

Angels, Ritual and Sacred Space in Islam

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ABSTRACT

The idea of “sacred space” has been discussed frequently in the study of religion, both the ways in which faith communities engage with sacred space, as well as how different religions define and authenticate their sacred spaces. This article will look at the ways in which Muslim sacred spaces are defined in Islam, looking particularly at the way in which angels are used to confirm the sanctity of particular locations. It will look notions of sacred space in relation to the Ka’ba and other places of prayer, comparing Muslim ideas with those of Judaism, Christianity and other religious traditions.

Keywords

Islam, sacred space, angels, Ka’ba, Mecca, prayer

Religious theories of sacred space were pioneered by Mircea Eliade in the 1950s and 1960s, and although his ideas have attracted some criticism,¹ Eliade’s theories continue to be debated. Concepts of religious or sacred space have focused on four main areas. The first is the idea that there is a divine archetype of the sacred site, establishing a theological link

1. One important critic has been J.Z. Smith; See Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1–23.

between heaven and earth.² The second is the notion of the *axis mundi*: a central point or pole around which the spiritual world is focused. The *axis mundi* also marks a point of intersection between the divine and earthly worlds, as well as a point of contact between the two.³ As Smith has shown, Eliade may have overstated the role and prevalence of a religious *axis mundi*,⁴ nevertheless in many religious traditions the Temple does act as a meeting place between God and humans. The third theme is the role of mythology in the sacralising of place: a holy site is given a sacred history, placing it in a wider spiritual context.⁵ The fourth theme, explored by Jonathan Z. Smith, is that ritual plays an important part in the articulation of sacred space.⁶

There has, however, been relatively little application of these theories to the concept of sacred space in Islam, especially in the medieval period;⁷ nor many studies of Muslim beliefs about Mecca, the Ka'ba and other sacred sites.⁸ This article will explore notions of sacred space in an Islamic context, comparing it to other religious traditions, particularly Judaism. To what extent do Islamic beliefs about the Ka'ba, and Mecca more widely, differ from Jewish ideas about the Temple and Jerusalem? How is sacred space authenticated? Are there differences in the sacredness of holy sites, and if so, how is this sacred "hierarchy" articulated?

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2. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), 42–50.
 3. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 12–17.
 4. See Smith, *To Take Place*, 1–13.
 5. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 68–113 and Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 410–436.
 6. See Smith, *To Take Place*, 103–117.
 7. Josef Meri is one of the few to have explored this area; see Josef W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints Among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12–58.
 8. One important article is Juan Eduardo Campo, "Authority, Ritual, and Spatial Order in Islam: The Pilgrimage to Mecca," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 5:1 (1991): 65–91. Campo is interested in the concept of authority and the rituals associated with the pilgrimage, rather than the concept of sacred space itself. There have been a number of other articles on the rituals of the pilgrimage, e.g.: Marion Katz, "The Hajj and the Study of Islamic Ritual," *Studia Islamica* 98/99 (2004): 95–129 and William R. Roff, "Pilgrimage and the History of Religions: Theoretical Approaches to the Hajj," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, edited by Richard C. Martin (Oxford: One World, 2001).

This article will also appraise the role of angels in the articulation of sacred space in Islam, particularly in the angelic performance of ritual both on earth and in heaven.

The Ka'ba and its Heavenly Archetype

It is incredibly common for sacred sites to be linked directly to another identical, or almost identical, version in heaven. There is some logic to such a conception of the temple, since both the divine and earthly temples are places through which divine communication can take place. For Judaism, during its existence, the Temple and the Holy of Holies marked the actual, physical place of divine communication. This single point was also often considered as the navel (*omphalos*), or centre of the world, also known as the *axis mundi*.⁹ In his study of Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern religions, Nicholas Wyatt comments:

The point of the junction is communication between the two, allowing the benefits of cult to reach the god (they were seen as being fed by their servants, like great lords), and for their power to be transmitted downwards as a blessing...¹⁰

The *axis mundi* represented a direct link between the heavenly and divine worlds. In Jewish literature, as well as Semitic religious traditions more broadly, there are many texts that establish links between the earthly temple and a heavenly prototype at the ends of this line of communication.¹¹ James R. Davila has commented on the heavenly temple in the Dead Sea Scrolls, noting that: "The Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice envisions a macrocosmic Temple conceived on the model of the earthly Tabernacle and the Temple in Jerusalem."¹² The two places that mark the path of interaction and communication between heaven and earth

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9. Samuel Terrien, "The Omphalos Myth and Hebrew Religion," *Vetus Testamentum* 20 (1970): 315-338; Jon D. Levenson, "The Temple and the World," *Journal of Religion* 64 (1984): 275-298 and Philip S. Alexander, "Jerusalem as the Omphalos of the World: On the History of a Geographical Concept," in *Jerusalem: Its Sanctity and Centrality to Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, edited by Lee I. Levine (New York: Continuum, 1999), 104-119.
 10. Nicholas Wyatt, *Space and Time in the Religious Life of the Near East* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 161.
 11. See R.G. Hammerton-Kelly, "The Temple and the Origins of Jewish Apocalyptic," *Vetus Testamentum* 20 (1970).
 12. James R. Davila, "The Macrocosmic Temple, Scriptural Exegesis and the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 9 (2002): 1.

are often in a parallel location and usually take the same physical form.

