Cultural Pearls from the East

In Memory of Shmuel Moreh (1932–2017)

Edited by

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Contents

Acknowledgments xi
A Note on Transliteration xii
Abbreviations xiii
Notes on Contributors xiv

Introduction: Shmuel Moreh (1932–2017): Scholar and Humanist 1
Meir Hatina

Shmuel Moreh's Scientific Achievements 18
Menahem Milson and Meir M. Bar-Asher

PART 1
Poetry

Narrative in Ancient Arabic Heroic Poetry: The Account of the Battle 31
Albert Arazi

An Unpublished Poem in Honor of the Prophet Moses 49
Joseph Sadan

An Anti-Jewish *Qaṣīda* by Sīdī Qaddūr al-ʿAlamī 57
Norman (*Noam*) *A. Stillman*

"To Choose Your Own Sky": Rootedness and Dislocation in the Poetry of Saʿdī Yūsuf 69
Yair Huri-Horesh

Intertextuality in Samīḥ al-Qāsim's Poetry: A Philosophy of Blending 91
Ibrahim Taha

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PART 2
Prose and Drama

The Pimps' Maqāma: A Libertine Piece of Ornate Prose from a Manuscript of the Mamluk Period 109
Amir Lerner

Where Is the Holy Land? A Reading of Two Seventeenth-Century Arabic Manuscripts of *Virtues of the Holy Land* Literature 126
Ghaleb Anabseh

Samīr Naqqāsh: From One Universe to Another—Iraq to Israel 142
Geula Elimelekh

Representations of Women in the Literary Works of Egyptian Writer Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī 161
Yona Sheffer

Shared Passion: Imam Ḥusayn in Persian and Arabic Drama 179
Peter Chelkowski

Fūl, Egypt's National Food: A Key Component of Egyptian Identity and Its Reflections in Modern Egyptian Literature 194
Gabriel M. Rosenbaum

Contemporary Arabic Literature and Its Obsession with the Internet 224
Eman Younis

PART 3
Historiography

An Unknown Chronicle of Ottoman Egypt and Its Historiographical Implications 247
Jane Hathaway

The Sufi Personality of the Egyptian Historian ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī (1753–1825) 264
Michael Winter

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Encountering Modernity in the Late Nineteenth Century: Two Egyptian Accounts 288
Meir Hatina

Shmuel Moreh's *Baghdad Mon Amour*: Autobiographical Works as Historical and Cultural Documents 315
Sigal Goorji

Index 333

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Where Is the Holy Land? A Reading of Two Seventeenth-Century Arabic Manuscripts of *Virtues of the Holy Land* Literature

Ghaleb Anabseh

1 Introduction

As is well known, the Holy Land was the subject of numerous compositions within the genre of "virtues literature" (*adab al-faḍā'il*),[1] which dealt with its status and sanctity from the earliest days of Islam until the end of the Ottoman period. These works dealt with holy Muslim cities (Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem) as well as Damascus, which attracted the attention of numerous scholars and orientalists, such as Meir J. Kister, Joseph Sadan, and many others.

In the present study we focus on later works that described Palestine and Syria in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, in particular the cities of Jerusalem and Damascus. Works of this type, known as the literature of "the virtues of al-Sham" (*faḍā'il al-Shām*), is a religious, literary, geographical, or local patriotic genre.

1 In early Arabic literature one encounters a number of nearly synonymous terms, such as *manāqib*, *maḥāsin* and *shamā'il*. Fuat Sezgin claims that the use of such terms goes back to pre-Islamic times, when poets sang the praises of their tribes or their own exploits, or expressed love of their homeland. Among the earliest works in which Muslim holy cities are discussed are al-Azraqī's *Faḍā'il Makka* and Ibn Shādhān al-Wāsiṭī's *Akhbār al-Madīna*, which relate to cities in Hijaz. The status of the cities of al-Sham in the broad sense was already discussed before the eleventh century CE, but none of these works are extant. They are mentioned by Kāmil al-'Asalī in the table of contents of *Makhṭūṭāt faḍā'il Bayt al-Maqdis*. The earliest works we possess today are from the eleventh century, including al-Rab'ī's *Faḍā'il al-Shām wa-Dimashq* and Ibn al-Murajjā's *Faḍā'il Bayt al-Maqdis wa'l-Khalīl* and *Faḍā'il al-Shām*. These works were motivated by religious considerations having to do with the centrality of holy cities in Islam, especially Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem; with the importance which the Umayyad rulers attached to Palestine and Syria; with the struggle against the Crusaders; and, last but not least, the rivalry between Jerusalem and Damascus concerning the location of Moses's tomb, as noted by Sadan in his paper (see footnote below).

