapped between their own state and people (Rabinowitz, 2001).

### **Narratives of the Haram al-Sharif among Palestinian Leaders**

The Haram al-Sharif is constantly in the public discourse and features in a plethora of publications, media channels, newspapers, books and visuals. Surely, there are nuances and differences among people who relate to it. However, as I found out and mostly during my interviews the place is narrated in a much uniformed way by various leaders and not only of religious background. The following is but a sample which demonstrates the importance of the site and the ways it is being narrated i.e. produced in contemporary Palestinian public discourse and understanding. The most prominent speaker on behalf of Islamic al-Aqsa and the

person who is more than anyone else got his reputation as the Shaykh of al-aqsa is Raid Salah the charismatic leader of the Israeli northern faction of the Islamic movement. This is how he narrates the site in a leading article of his movement's journal:

This is the destination of the nocturnal journey of the Prophet (Israa) and from here he ascended to heaven (Mi'raj). This place witnessed the conquest of Jerusalem by Umar ibn al-Khattab and the liberation of Jerusalem from the hands of the Crusades by Salah al-Din... and because it is so important it is beyond negotiation and no voice will rise higher than the voice of al-Aqsa. And those of feeble character that say that America is stronger than they, the blessed al-Aqsa answers and says God is stronger. And the Western Wall from within and from without is part of al-Aqsa and so are the other buildings and mosques within it including al-Mussala al-Marwani. This being the true nature of al-Aqsa, we will renew our covenant with God and our covenant with al-Aqsa and we will pin our hopes on our Islamic Umma and our Arab world and our Palestinian people and reiterate: we shall redeem you in spirit and blood. (p. 5)

Rhetoric of this nature positions the Israeli Islamic movement as the most hawkish and reluctant party to any concession regarding the Haram. It also constructs the place as purely Islamic and therefore non-negotiable as in the following description by Salah:

The al-Aqsa Mosque is an Islamic, Arabic, and Palestinian property and no one save them, and no matter who they are, has any right over it. And particularly the Jews have no right there until the end of days. Whoever agrees that they have a right even on one single stone or any relic is a traitor (Sawt al-Haqq w-l-Huriyya January 25, 2002).

A very intriguing response is drawn in an interview with Shawqi Khatib, at the time the mayor of a small municipality in the north of Israel. Khatib is a well-known political figure among Israeli Palestinians. He served as the chair of the Arab Follow-Up Committee, he is a member of Hadash, a political party that states in its platform that in any peace agreement Jerusalem will be divided between the two nations; moreover, special arrangements will be made to facilitate the

continuation of Jewish worship at the Western Wall. However, when asked directly about the sacred site in Jerusalem he made it clear that for him the Jewish linkage to Jerusalem is indeed a myth based on lies and historical distortion: "I have not conducted serious research but I have heard people saying that you [the Jews – N. L.] base your research on Jerusalem on lies" (interview with the author, August 2002).

Thus, even a “secular” leader who admits for not leading a very religious life is about by this narrative which informs a very distinct sense of the place. A way to understand the almost unanimous production of the site among Israeli-Palestinian is suggested by Abd al-Malik Dahamshe a former MK, leader of the Islamic party in the Knesset at the time. In the first days after Sharon’s visit to the Mountain which sparked what later was named the second Intifada Dahamshe made the following rejoinder:

It is a war that every Muslim should be part of. There is no Green Line where al-Aqsa is concerned and this [the reactions - N. L.] will continue throughout Israel... I cannot see this murderer transgress the most holy place in this land and look idly on from the sidelines. Am I not a human being? Am I devoid of emotions, am I not a Muslim? He entered the most holy mosque of the Muslims in order to defile it as a murderer, as a powerful man, a Zionist. Do you honestly believe that we will not face up to it? This act is addressed against our very existence, but we do exist. Our sole culpability is that we are humans and that we have a life and that we have a mosque and a land (Haaretz, 3.10.2000).