As will be seen below, the Ka'ba marks the particular locus where there is a direct link between the heaven and earthly realms. The Ka'ba is also the direction in which Muslims pray—a common feature of a temple in Semitic and other religious traditions. Michael Sells, in a review article, discusses the *mihrab*; commenting:

What are these prayer niches but in a sense relics of abodes or potential relics, pointing toward the dwelling of sacrality (*bayt al-haram*) in Mecca, itself reflected in the heavenly enlivened dwelling or dwelling of life (*ad-bayt* [sic] *al-ma'mur*) and the eternal abode of the afterlife (*dār al-akhira*).¹³

The *Inhabited House* [*bayt al-ma'mūr*] is the Islamic “replica” of the Ka'ba in heaven. The connection between heaven and earth through the locus of Mecca, and by extension through the *qibla*, is an extremely important part of the interaction between humans and God. W. McKane comments that in Islamic visions of heaven there “is a doctrine of heavenly prototypes and earthly copies; thus a heavenly *Ka'aba*, a heavenly *mu'addin* and an angel in the form of a cock who regulates the crowing and silence of all earthly cocks.”¹⁴ This heavenly prototype is believed to be directly above the earthly Ka'ba, this can be seen in a number of texts, such as al-Tha'labi's *Stories of the Prophets*:

Then God inspired Adam: I have a Sanctuary located directly under My Throne; so go to it and circumambulate it, as (the angels) circumambulate My Throne; and pray there, as they pray at My Throne, for there I shall answer your prayer.¹⁵

13. Michael A. Sells, “Towards a Multidimensional Understanding of Islam: The Poetic Key,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996): 145–166, 151.
14. W. McKane, “A Manuscript on the Mi'raj in the Bodleian,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 2 (1957): 375; for more on the history of the Ka'ba, see Uri Rubin, “The Ka'ba: Aspects of its ritual function and position in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 8 (1986): 97–131.
15. William M. Brinner (trans.), *'Arā'is al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* or “*Lives of the Prophets*” (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 60. The nature of some of these hadith makes them difficult to locate. However, the Mamluk polymath Jalal al-Din Al-Suyūṭī compiled a hadith collection explicitly on angels, making it a very useful resource: al-Suyūṭī, edited by Muḥammad al-Sa'īd b. Basyūnī Zaghlūl, *Al-Ḥabā'ik fī akhbār al-malā'ik* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1988). See also S.R. Burge, *Angels in Islam: A Commentary, with Selected Translations, of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's Al-Ḥabā'ik fī akhbār al-malā'ik (The Arrangement of the Traditions about Angels)*, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2009. Al-Suyūṭī includes a similar comment in his *al-Habā'ik*: “...if [the

Here, the Ka'ba is seen to be related to God's Throne, and the rites associated with the pilgrimage and the Ka'ba are those performed in heaven by the angels. The *Inhabited House* is also used explicitly as the physical template for the earthly Ka'ba, take this hadith as an example:

When God sent Adam down from the Garden, he said: Adam, I have built a house for me, opposite my house which is in heaven. You can worship me in it, and your children, just as my angels worship around my Throne. So the angels came down to him, and he dug until he reached the Seventh Earth, and the angels threw the rock down until it towered over the face of the earth.¹⁶

In this case the Ka'ba is associated directly with the angels and the *Inhabited House*—it is, in effect, a replica of the divine house of God.¹⁷ Similar ideas can be seen Jewish and Christian texts.¹⁸

In Islamic tradition there is a different relationship between the Ka'ba and the divine world, as it does not represent a place of direct communication, nor are its rituals restricted to a select few, such as a priestly class. However, the Ka'ba is envisaged and imagined in similar terms as the world's *omphalos* or *axis mundi*. The existence of the *Inhabited House* has strong similarities to the divine and earthly depictions of the Jewish Temple and establishes the Ka'ba as the religious and spiritual centre in Islam.

Myths, Angels and the Authentication of Sacred Sites

Mircea Eliade has highlighted the importance of myth in the establishment of sacred sites.¹⁹ Such myths and legends lend a sacred site authenticity, as well as presenting explanations for its location, size, form and function.²⁰ Narratives place the locus within the context of a community's salvation history, linking the present community to key figures of the religion's past. Often the most important sites are those with a con-

Inhabited House] were to come down, then it would come down on top of [the Ka'ba]." Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Haba'ik*, 14–15 (§21); see also 134–135 (§498), 142 (§522) and 185 (§685).

16. Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Haba'ik*, 185 (§687).

17. Brannon Wheeler has suggested that the "sanctuary at Mecca was to be an earthly substitute for the garden of Eden, made necessary by Adam's fall..." Brannon Wheeler, *Mecca and Eden: Ritual, Relics and Territory in Islam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 64.

18. See Davila, "The Macrocosmic Temple, Scriptural Exegesis and the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice."

19. Cf. Mircea Eliade, "Cosmogonic Myth and 'Sacred History,'" *Religious Studies* 2 (1967).

20. Cf. Smith, *To Take Place*, 2–13.

nection to a faith community's founder. Other important people, such as prophets, kings and saints, also give further approval to the sanctity of the location, creating a sense of sacredness in perpetuity.