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The region of al-Sham[2] (and especially Jerusalem) was the subject of many books composed before the fifth century AH/eleventh century CE[3] and which dealt with its religious, historical, and spiritual importance.[4] However, no such works are extant, although several are mentioned in Kāmil Jamīl al-ʿAsalī's *Makhṭūṭāt faḍā'il Bayt al-Maqdis* (Manuscripts of the virtues of Jerusalem).[5] In contrast, beginning in the eleventh century CE, independent compositions began to appear on al-Sham in both the broad and the restricted sense. Of these we may mention, for example, *Faḍā'il Bayt al-Maqdis wa'l-Khalīl wa-faḍā'il al-Shām* (Virtues of Jerusalem and Hebron and virtues of al-Sham) by Ibn al-Murajjā (d. 738/1337), edited by Ofer Livne-Kafri, and *Faḍā'il al-Shām wa-Dimashq* (Virtues of al-Sham and Damascus) by Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Rabʿī (d. 444/1052), edited by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid.[6] It

2 In medieval historical and geographical sources, the word al-Sham may refer broadly to Palestine and Syria or, in a more restricted sense, to Syria or only the city of Damascus.

3 Books that were written about the merits of Jerusalem before the eleventh century CE apparently remained in unpublished manuscripts or were lost. Hence for example, *Kitāb futūh bayt almaqdis* (by Isḥāq b. Bishr al-Bukhārī, d. 821).

4 Emmanuel Sivan, "Le caractère sacré de Jérusalem aux XIIe–XIIIe siècles," *Studia Islamica* 22 (1967): 149–150. In this article there are numerous sources, p. 50. E.W. Ashtor; Z. Caskel; Ch. Hirschberg; A. Matthews; N. Poliak, G. Vajda; Heribert Busse, "Der Islam und die biblischen Kultstätten," *Der Islam* 42 (1966): 113–147; idem, "The Sanctity of Jerusalem in Islam," *Judaism* 17 (1968): 441–468; idem, "Jerusalem and Mecca: The Temple and the Kaaba," in *The Holy-Land in History and Thought*, edited by Moshe Sharon (Leiden: University Press, 1968), 236–246; Meir J. Kister, "You Shall Only Set Out for Three Mosques," *Le Muséon* 82 (1969): 173–196; Emmanuel Sivan, "The Beginnings of the Faḍā'il al-Quds Literature," *Der Islam* 48 (1971): 100–110; Shmuel Dov Goitein, "The Sanctity of Jerusalem and Palestine in Early Islam," in idem, *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 135–148; Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, "The Sanctity of Jerusalem in Islam," in *Jerusalem*, eds. John. M. Oesterreicher and Anne Sinai (New York: John Day: 1974), 211–225; Joseph Sadan, "A Legal Opinion of a Muslim Jurist Regarding the Sanctity of Jerusalem," *Israel Oriental Studies* 13 (1993): 231–245; Meir J. Kister, "Sanctity Joint and Divided," *JSAI* 20 (1996): 18–65; Ofer Livne-Kafri, "A Note on Some Traditions of Faḍā'il al-Quds," *JSAI* 14 (1991): 71–83; Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd, *Faḍā'il Bayt al-Maqdis fi makhṭūṭāt ʿarabiyya qadīma* (Kuwait: Maʿhad al-Makhṭūṭāt al-ʿArabiyya, 1985); cf. Meir J. Kister, "A Note on the Antiquity of Traditions on the Praises of Jerusalem," *Topics in the History of the Land of Israel under Muslim Rule*, edited by Moshe Sharon (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1976), 69–71 (in Hebrew); Joseph Sadan, "Three New Sources from the Praises of the Holy Land Literature in Arabic in the 16th–17th centuries," *Cathedra* 11 (1979): 186–206 (in Hebrew).

5 Kāmil Jamīl al-ʿAsalī, *Makhṭūṭāt faḍā'il Bayt al-Maqdis* (Amman: Dār al-Bashīr, 1984), Introduction.

6 See al-Musharraf b. al-Murajjā, *Faḍā'il Bayt al-Maqdis wa'l-Khalīl wa-faḍā'il al-Shām* (Shafāʿamr: Dār al-Mashriq li'l-Tarjama wa'l-Tibāʿa wa'l-Nashr, 1995); Alī al-Rabʿī, *Faḍā'il al-Shām wa-Dimashq* (Damascus: Maṭbūʿāt al-Majmaʿ al-ʿIlmī al-ʿArabī bi-Dimashq, 1950).

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appears to us that the Ottoman period, specifically the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was rich in works on the sanctity of al-Sham in both the broad and the restricted sense, as we have shown in the footnote above.

Our aim here is not to determine the nature of the concept of the Holy Land,[7] but rather to show the role which traditions relating to al-Sham, including local traditions, played in defining the Holy Land in works of the genre in question.

In this study we base ourselves on Jospeh Sadan's work (published in French in 1981) on the rivalry between the centers in Jerusalem and Damascus concerning the location of Moses's tomb.[8] Sadan mentions dozens of printed and manuscript texts composed in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods which discuss this issue. He showed that writers geographically associated with the Jerusalem center located the shrine near Jericho, while those who were geographically aligned with the Damascus center identified it near the al-Qadam Mosque (also known as al-Aqdām or al-Kathīb al-Aḥmar) south of Damascus.[9] For us this means that the writers on both sides championed their own respective regions and naturally espoused the cause of the shrine located

7 The Qur'an contains quite a number of verses in which the Holy Land is mentioned. See Qur'an 21:17, 81; 17:1; 5:24, and more. These refer to "the land which God blessed," the land of al-Sham, Palestine, Damascus, and part of Jordan, or al-Ramla, Jordan and Palestine, or Jericho, or parts of Jericho, Palestine, and Syria, or parts of Jerusalem.