Dahamshe is at pains to explain that his response and his people response is motivated and triggered by the actions of Israel as a Jewish state. The novelty here is the way the site is narrated as equal to the Palestinian existence in the region. That is, one cannot envision a Palestinian society without the connection to the mosque in Jerusalem. Thus in a sense we have come a full circle and the completion of a mirror project in which both societies produce the place as their very essence of national existence.

## **Words of Summation**

Trapped in an almost impossible situation between the two competing national movement and challenged by a very religious-national Jewish-Israeli discourse the Israeli-Palestinians are meandering between their need for identity and the desire to belong. As long as the Israeli identity is being narrated in growingly religious terms they adhere more and more towards Islamic cum Palestinian identity formation. Thus, the iconic religious site is being narrated as the most important landscape of Palestinian national identity on both sides of the Green Line. In a rather ironic twist it is understood as the Islamic-Palestinian “Rock of Foundation”; an understanding that emanates from Jewish narratives of the site. Through this short discussion I was able to demonstrate how narratives (an oral and written (hi)story) construct a geography and how by narrations of a place one is able to construct a certain landscape. Narratives are therefore strong symbolization mechanisms that indeed emanate from a certain socio-political reality and ways of being in the world but also shape and being informed by spatiality. In this paper I wanted to draw attention to the interplay between the construction of narrative and the production of place and informing a new landscape. I have not addressed physical actions that actively change the site but suffice at this juncture to say that these narratives are not confined to the rhetoric of social life but also have a very concrete and daily geographical meaning.

## **Bibliography**

- Cosgrove, D. 1984. *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London: Croom Helm).
- Duncan, J. and N. Duncan, N. 1998. Re(reading) the landscape. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 6, 117-126.
- Eliade, M.1959. *The Sacred and the Profane*. New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Press.
- Lefebvre, H. 1991 [1974]. *The Production of Space*. (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Little, D. P. 1995. Mujīr al-Dīn’s al-‘Ulaymī’s Vision of Jerusalem in the Ninth-Fifteenth Century. *JAOS* 115/2: 237-247.
- Luz, N. 2002. Aspects of Islamization of Space and Society in Mamlūk Jerusalem and Its Hinterland. *Mamlūk Studies Review* 6: 135-155.

Luz, N. 2004. *Al-Haram Al-Sharif in the Arab-Palestinian Public Discourse in Israel: Identity, Collective Memory and Social Construction*. Floersheimer Institute for Policy Study, Jerusalem, Achva Press. [Hebrew]

Luz, N. (2013a). The Islamic Movement and the Lure of the Sacred: The Struggle for Land through Sacred Sites. In, E. Rekhess & A. Rudnitzky (eds.), *Muslim Minorities in non-Muslim Majority Countries: The Test Case of the Islamic Movement in Israel*, Tel Aviv University: The Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation, Tel Aviv: Eyal Press, 67-78.

Luz, N. (2013b). Islam, Culture and the 'Others': Landscape of Religious (in) Tolerance in Jerusalem 638-1517. *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 40, 301-334.

Luz, N. 2014. *Reading Mamluk Cities: Culture and the Urban Landscape. Cities and Urbanism of the Pre-Modern Middle East*. (New York: Cambridge University Press).

Makiya, K. 2001. *The Rock. A Tale of Seventh-Century Jerusalem*. (New York: Pantheon Books).

Olwig, K. 1993. Sexual Cosmology: Nation and Landscape at the Conceptual Interstices of Nature and Culture, or: What does Landscape Really Mean? In, B. Bender (ed.), *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*. (Oxford: Berg), 307-343.

Schama, S. 1996. *Landscape and Memory*. (New York: Vintage).

Al-'Ulaymī, Mujir al-Din al-Hanbali, 1973. *Al-Uns al-Jalīl bī-Ta'rikh al-Quds wa-l-Khalīl*. (Amman, 1973). 2 vols.

Tuan, Y. 1979. Thought and Landscape in D. Meinig (ed.), *Interpretations of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographic Essays*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 89-102.