The association of the specific locus of the temple to events, such as the binding of Isaac, associate the place with an important moment in Jewish salvation history,²¹ and also make dislocation of the temple from its site problematic.²² In Islam, some traditions suggest that the *Inhabited House* is the place in which God resides, in others the Throne of God is directly above the *House*.²³ This alignment of Throne, *House* and Ka'ba establishes an important theological link between the two poles of the *axis mundi*. As in Judaism, there are a number of stories that focus on the Ka'ba as part of this spiritual connection, most notably the creation of Adam and the purification of the Ka'ba by Abraham and Ishmael.²⁴ The association of the Ka'ba with the divine world is also emphasised with traditions about its building by Adam or other prophets. The stories about Adam are particularly important as they show that God does not leave Adam and, by extension, humanity as a whole, without any means of communication with God.²⁵ Such narratives are extremely popular.²⁶ Al-Ṭabari writes in his *History*:

Adam missed what he used to hear from the angels and felt lonely so much so that he eventually complained about it to God in his various prayers. He

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21. For a discussion of the presence of angels during this narrative, see Moshe J. Bernstein, "Angels at the Aqedah: A Study in the Development of a Midrashic Motif," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 7 (2000): 263–291.
 22. Cf. Isaac Kalimi, "The Land of Moriah, Mount Moriah and the Site of Solomon's Temple in Biblical Historiography," *Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1990) and *idem*, "Zion or Gerizim? The Association of Abraham and the Aqeda with Zion / Gerizim in Jewish and Samaritan Sources," in *Boundaries of the Ancient Near Eastern World: A Tribute to Cyrus H. Gordon*, edited by Meir Lubetski, Claire Gottlieb and Sharon Keller (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). Temples are frequently associated with important mythic events; cf. Raphael Patai, *Man and Temple in Ancient Jewish Myth and Ritual* (London: Nelson, 1947), 105–139.
 23. Such an anthropomorphic view of God did raise problems for Muslim theologians; for a discussion images of God residing in heaven, see Gösta Vitesam, "Arsh and kursī. An Essay on Throne Traditions in Islam," in *Living Waters: Scandanavian Orientalistic Studies presented to Frede Løkkegaard*, edited by Egon Keck, Svend Søndergaard and Ellen Wulff (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1990); and Thomas J. O'Shaughnessy, "God's Throne and the Biblical Symbolism of the Qur'ān" *Numen* 20 (1973).
 24. Cf. Q 2:125 and the stories relating to this in the exegeses.
 25. For a discussion of this theme, see Wheeler, *Mecca and Eden*, 56–70.
 26. Cf. al-Zarkashī, edited by Abu 'l-Wafā' Muṣṭafā al-Maraghī, *l'lām al-sājid bi-aḥkām al-masājid* (Cairo: n.p., 1384), 43–50.

was therefore sent to Mecca.... God sent down a jewel (yāqūt ["ruby"]) of Paradise where the House is located today. (Adam) continued to circumambulate it, until God sent down the Flood. That jewel was lifted up, until God sent His friend Abraham to (re)build the House (in its later form).²⁷

In this example, the Ka'ba is partly of divine origin, not simply a recreation of a divine structure on earth. Such a position is less common in Islamic tradition, but it is important to note that this hadith also includes references to both Adam and Abraham.

In the context of the nascent Muslim community, it should not be surprising to see Muhammad have a similar relationship with the Ka'ba. In the histories of the period and the biographies of the Prophet's life, it is possible to see direct links between him and the Ka'ba itself. The Prophet, like Abraham and Ishmael, purifies the Ka'ba of idols;²⁸ was selected by the Meccans to install the black stone,²⁹ and he also established the rites and rituals to be performed during the pilgrimage.³⁰

It is interesting to note that Islam did not seek to institute the Ka'ba as a new sacred site, but places it within a wider salvation-historical context. Jonathan Z. Smith comments that the establishment of Constantinople as a new Christian religious centre faced problems.

The creation of a new ritual site is always an intriguing process. For, from the standpoint of ritual, novelty may result in a functional gain, but, just as often, in an ideological loss. If the former allows the freedom to innovate, the latter may result in a lack of resonance.³¹

Islamic tradition goes out of its way to associate the Ka'ba with Adam and the establishment of life on Earth. The Ka'ba's association with the

27. Franz Rosenthal (trans.), *The History of Al-Ṭabarī: From the Creation to the Flood* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 293; cf. Brinner, 'Arā'is al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā' or "Lives of the Prophets," 147. For the legends surrounding Ishmael, Hagar and the well of Zamzam, see G.R. Hawting, "The Disappearance and Rediscovery of Zamzam and the 'Well of the Ka'ba,'" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43 (1980): 44–54.

28. Alfred Guillaume (trans.), *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasūl Allāh*. (Repr. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 552.

29. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 84–86.

30. Especially during the 'Farewell Pilgrimage'; see Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 649–652. See also Richard Bell, "Muhammad's Pilgrimage Proclamation," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2 (1937); for a criticism of Bell's article see, Uri Rubin, "The Great Pilgrimage of Muḥammad: Some Notes on Sūra IX," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 27 (1982).