8 Joseph Sadan, "Le tombeau de Moïse à Jéricho et à Damas: Une compétition entre deux lieux saints principalement à l'époque ottomane," *Revue des études Islamiques* 49/1 (1981): 60–99.

9 Joseph Sadan, "A Legal Opinion of a Muslim Jurist Regarding the Sanctity of Jerusalem," 231–245. However, according to standard Muslim tradition, its location is not known. Still, in the "virtues literature" there are numerous reports on its purported site, which is variously identified as Midyan, Tayh Bani Isra'il, Lydda, Damascus, Bosra near Damascus, al-Balqā' and Jericho, not far from Jerusalem. See Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Khalīlī, *Ta'rīkh al-Quds wa'l-Khalīl ʿalayhi al-salām* (London: Mu'assasat al-Furqān li'l-Turāth al-Islāmī, 2004), 10–87. The manuscript was edited by Muḥammad ʿAdnān al-Bakhīt and Nawfān Rajā al-Sawāriya. As far as I could tell, the author of the manuscript (MS clark 33: Oxford) is not mentioned. See also Shams al-Dīn b. Ṭūlūn, *Tuḥfat al-ḥabīb fīmā warada fi'l-Kathīb* (MS Leyden Or. 2512), fol. 1 v., 2 r., in which the shrine is located next to al-Kathīb al-Aḥmar since, according to Muslim tradition, the Prophet saw Moses there during his night journey: 5v. Although this tradition would seem to place Moses's shrine near Jericho, while the tradition placing the shrine in al-Sham in the broad sense would seem to be in favor of Damascus, there is in fact no difficulty in considering al-Kathīb al-Aḥmar as being located near Jericho. Cf. Shihāb al-Dīn al-Maqdisī, *Muthīr al-gharām ilā ziyārat al-Quds wa'l-Shām* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1994), 273, where it is said with respect to Moses: "In the past the rock was the direction in which he prayed. The Prophet and his Companions prayed to it for sixteen or seventeen months, then turned to the Kaʿba. The Prophet saw him on the night of the midnight journey (*al-isrā'*) as he was praying at his tomb at al-Kathīb al-Aḥmar." Al-Maqdisī does not mention the shrine but does say that it is in Palestine.

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nearby.[10] However, this is not always the case. Thus, for example, ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1731), who belonged to the Damascus center, states that Moses's shrine is the one located near Jericho.[11]

We mention the rivalry between these two centers not for purposes of comparison. In fact, there is no comparing the two, since Jerusalem is considered the third holiest city of Islam, after Mecca and Medina.[12] However, Damascus, too, enjoyed considerable religious, administrative, historical, and economic importance.

2 Traditions in Keeping with Islamic Thought and Local Traditions

A perusal of compositions in the "virtues of the Holy Land" genre reveals that they contain traditions going back to early Islam, which mention the Holy Land as part of an exegesis of the Qurʾan, or belong to official Ḥadīth literature. On the other hand, we also encounter traditions that are not consistent with Islamic thought and do not occur in official Ḥadīth collections. In the present study, which is limited to the seventeenth century and to two manuscripts from that time which were made available to us by Sadan in the course of our studies at Tel Aviv University, we shall for brevity's sake limit ourselves to mentioning the sources used by the two authors in question: Ṣāliḥ b. Aḥmad al-Tamartāshī (d. 1645) and Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb (d. 1649). The sources they used in compiling the materials for their compositions include the Qurʾan, commentaries on the Qurʾan, Ḥadīth literature, *adab* literature, works on geography and history, and previous works in the "virtues" genre. At the same time, we see that they also used local traditions of doubtful validity that contradict Islamic thought, and traditions that can be interpreted as referring to more than one geographical region. This fact has been noted by a number of investigators of the genre, among them the historian Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid, who, in his edition of al-Rabʿī's *Faḍāʾil al-Shām wa-Dimashq*, divided the traditions mentioned in that work into three parts: the so-called "Israelite" ḥadīths (*Isrāʾīliyyāt*), fabricated ḥadīths, and valid ḥadīths.[13] For the purposes of his edition, he sought the opinions of clerics such as Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Arnāʾūṭ and

10 Joseph Sadan, "Le Tombeau de Moïse à Jéricho et à Damas," 60–99. Heribert Busse, "Der Islam und die biblischen Kultstätten," 137–140; "The Sanctity of Jerusalem in Islam," 441–468.

11 ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusi, *Riḥlati ilā al-Quds* (My journey to Jerusalem) (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1902), 46.