31. Smith, *To Take Place*, 75.

Inhabited House takes this even further, linking the location to a pre-existent and eternal place. Islamic texts assert that the sacred centre at Mecca is not new, but the *original* centre. This has much in common with Islam's conception of itself, not as a new, innovative religion, but *ḥanif*—part of the older Judeo-Christian tradition.³² At the same time, the rites of the *hajj* also incorporated pre-Islamic practices, marking a break from the two Abrahamic religions.³³

The narratives about Adam, Abraham and Muhammad create a direct link between this world and the next from its very inception. These stories also create a continuous link between the present moment and past prophets, which will continue until the Last Day. These stories also give the particular location religious significance and authentication, as the prophets of the Islamic past continually reaffirm the sacredness of the location.

The Presence of Angels as a Marker of Sanctity

It has already been seen above that heavenly prototypes and legends about the prophets have been used to authenticate the sacredness of the holy sites. In both the mythic accounts and the descriptions of the heavenly archetypes of the earthly structures angels have also featured. The presence of angels is an extremely important way in which the sacredness of a site or the holiness of an individual can be understood.³⁴ In his study of Jewish apocalypses, Ithamar Gruenwald highlights ways in which texts signal the presence of the divine, of which two important components are the presence of angels around God's Throne and the recitation of prayers by angels.³⁵ Conversely, just as the angels in a vision

32. See *EP*, s.v. *Ḥanif* [Watt].

33. "The very incorporation of the rites of the pre-Islamic sanctuaries in and around Mecca into the Islamic religion constituted the decisive step by which Islam made itself independent of the other monotheistic religions." S.D. Gottein, "The Sanctity of Jerusalem and Palestine in Early Islam," in *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions*, edited by S.D. Gottein (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 135–148, 138.

34. For example, in the *Testament of Levi*, the visionary is robed in priestly garments by angels, which "...is meant to reinforce the divine favour of the priesthood for his descendents, to legitimate Levi in his priestly duties." Alan F. Segal, "Heavenly Ascent in Hellenic Judaism, Early Christianity and their Environment," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, edited by Hildegard Temporini, Wolfgang Haase and Joseph Vogt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1972): 1361; see also James H. Charlesworth, "The Portrayal of the Righteous as an Angel," in *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism*, edited by George W. E. Nickelsburg and John J. Collins (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980).

35. Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 31.

of God's Throne testify to the veracity of a prophetic vision, the presence of angels on earth can indicate an area of sacred space.³⁶

It has already been seen that there is a heavenly archetype of the Ka'ba, but the references to the *Inhabited House* frequently describe the presence of angels. There are a number hadith that describe the angels worshipping God in the *Inhabited House* and then descending to the Ka'ba and worshipping there:

...It is called *The Inhabited House* because seventy thousand angels pray in it every day; then they come down, when they have spent the night [there], they circumambulate the Ka'ba, then they bless the Prophet (God bless him and grant him salvation), then they leave and they do not have another turn until the coming of the Hour.³⁷

In this hadith, the angels are not instituting any particular rite or ritual, but they are used to stress the holiness and sanctity of the location of the Ka'ba. This hadith and others like it illustrate that the *Inhabited House* is at the heart of the angelic worship of God, and that the earthly Ka'ba functions similarly. In this way the angels are used to establish a link between the divine worship in the *Inhabited House* and Muslim ritual on earth.

The Temple and the Ka'ba, as divine loci, are also the focus of divine worship; and for both Jews and Muslims, there is a scriptural injunction to pray towards the central locus.³⁸ In other Jewish (and Christian texts), especially pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls, references to angels can also be seen praying alongside humans, facing the same direction.³⁹ In Islam the locus of the "temple" as the house of God is a key component of the worship of God as the *qibla* is directed to the Ka'ba, and the angels can be seen

36. There has been much work done on angelology in Judaism and Christianity; e.g. Kevin P. Sullivan, *Wrestling with Angels: A Study of the Relationship Between Angels and Humans in Ancient Jewish Literature and the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Georges Tavad, with André Caquot and Johann Michl, *Die Engel* (Freiburg: Herder, 1968); and Michael Mach, *Entwicklungsstadien des jüdischen Engelglaubens in vorrabbinischer Zeit* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1992). The presence and interaction of the Qumran community with the angels is also extremely important, see Maxwell J. Davidson, *Angels at Qumran: A Comparative Study of 1 Enoch 1-36, 72-108 and Sectarian Writings from Qumran* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992).

37. Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Haba'ik*, 14-15 (§21); see also 134-135 (§498), 142 (§522) and 185 (§685); see also al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalūs, 1994), 32-51; and al-Zarkashī, *I'lām al-sājid bi'ahkām al-masājid*, 43-48.

38. Praying towards Jerusalem is mentioned in Hebrew Bible, e.g. 1 Kings 8:44.

39. There have been a number of studies on angelic prayer, e.g. Bilhah Nitzan (trans. Jonathan Chipman), *Qumran Prayer and Religious Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 273-318.

as behaving in the same way.⁴⁰ In the performance of the ritual prayers, a Muslim engages with divine space, along with all the other members of the community: "The central gesture [of the ritual prayers] is the facing of the direction of prayer, in Arabic, *tawliyat al-wujh*, the turning of one's face (to the house of God)."⁴¹ The hadith do not only describe facing the *qibla* of the *Inhabited House*, they also show the angels performing or supporting specific rituals associated with the Ka'ba. For example, the angels are said to have been the first to perform a circumambulation of the Ka'ba.

Adam (peace be upon him) circumambulated the Holy House, and the angels said: 'Your piety obeys [God], Adam, we have circumambulated this House before you, for two thousand years.'⁴²

Adam, as the first man and the first to come into contact with the Ka'ba, is associated with its rituals, which does make logical sense in salvation-historical terms. Another hadith establishes a link between the practice of circumambulation in heaven and on earth:

And [Adam] walked around it, just as he had walked around the Throne, and he performed the prayers by it, just as he had performed them by the Throne.⁴³

The angels are used particularly prominently to show that the rites and rituals performed by the Muslim community are those performed by the angels. There are a number of hadith in which specific liturgical practices are described as being practised by the angels in heaven. These include general references to the performance of the ritual prayers,⁴⁴ to specific elements such as the *adhan* and give the roles of muezzin and imam to different angels.⁴⁵ The fact that there is an imam and a muezzin

40. The ritual gesture of facing the direction of a sacred site is a key component in Judaism (including Samaritanism), Christianity and other religious traditions; cf. B. L. Gordon, "Sacred Directions, Orientation and the Top of the Map," *History of Religions* 10 (1971): 220–222.

41. A. Neuwirth, "Face of God—Face of Man: The Significance of the Direction of Prayer in Islam," in *Self, Soul and Body in Religious Experience*, edited by A.I. Baumgarten, J. Assmann and G.G. Stroumsa (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 302; see also Syed Ali Ashraf, "The Inner Meaning of the Islamic Rites: Prayer, Pilgrimage, Fasting, Jihād," in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (London: SCM Press, 1987).

42. Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Haba'ik*, 162 (§609).

43. Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Haba'ik*, 166 (§624).

44. e.g. "When Israfil glorifies God, he cuts off the ritual prayers and the hearing of all the angels in heaven." Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Haba'ik*, 35 (§100).

45. One hadith states that Gabriel is *imam* (§39), whereas another that Michael is *imam*

in heaven shows that the earthly practices of the Muslims are a copy of those performed in the divine realm.⁴⁶ This is an extension of the concept of the parallel 'Houses of God' in heaven and earth—the Ka'ba and the *Inhabited House*. The idea that earthly practice is a mirror of the heavenly is seen most clearly in a hadith included in Al-Suyūṭī's *al-Haba'ik*:

The muezzin of the heavenly host is Gabriel, and Michael is their imam, who leads them in the prayers in the inhabited house, and the angels of the heavens congregate and circumambulate the *Inhabited House*, and they perform the prayers and pray for forgiveness. God gives their reward, their forgiveness and their praise of God to the community of Muhammad (God bless him and grant him salvation).⁴⁷

In this hadith a whole number of Muslim ritual practices can be seen: the ritual prayers, the direction of the *qibla* and the circumambulation of the *Inhabited House*. Furthermore, the Muslim community actually benefits from these angelic actions.

There is also an important angel called the Cockerel that has a special role in ritual life.⁴⁸ The angelic cockerel calls out during the night, which in turn causes earthly cockerels to rouse Muslims from their sleep in time for the dawn prayers.⁴⁹ Cockerels were revered in Islam for this reason, and they are given similar roles in other religious traditions including Judaism,⁵⁰ Zoroastrianism,⁵¹

and Gabriel is the *muezzin* (§83) and in yet another that the angel Israfil is the *muezzin* (§102); see Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Haba'ik*, 19, 30 and 35–36.

46. There are a number of hadith that describe the angelic call to prayer, usually witnessed by Muhammad during his ascension; these are often used in the arguments between different Muslim groups concerning the wording of the call to prayer; cf. I.K.A. Howard, "The Development of the *Adhān* and *Iqāma* of the *Ṣalāt* in Early Islam," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 26 (1918): 219–228.
47. Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Haba'ik*, 30 (§83).
48. Asin Palacios comments: "El gallo de la leyenda musulmana es también de gigantesco tamaño, y se ofrece a los ojos de Mahoma llenando el cielo; sus alas agítanse igualmente al entonar sus cánticos religiosos excitando a los hombres a la práctica de la oración, y reposan después..." M. Asín Palacios, *La Escatología Musulmana en la Divina Comedia: Seguida de la Historia y Críticade una Polémica* (Madrid: Escuelas de Estudios Árabes de Madrid y Granada, 1943), 31.
49. See Roberto Tottoli, "At Cock-Crow: Some Muslim Traditions About the Rooster," *Der Islam* 76 (1999): 139–147.
50. Cf. 3Bar. 6:16: "This is what wakens the cocks on earth, for just as articulate beings do, thus also the cock informs those on the earth according to its own tongue. For the sun is being prepared by the angels and the cock is crowing."
51. See John P. Peters, "The Cock," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 33 (1913): 377–380.

and Mesopotamian religion.⁵² This establishes further links between the divine and human realms. It also associates the dawn prayers with their simultaneous performance in heaven. In this way, the human and divine prayers are unified temporally. Earthly rituals, then, become deeply entwined with the divine world, through joint participation in ritual, and the divine origin of acts like the call to prayer. In these examples, earthly ritual becomes a reflection of divine ritual, bridging the gap between the two realms.