12 Kister, "You Shall Only Set Out for Three Mosques," 173–196.

13 See al-Rabʿī, *Faḍāʾil al-Shām wa-Dimashq*, 89.

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Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī regarding the validity and acceptability of the traditions upheld in the book as an act of religious purism and out of a desire to please the clerics and Muslim society in general.

3 The Rivalry between Jerusalem and Damascus

It is a well-known fact that the rivalry between the centers in Jerusalem and Damascus began with a dispute regarding the nature of the Holy Land and, to judge by the manuscripts and other texts that we examined, later spread to additional issues, such as the location of Moses's tomb. The rivalry was limited to a specific geographical region, as shown by Sadan (see above), and not one that concerned the Muslim world as a whole, as dealt with by Kister and Sourdel-Thomine.[14]

In our perusal of the two seventeenth-century manuscripts, we found that the rivalry in question concerned the definition of the concept of the Holy Land.[15] This raises the following questions: Can we find traditions of a local character used as elements of this rivalry? Can we find traditions that can be interpreted in more than one way? For example, among the ways the term "al-Sham" can be understood, should we adopt the more restricted sense (that is, the city of Damascus), as demanded by the ruler of that city, who insisted that the city was the Holy Land? We wish to point out that our task in the present study is not to discuss the traditions commonly accepted as valid since the inception of Islam. Important as they are, they do not pertain to the subject under discussion here. Such traditions, which go back to the times of the Prophet, or were ascribed to him at a later date, are irrelevant here, despite their intrinsic importance, except perhaps with respect to what we can learn about the way such traditions appeared in different times and places.

In the seventeenth century, two oral debates took place on whether or not Damascus was the Holy Land, as shown by the two aforementioned manuscripts.

14 Kister, "You Shall Only Set Out for Three Mosques," 173–196; and "Sanctity Joint and Divided," 18–65; Janine Sourdel-Thomine, "Une image de Jérusalem au début du XIIIe siècle," in *Jerusalem, Rome, Constantinople*, in the series *Cultures et civilizations médiévales*, edited by Daniel Poirion (Paris: Sorbonne, 1986), 217–233.

15 The concept of the Holy Land, as we shall see, is not well-defined. Ibn Ḥabīb understands the term al-Sham in the narrow sense, that is, the city of Damascus. See Qur'an, 5: 21. There are a number of different definitions in Islam of the concept of the Holy Land, for example "the land which God blessed," the land of al-Sham, Palestine, Damascus, and part of Jordan, or al-Ramla, Jordan, and Palestine, or Jericho, or parts of Jericho, Palestine and Syria, or parts of Jerusalem. Qur'an, 21: 71,81; 17: 1; 5: 24; 1: 93; 7: 133; 24: 36; 21: 105; 5: 41.

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In order to clarify the matter, we chose a passage from the manuscript composed by Ṣāliḥ b. Aḥmad al-Tamartāshī, a resident of the city of Gaza, entitled *al-Khabar al-tāmm fī dhikr ḥudūd al-arḍ al-muqaddasa wa-Filasṭīn wa'l-Shām* (Complete report mentioning the boundaries of the Holy Land, Palestine, and Syria).[16] It should be noted that al-Tamartāshī wrote his book in the wake of an oral debate on whether or not Damascus was the Holy Land, a debate that took place in Egypt in the presence of clerics and men of government. The passage reads as follows:

> I traveled away from my family and homeland, said farewell to my children and brothers, and set out for Cairo, may God guard it and the lands of the Muslims forever from the evils of injustice and aggression. In Cairo I heard, as I did also in my country, that His Excellency […] the representative of the Ottoman State […] the Vizier ʿAlī Pasha, now in Cairo, may God protect him […] loves scholars and honors the pious and the wise. His Excellency held a meeting, which I too attended, with Khalīl Efendi al-Rūmī, a teacher at the al-Shaykhūniyya school and other Cairene dignitaries.[17]

The manuscript then goes on to explain the reason that the epistle was written, by way of an oral dispute that took place at the gathering of the aforementioned vizier:

> During the gathering at His Excellency ʿAlī Pasha's, a question was raised about Damascus al-Sham—whether it is a holy land or not. I asked God for guidance and composed this epistle, which contains a mention of the lands of al-Sham, its boundaries and why it was named as it was. It also mentions the land of Palestine and why it was named thus, as well as the holy lands, their boundaries and why they were called that.[18]

What is interesting here is how the author uses the word *al-Shām*, which may be understood in the general sense, that is Palestine and Syria, or in the more restricted sense, of Syria alone, which contradicts the epistle's purpose, or perhaps it refers just to the city of Damascus, which would make it consistent with

16 Based on the Istanbul MS, Asʿad Efendi, MS. No. 2212/2, composed by Ṣāliḥ b. Aḥmad al-Tamartāshī al-Ghazzī. See his biography in Khayr al-Dīn al-Zirkilī, *al-Aʿlām* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm li'l-Malāyīn, 2002), 3:195.