The use of angels as exemplars of ritual performance is an important area for discussion. The basic thesis is that the *correct* rituals are those performed in heaven. This is not something to cause great surprise, as it is also found in Jewish and Christian texts.⁵³

“This common participation of men and angels in the heavenly worship is one of the particular ideas of Revelation and one of the boldest interpretations of worship of all. The Old Testament and post-exilic Judaism knew of an angelic worship in heaven and also of angels descending to the worship of God’s elect and ascending again with their prayers.”⁵⁴

The simultaneous worship of God by both angels and humans is particularly important in the Qumran community, where there are a number of liturgical texts that refer to angels, especially, the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*.⁵⁵ There have been a number of studies of the way in which angels interact with humans in prayer. One such approach by Bilhah Nitzan highlights three main ways in which angels are used in discussions of prayer: (i) angels and humans pray together, as a single body, worshipping God; (ii) angels, as divine creatures, are specialists in prayer, and they cannot be emulated by humans; and (iii) some special humans,

52. See Erica Ehrenburg, “The Rooster in Mesopotamia,” in *Leaving No Stones Unturned*, edited by Erica Ehrenburg (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002).

53. See Andrei A. Orlov, “Celestial Choirmaster: The Liturgical Role of Enoch-Metatron in 2 Enoch and the Merkebah Tradition,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 14 (2004); Esther G. Chazon, “Liturgical Communion with the Angels at Qumran,” in *Sapiential, Liturgical and Poetical Texts from Qumran: Proceedings of the Third Meeting of the International Organization for Qumran Studies, Oslo 1998*, edited by Daniel K. Falk et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 95–105; and Esther G. Chazon, “Human and Angelic Prayer in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Liturgical Perspectives: Prayer and Poetry in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, edited by Esther G. Chazon (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 35–47.

54. Otto A. Piper, “The Apocalypse of John and the Liturgy of the Ancient Church,” *Church History* 20 (1951): 10–22, 11.

55. See James R. Davila, *Liturgical Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 97–167.

such as prophets and visionaries, are able to copy angelic prayer, but it is not possible for all humans to do so.⁵⁶ All of these elements can be encountered in Islamic tradition.

Islam follows other religious traditions in designating a sacred site and authenticating its holiness in different ways. In line with the conception of the Temple and its place in Jewish tradition, the Ka'ba is believed to have a heavenly counterpart, the *Inhabited House*. The Ka'ba is either modelled on the divine *Inhabited House*, or is associated more loosely with divine spaces, such as the Throne of God. The Ka'ba has its sacredness authenticated by its involvement in Islamic sacred history, particularly through the prophets Adam, Abraham, Ishmael and Muhammad. Lastly, angels are frequently associated with the Ka'ba and its precincts. Sometimes this is simply marked by their presence at the site, but at other times the angels institute the particular rituals performed by the Muslim community. In this way, the Ka'ba functions in much the same way as the Jewish Temple, and sacred sites in other religious traditions.

Contesting the Sacred Centre

Whilst the Ka'ba and the holy city of Mecca are widely held to be the *sacred centre* in the literary material, other holy sites can often be seen to compete with the Arabian sanctuary. Jerusalem was a particularly important 'rival' to Mecca and the Ka'ba, but other holy places, such as saints' tombs and Shi'i shrines could be considered sacred spaces. How are these other sites authenticated? And do the ways in which these holy spaces are defined, authenticated and imagined differ from the Ka'ba?

The fact that Jerusalem is mentioned in the Qur'an established it as an important site, incorporating Judeo-Christian tradition. It was the focus of many Islamic traditions (especially the Prophet's ascent to heaven and night-journey) making it an obvious sacred site. Indeed, Islamic tradition portrays the city and the Temple mount in similar ways to the Ka'ba: (i) the city has a long mythic tradition associated with it; (ii) there is a link between the Temple mount and Qur'anic prophets; (iii) the city has a 'link' to heaven through the Prophet's ascension; (iv) Jerusalem was the original *qibla* and (v) angels are associated with the location.⁵⁷ F.E. Peters has argued that Muslims did not simply accept the holiness of Jerusalem,

56. Nitzan, *Qumran Prayers and Religious Poetry*, 273-276; another scholar; cf. Chazon, "Human and Angelic Prayer in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls," 46-47.

57. Cf. F.E. Peters, *Jerusalem and Mecca: The Typology of the Holy City in the Near East* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 105.

but through the Prophet's ascension and night journey 'Muhammadanised' the city—establishing a direct, Muslim link between the faith and the place.⁵⁸ A significant body of material arose, the *faḍā'il* works, which stress the merits of Jerusalem, emphasising its sanctity.⁵⁹ To a certain extent, the "Holy Land" had to be considered sacred space "...because it was the homeland of prophecy and of God's revelation."⁶⁰ All this would seem to present Jerusalem as rival to Mecca.

However, there is also much to weaken Jerusalem's status as a holy city. First, the *merits of Jerusalem* are usually focused on a much larger area than simply the Temple Mount, with a number of different holy sites being cited in the literature: the Mount of Olives, the Holy Sepulchre, Bethlehem and so on.⁶¹ With such a range of sacred sites, the area could be perceived as having an elevated sacred status, but in reality it dilutes it. Islamic theology and tradition places great emphasis on the fact that the Ka'ba marks an individual and specific point of direct interaction between God and man: the sacredness of Jerusalem is much more generalized. This is symbolized particularly strongly in the moving of the *qibla* from the direction of Jerusalem to the "Holy Mosque," which, along with the introduction of pre-Islamic Arab rituals, "constituted the decisive step by which Islam made itself independent of the other monotheistic religions."⁶² The new *qibla* rejects Jerusalem as the *centre*, and, consequently, reduces its sacred status.

The narrative and historical traditions in Islam concerning the Ka'ba show its association with the created world and the Muslim community from its very beginning. There are a great many traditions that associate the creation of the Ka'ba, as has been seen above, with Adam after his expulsion from the Garden. Jerusalem and the Holy Land become part of the Islamic mythico-historical tradition much later, with Abraham and

58. F.E. Peters, "Jerusalem: One city, one faith, one god," in *Jerusalem: Idea and Reality*, edited by Tamar Mayer and Suleiman Mourad (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 21–22; see also Uri Rubin, "Muḥammad's Night Journey (*Isrā'*) to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā. Aspects of the Earliest Origins of the Islamic Sanctity of Jerusalem," *al-Qanṭara* 29 (2008): 157–163.

59. Suleiman Ali Mourad, "The Symbolism of Jerusalem in Early Islam," *Jerusalem: Idea and Reality*.

60. Gottein, "The Sanctity of Jerusalem and Palestine in Early Islam," 143.

61. See Amikam Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 78–146.

62. Gottein, "The Sanctity of Jerusalem and Palestine in Early Islam," 138.

the establishment of the Temple by Solomon. At the same time, figures such as Abraham are associated with the Ka'ba, reducing the status of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount in Islam. Likewise, whilst there are many traditions that associate the Prophet's ascension with the Temple Mount, there are versions of the narrative that separate the night-journey [*isrā'*] from the ascension [*mi'rāj*].⁶³ In these cases, the ascension occurred in Mecca and not in Jerusalem, eliminating any direct link between Jerusalem and heaven. It should be no surprise that the *Merits of Jerusalem* works seek to emphasise that the ascent took place in Jerusalem, but the fact that there are many hadith that contest this, shows that this was not agreed by consensus. Furthermore, there is no equivalent of the *Inhabited House* for Jerusalem, despite such models existing in Jewish tradition, and even when the ascension is taken to have begun from the Temple Mount, the association of the *Inhabited House* with the Ka'ba moves the location of the divine ascent back to Arabia. Angels are said to be present in and around Jerusalem, but they do not behave in the same way as they do in and around the Ka'ba; nor is there any reference to angels performing rituals there. All these elements reduce the claims of Jerusalem to be a sacred site.

Something also needs to be said regarding the *Merits* literature in general. Almost every major city in the medieval period generated a specific *Merits* work: Damascus, Cairo, Asqelon, al-Andalus and even more remote places such as Balkh.⁶⁴ Added to these specific *Merits* works, local histories will frequently include a section on the merits of that particular place. Although this does not challenge the sites of specific sanctity, such as Mecca and Jerusalem, all *merits* works should be placed in their wider context and not simply taken at face value. The *merits* works were a form of local propaganda either for a particular ruler, newly established in a particular area,⁶⁵ or just simply a product of a city's pride.

63. Cf. Tobias Nünlist, *Himmelfahrt und Heiligkeit im Islam: Eine Studie unter besondere Berücksichtigung von Ibn Sīnā's Mi'rāj-nāmeḥ* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2002) and Rubin, "Muḥammad's Night Journey (*Isrā'*) to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā. Aspects of the Earliest Origins of the Islamic Sanctity of Jerusalem," 161–163.

64. E.g. al-Rabā'ī, *Faḍā'il al-Sham wa-Dimashq* (Damascus: Maṭba'at al-Tarqī, 1951); al-Kindī, *Faḍā'il Miṣr al-mahrūsa* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1997); Ibn Ḥazm, *Faḍā'il al-Andalus wa-ahliḥā* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1968); al-Balkhī, *Faḍā'il-i Balkh* (Tehran: Bunyād-i Farhang-i Īrān, 1971). See also Ghaleb Anabseh, "The Sanctity of the City of 'Asqelon and the 'Merits' Literature of Palestine: A Examination of Mamluk and Ottoman Sources," *Holy Land Studies* 5:2 (2006).

65. It has been suggested that the *Merits of Jerusalem* were originally produced to estab-

There is nothing unique about a city having a body of merits material, but Jerusalem and Mecca are clearly set aside by the quantity and quality of their claims on sacredness.⁶⁶

The same is found in the relationship between notions of sacred space and tombs of saints and Imams.⁶⁷ Ordinary people gained great spiritual benefit from visiting shrines of holy people, and they sought, through their visit, to gain some blessing [*baraka*] from the shrine itself, or intercession [*shafā'a*] from the saint.⁶⁸ People believed that by coming into contact with the saint's body or tomb, it would be possible to gain eschatological or worldly advantage through the saint's charisma. This includes visiting the Prophet's tomb, which was an important part of the pilgrimage itinerary.⁶⁹ The shrines and tombs can, then, be considered sacred sites.⁷⁰ These shrines can be understood to act as a place of mediation between this world and the next, between humans and God, through the charisma of the saint. Do they, then, compete with the sacred centre? As with Jerusalem, they appear to do so, but there are also a number of factors which reduce their importance as sacred sites: the fact that they do not act as a *qibla*, nor have ever done so, reduces their importance; angels are believed to be present, but they do not behave in the same way as they do in and around the Ka'ba; there are few specific rituals associated with the visitation of tombs;⁷¹ and any mythol-

lish Jerusalem as an important pilgrimage site by Abd al-Mālik during the civil war with 'Abd Allah b. al-Zubayr; but this has been rejected—see Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship*, 147–163.