17 Al-Tamartāshī, MS *al-Khabar al-tāmm*, 6v–7r.

18 Ibid., 6v–7v.

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the epistle's stated purpose. Thus, for example, he says elsewhere: "Scholars are agreed that al-Sham is the best of sites after Mecca and Medina."[19]

Another example is provided by traditions taken from *Ta'rīkh madinat Dimashq* (History of Damascus), by Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 499/1176), regarding the prompting of the people of al-Sham, as in the following passage:

> As narrated by ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥawwāla al-Asadī: The Messenger of God said: "You shall conscript armies, an army in al-Sham, an army in Iraq and an army in Yemen." Then Ibn Ḥawwāla said to him: "Choose for me, oh Messenger of God." He replied: "Take al-Sham, and whoever refuses let him adhere to the south and let him conscript whoever betrayed him. Indeed, God has guaranteed to me al-Sham and its people."[20]

Then another tradition is quoted, an Israelite tradition transmitted by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Rabʿī in his *Faḍā'il al-Shām wa-Dimashq*: "[…] Kaʿb narrated: It was said: 'God blessed al-Sham from al-ʿArīsh to the Euphrates.'"[21]

Here, too, the report may be interpreted as referring to al-Sham in either the broad or the restricted sense. Al-Tamartāshī collected the materials for his manuscript from various other religious, historical, and geographical sources, in order to impress a local venerable with his erudition in matters of history and religion, and hopefully to obtain a good position with him. To judge by the manuscript's contents, he speaks about the geographical boundaries of al-Sham, as well as about Palestine and its virtues, but uses the opportunity to also discuss the virtues of Gaza, the city of his birth. By focusing on a town that was small, at least relative to the large Muslim cities that are usually the subject of works on the "virtues of al-Sham," he was displaying a measure of local patriotism.[22] The status of Jerusalem is somewhat obscured, however. Only at the end of the manuscript does he note the fact that "Jerusalem is the center of the earth." This is what he writes:

19 Ibid., 9v.

20 Ibid., 10r, 9v. Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī treats this ḥadīth as very reliable: Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Takhrīj aḥādīth faḍā'il al-Shām wa-Dimashq li'l-Rabʿī* (Damascus: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1960), 13.

21 Al-Tamartāshī, op.cit., 12r.

22 Ibid., 14v, 17v. According to this MS, "It is one of the most beautiful towns in the neighborhood of Jerusalem. In it Sulaymān, son of Dāwūd, peace be upon them both, was born […] The *imām* Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī, may God be pleased with him, was born in it before that; the place of his birth is known and is a pilgrimage destination."

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> The al-Aqṣā (literally: "the furthest one") Mosque was called so because it is the middle of the world […]. It was related in the name of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, may God be pleased with him, who said: "The middle of the two earths is the Temple in Jerusalem (*bayt al-maqdis*), and the highest of the two earths towards the heavens is the Temple in Jerusalem."[23]

He ends his composition with a delineation of the Holy Land:

> As for the boundaries of the Holy Land, (they are) in the direction of prayer the Land of Hijaz […] in the east beyond Dūmat al-Jandal, the desert of al-Samāwa, which is large and extends to Iraq […] in the north the Euphrates river […] and from the west the Byzantine Sea, which is the Salt Sea, and in the south the Egyptian desert.[24]

In this context the word "boundaries" (*ḥudūd*) is used as a definition referring to a geographical area rather than an abstract concept. The reason why this interpretation is clearly preferred is because various writers who used the term "boundaries of the Holy Land" or "boundaries of al-Sham" do not in fact provide complete borders, but only enough to define a geographical region. Furthermore, the division to which they refer is one that reflects a geographical reality in antiquity and does not express the historical situation at the time the texts were written.

As for the name Holy Land, the reason for it appears in a commentary on the verse "My people, go into the Holy Land":[25] "It was called this because it was the abode of the prophets and the residence of the believers. Some say that it is Mt. Sinai (*al-Ṭūr*) and its surroundings, others that it is Damascus, Palestine and parts of Jordan, and still others that it is al-Sham only."[26]

However, what is of interest to us here is the word al-Sham and its reference to the city of Damascus, which appears in the sources from which our writer borrowed. The term al-Sham is used in various traditions that speak of its sanctity, but these may be interpreted as referring either to the general sense of the term, that is Palestine and Syria, or just Syria, or even just the city of Damascus. In other words, they do not make it possible to claim with certainty that the

23 See MS *al-Khabar al-tāmm*, 18v.

24 Ibid., 17v.

25 Qur'an, 5: 21.

26 MS *al-Khabar al-tāmm*, 17r. The work in question is the commentary of Abū al-Suʿūd al-ʿImādī (d. 982/1574), *Irshād al-ʿaql al-salīm ilā mazāyā al-Qurʾān al-karīm* (Guidance of the healthy mind towards the merits of the noble Qur'an).

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city of Damascus is the Holy Land.[27] In addition, the fact that the writer treats a variety of topics shows that he realized the uncertainty surrounding the concept of the Holy Land, and that addressing this was the main reason for composing this work.

A more certain conclusion concerning the possible interpretation "the Holy Land" as referring to the city of Damascus can be arrived at from a perusal of another manuscript, also composed in the seventeenth century. This work, entitled *Durr al-niẓām fī maḥāsin al-Shām* (Arrangement of pearls on the beauties of Syria), was written by Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb,[28] a resident of the city of Nablus. The manuscript is of interest because the author himself is not clear about his own definition of the Holy Land. He occasionally uses the word al-Sham in its restricted sense (Damascus) and occasionally in the more extensive sense (that is, as referring to Syria and Palestine).[29] This stands in contradiction to the stated reasons for the book's composition, as we shall show below.

According to the manuscript itself, it was composed in the wake of a disputation that took place in the presence of the governor of Damascus and the local governor of Nablus. The ruler of Damascus had a text read out aloud in his presence to the effect that the Holy Land was al-Sham in the narrow sense, that is, the city of Damascus. The quoted tradition was a local one, which he promulgated despite the opposition expressed by the scholars and clerics who attended the debate. This shows the extent to which the official religious establishment rejected this kind of ḥadīth. In order to win the approval of the ruler of Damascus, the governor of Nablus, upon his return to his city, asked a moderately cultured local man to compose a work that would prove the aforesaid tradition's validity.

The tradition pronounced by the ruler of Damascus, the validity of which the governor of Nablus wished to prove, is quoted in Ibn Ḥabīb's text, as follows:

> I was at a gathering of the Prince of Princes [...], the Honorable Sulaymān Pasha, the prince of the district of Nablus [...], and the above-mentioned vizier noted that he had been at a gathering of [...] the king Yūsuf

27 See MS *al-Khabar al-tāmm*, 7v–8v.

28 MS Princeton Yehuda Collection Els. 1862. We have not been able to locate any biography of this writer.

29 See MS *Durr al-niẓām fī maḥāsin al-Shām*, in which the author quotes well-known traditions on the status of Palestine and the sanctity of Jerusalem. On folio 6r he says: "Ibn 'Abbās said: Bayt al-Maqdis is holy because there one is purified of one's sins." On folio 7v there is an interesting tradition where Jerusalem is compared with Damascus: "It has been said that Damascus is the best region of al-Sham except Bayt al-Maqdis." Folio 13v.

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> al-Zamān Sinān Katkhuda and the victorious army at the time in the city of Damascus al-Sham […]. Yūsuf al-Zamān mentioned al-Sham and its virtues, and Damascus and its beauties, and what was said in praise of its inhabitants, that it was the Holy Land par excellence in whose praise God, may He be glorified, said in the holy ḥadīths: "I am Allah, Lord of al-Sham." But how could he pronounce such an utterance, when God is Lord of the heavens and the two earths, without any specified place? Does this mean that his lordship extends to al-Sham but not elsewhere? Furthermore, the chain of transmission of this tradition is weak, with great error and sin […]. Some teachers of his country were present at the gathering […] and they spoke at length in this vein, and I had no choice but to listen patiently before rebutting their claims and proving the ḥadīth's validity to them.[30]

It would thus appear that the governor of Nablus wished to demonstrate the truth of this tradition at the gathering itself, in order to ingratiate himself with the ruler of Damascus. The manuscript then goes on:

> I then arose and quoted the Almighty's words as proof of the validity of this holy ḥadīth: "If you help God, He will help you."[31] I wanted to clarify this noble ḥadīth with a good chain of transmission and said: "Yes, this is a true ḥadīth […] for this exalted ḥadīth is holy and noble, glorified in the place of revelation, saying: 'I am Allah Lord of al-Sham, I shall not tolerate injustice by the unjust in it.'"[32]

Ibn Ḥabīb mentioned the sanctity of al-Sham in the broad sense in accordance with various traditions, as well as in the narrow sense of Damascus, since this was the reason why he had composed his epistle. He took his materials from a variety of sources, including commentaries on Qur'anic verses that include words variously taken to refer to Damascus and Jerusalem.[33] He also cited the verse about the Prophet's midnight journey, which he used indirectly to say something at least about the sanctity of Jerusalem, although this might also be perceived as contradicting his aim in writing the book. He did this by

30 MS *al-Khabar al-tāmm*, 1v, 2r.

31 Qur'an, 47: 7.

32 Ibn Ḥabīb, MS *Durr al-niẓām fī maḥāsin al-Shām*, folio 2r, 2v. It is possible that Ibn Ḥabīb hoped to obtain a position in Nablus from that city's governor.

33 Ibid., folio 3v. For example, Qur'an, 95: 1–3, where the figs symbolize the mosque of Damascus and the olive trees that of Jerusalem.

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combining traditions dealing with the sanctity of Syria and Damascus with those that deal with the sanctity of Jerusalem.

Let us see, for example, how the author manages to bring Jerusalem into the discussion despite the fact that he is supposedly writing about the status of Damascus: "It has been said that Damascus is the best region of al-Sham, with the exception of Jerusalem."[34] In his epistle Ibn Ḥabīb does not refrain from quoting the local traditional text noted above that was recited at the gathering in the presence of the ruler of Damascus ("I am Allah the Lord of al-Sham") in which, although the word "al-Sham" could be interpreted in the more extensive sense, the author clearly intends it in the sense of the city of Damascus, since this was, after all, the purpose for which the epistle was written.

Elsewhere in the manuscript Ibn Ḥabīb refers to the boundaries of al-Sham:

> The First al-Sham is Gaza […], Jerusalem and its large city Palestine.[35] The Second al-Sham is Jordan […] and its large city Tiberias. The Third al-Sham is al-Ghūṭa […] and its large city Damascus. The Fourth al-Sham is Qartab, Homs and Hama […] and its large city Homs. The Fifth al-Sham is al-ʿAwāṣim […] and its large city Antioch.[36]

In this passage, Ibn Ḥabīb describes a geographical division of al-Sham that does not reflect the situation in the Ottoman period, but that of an earlier time. Like al-Tamartāshī in the manuscript described previously, he uses the opportunity to display his local patriotism and discuss the virtues of his own town, Nablus.[37]

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34 Ibid., folio 7v. This tradition is quoted by ʿIzz al-Dīn b. ʿAbd al-Salam al-Sulamī, *Targhīb ahl al-Islām fī suknā al-Shām* (Jerusalem: no publisher, 1940), 22.

35 Notably, Palestine is not a city, but a geographical area, according to geographical references. See Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Maqdisī, *Ahsan al-taqāsīm fī maʾrifat al-aqālīm* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya liʾl-Dirasat waʾl-Nashr, 2003), p. 158.

36 MS *Durr al-niẓām*, folio 5r.

37 Here is a passage from the manuscript, folio 12r:
In his document, al-Musharraf reported in Kaʿbʾs name, who said: The country God loves most is al-Sham and the part of al-Sham that God likes best is Jerusalem, and the part of Jerusalem God likes best is Mount Nablus […] Many scholars, venerable and pious men, have come out of it. It is filled with springs, trees, and fruit. The most common trees in its surroundings are olives. It has been said that our Lord Joseph, peace be upon him, has his tomb near the city of Nablus between the village of Balāṭ and ʿAskar. It has also been said that this is Joseph, the friend who provided for Mary.
See: Ghaleb Anabseh, "Selection of Traditions on the Virtues of Nablus in Arabic Virtues of Palestine (*Faḍāʾil*) Literature," *Cathedra* 124 (2007): 21–30 (in Hebrew).

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4 The Use of Deviant Local Traditions

In our perusal of the manuscript texts of "the virtues of al-Sham" in the extensive as well as the restricted sense, we found that both authors collected materials from a variety of different sources (e.g. religious, geographical, historical). Since it is our aim here to show the role played by local traditions that were not accepted by the official religious establishment, especially with respect to holy places, we have pointed out that several writers in the genre of "virtues literature" have quoted traditions that were quite suspect, especially when they divided tradition into three types: traditions that supposedly go back to the Prophet's time and are ascribed to him; traditions that are ascribed to the Prophet's Companions; and the *isra'īliyyāt*. To these types we add another, namely traditions stemming from a later period—that is, local traditions that had been suspended for a while and then reappeared at a later time.

Among the local traditions found in works on "the virtues of al-Sham" we find, for example, the tradition about "the cities of Paradise," which is quoted in some of these works, and where the term al-Sham was used in both the extended and the more restrictive sense. Thus, in the Mamluk period, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Maqdisī (d. 765/1363) in his *Muthīr al-gharām ilā ziyārat al-Quds wa'l-Shām* (Arouser of a love for pilgrimages to Jerusalem and al-Sham) quotes:

> Narrated by Abū Hurayra, may God be pleased with him: The Messenger of God, may God bless him and give him peace, said: "Four are the cities of Paradise: Mecca, Medina, Damascus, and Jerusalem, and four are the cities of Fire: Constantinople, Tyana, Antioch, and Sana'a."

Elsewhere he quotes a tradition in which Jerusalem appears before Damascus.[38] As for the Ottoman period, the ḥadīth quoted by Ibn Habib is as follows:

> Narrated Abū Hurayra, quoting the Prophet, may God bless him and give him peace, who said: "There are four cities of Paradise: Mecca, Medina, Damascus, and Jerusalem."[39]

38 See al-Maqdisī, *Muthīr*, first ḥadīth, p. 124; second ḥadīth, p. 259.

39 Ibn Ḥabīb, MS *Durr al-niẓām*, folio 13r. The tradition is quoted in folio 13r. The tradition *Faḍā'il al-Shām* (Damascus: Dār al-Thaqāfa al-'Arabiyya, 1992), where Jerusalem is mentioned before Damascus: ḥadīth no. 19. The same is true of the version quoted in al-Rab'ī, *Faḍā'il al-Shām wa-Dimashq*, ḥadīth no. 53, 54, and also in Ibn al-Murajjā who, however, also quotes another tradition in Ka'b's name:

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No doubt that Ibn Ḥabīb intentionally put Damascus before Jerusalem, since that was the entire purpose of writing his composition, despite the fact that this ḥadīth may well have belonged to local traditions that are relatively plentiful in the literature of the virtues of al-Sham in both the broad and the restricted sense.

The tradition about the "four cities of Paradise" is also quoted in al-Rabʿi's *Faḍā'il al-Shām wa-Dimashq*, but there Jerusalem appears before Damascus (the order being: Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, Damascus). In his explanation of the ḥadīths, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid in his aforementioned work relies on the work of Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, who states: "I recorded an unattested ḥadīth."[40] Such traditions represent local traditions, not accepted in canonical Islam.

Actually, traditions in which Damascus precedes Jerusalem do not represent the official establishment in Islam. These traditions are rare and do not often appear in collections. The order Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, Damascus fits in with what is considered acceptable in Islamic thought, irrespective of a particular tradition's validity or lack thereof (indeed, the tradition in question is considered to be fabricated, as noted above). Placing Damascus before Jerusalem simply contradicts the status of these cities in Islam.

We are of the opinion that the order of cities as given above reflects their relative sanctity in the authors' views. We may also compare the official order in which the holy cities are placed, according to their relative status, with the "lashing the saddle" (*shadd al-riḥāl*) ḥadīth, discussed by Kister, which represented the sanctity of Islam's holy cities by degree.[41] However, according to al-Albānī and others who wrote in the "virtues of al-Sham" genre, we have here, at the very least, an official tradition ("lashing the saddle of the holy cities of Islam") and a local one ("the cities of Paradise"), even when Jerusalem is placed before Damascus. We may compare the way the status and relative sanctity of Muslim cities appear in the "lashing the saddle" tradition, with the relative size of certificates of pilgrimage to al-Sham handed out to pilgrims in the Ayyubid periods: a large register of holy places in Mecca; a smaller one with the holy places in Medina; and an even smaller one with the holy places in Jerusalem.

"There are five cities of Paradise: Homs, Damascus, Jerusalem, Bayt Jibrin, and Zafar in Yemen, and five cities of Hell: Antioch, ʿAmmūriyya, Constantinople, Tadmur, and Sanʿa in Yemen (paragraphs 217–218)."

An anonymous MS, *Kitāb fī faḍā'il Bayt al-Maqdis wa-fīhi kitāb fī faḍā'il al-Shām*, Britain, MS Cambridge Qq 91.7, folio 127r, mentions Jerusalem before Damascus; cf. Aḥmad al-Baṣrī, *Tuḥfat al-anām fī faḍā'il al-Shām* (Damascus: Dār al-Bashā'ir, 1998), 26, where Jerusalem precedes Damascus.

40 See the appendix of ḥadīths in al-Rabʿī's book, by Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, 99.

41 Kister, "You Shall Only Set Out for Three Mosques," 173–196.

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The latter were studied by Dominique Sourdel and Janine Sourdel-Thomine. Although not every pilgrim received such certificates, their study provides a method for the identification of the official Islamic position by way of local works that highlight the sanctity of specific places. The problem is whether one can thereby identify the natural Islamic view.

In fact, what is important here, in addition to the rivalry between Jerusalem and Damascus, is the appearance of local traditions of other cities in a different context, such as traditions about the cities of Homs, Nablus, and Bisan, as indeed happens in the "virtues of al-Sham" genre.[42] Clearly, such traditions about Jerusalem, Damascus, or other cities constitute a local phenomenon that is not recognized by disparate sources. Perhaps we are faced with a literary and folkloristic phenomenon that is both similar and different from official ḥadīths.

5 Conclusion

In a number of traditions that mention al-Sham and appear in works in the "virtues of the Holy Land" genre, al-Sham does not always refer to Palestine and Syria in a broad sense, but has a more restricted denotation, referring to Syria only, or even just to the city of Damascus. Quite a few of these traditions aim at bolstering the status of Damascus and are therefore used in an unaccustomed manner to show that "al-Sham" (that is, Damascus) is "God's land." Such traditions could have been expected to disappear, but they remained in place and reappeared at a later time.

Al-Tamartāshī and Ibn Ḥabīb both tried to prove the sanctity of Damascus and to define the concept and boundaries of the Holy Land, although the issue remains somewhat obscure in both their compositions. In the case of al-Tamartāshī, this lack of clarity concerns the definition per se, while in the case of Ibn Ḥabīb, it has to do with his reliance on a late geographical division. Both writers mention the sanctity of Jerusalem and their own places of birth (Gaza and Nablus, respectively, both of which belonged to the Jerusalem center) as a show of local patriotism. Another important point is that one should not analyze the traditions used in the "virtues literature" according to Islamic criteria, but rather in light of cultural and literary considerations that help clarify how local traditions emerge and how, although they were not

42 Here we refer to the ḥadīth in which Homs is mentioned as one of the cities of Paradise and is listed before Jerusalem and Damascus. The second city listed is sometimes Damascus and sometimes Jerusalem.

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gathered into official Ḥadīth collections, they have remained living materials with local color and used by later generations.

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