66. Uri Rubin has argued that there is an “axis of sanctity” stretching from Mecca to Jerusalem. However, the textual material clearly suggests that Jerusalem's claims to sanctity were not as strong as Mecca. This somewhat weakens Rubin's theory; see Uri Rubin, “Between Arabia and the Holy Land: A Mecca-Jerusalem Axis of Sanctity,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 34 (2008).
67. See Meri, *The Cult of Saints Among Jews and Christians in Medieval Syria*, 100–108; and Liyakat Takim, “Charismatic Appeal or Communitas? Visitation to the Shrines of the Imams,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 18(2), (2004): 106–120.
68. See Christopher S. Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyāra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 127–167. Taylor stresses that any blessings or miracles associated with a saint are possible through the permission of God. See also Meri, *The Cult of Saints Among Jews and Christians in Medieval Syria*, 144–161.
69. See Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous*, 195.
70. See Meri, *The Cult of Saints Among Jews and Christians in Medieval Syria*, 43–58.
71. The sources that Meri includes in his analysis of saint veneration in Islam show

ogy around the location is limited to the life of the saint. Furthermore, the visitation of Sufi shrines is often condemned by religious scholars, most famously, Ibn Taymiyya.⁷² This all makes Sufi shrines less significant sacred sites.

Whilst there are a number of other sacred spaces in Islam which can act as places of mediation between humans and God, these sites are not portrayed in the same way as Mecca and the Ka'ba. The existence of a sacred centre does not negate the ability for other places of intermediation to occur, but, conversely, the existence of other sacred spaces does not weaken the sacred centre in Mecca. Through the *qibla* the Ka'ba remains the Islamic sacred centre. No other sacred space has a *qibla*, and very few have any specific forms of liturgy or ritual that are performed in and around the sacred site. The interaction of angels is also important: whilst angels may be found at other sacred sites, they do not behave in the same way as they do in and around Mecca. In Islam angels are present in almost every place, so it is not surprising to find them at holy places, but rarely are they described performing rituals or behaving in a special way. The angels may bestow blessing on humans in Jerusalem or a Sufi shrine, but they can do so anywhere. Only the Ka'ba, through its association with Adam has a continuous link with God from the inception of the created world and before. Other sacred sites, particularly Jerusalem, may be connected with past prophets, but none have as long a history of divine interaction than the Ka'ba. The shrines of Imams and Sufi saints only have a sacred history beginning with that particular Imam or saint. This does not mean that the space is not sacred (although some, such as Ibn Taymiyya, would disagree), rather it means that these sacred spaces do not and cannot challenge the sacred centre.

Widening the Sacred Space

The focus thus far has been the notion of specific areas of sacred space: temples and shrines. Two ideas have been predominant: first, that ritual plays an important part in the authentication of a sacred site and, sec-

that liturgies at shrines are limited and that the focus is always remembrance of God (*dhikr*) through the teachings and testimony of the saint, Meri, *The Cult of Saints Among Jews and Christians in Medieval Syria*, 144–161.

72. See Neils Henrik Olsen, *Culte des Saints et Pèlerinages chez Ibn Taymiyya (661/1263–728/1328)* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Guenther, 1991), 140–192; Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous*, 168–194 and Meri, *The Cult of Saints Among Jews and Christians in Medieval Syria*, 126–138.

only, the presence and behaviour of angels indicates and authenticates sacred space. However, ritual is not just performed in specific places and are angels not only present in holy places. What role do angels and ritual play in the demarcation of sacred space in non-specific locations?

One overarching theme in the hadith relating to angels is that they are continually present in the human world, and that they seek to support the community of believers. The idea of God sending angels to help and support the Muslim community is an early one, found frequently both in the Qur'an and in hadith. For example, during the Battle of Badr, God sent a contingent of angels to help the outnumbered Muslims:

...and God most surely helped you at Badr.... "Is it not enough for you that your Lord should reinforce you with three thousand angels sent down upon you? Yea if you are patient and godfearing, and the foe come against you instantly, your Lord will reinforce you with five thousand swooping angels."⁷³

Such angelic support does not just apply to military aid, but is also important in ritual and liturgical affairs. In both the Judaism of the Qumran community and in Islam the angels' participation and support of the community are crucial to understanding the relationship between God and his creations.

The performance of ritual actions in Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other religious traditions can generate sacred space around the person or persons performing it. In an Islamic context this is most frequently encountered during the performance of the ritual prayers, which is often portrayed in similar terms to the relationship between the Ka'ba to God. For example, Mahmoud Ayoub comments that the ritual prayers act as a "bridge between the human being and God. In their essential form, the canonical prayers in Islam are an affirmation, as indeed all faith is, of God's mercy and majesty."⁷⁴ Facing the *qibla* establishes direct contact between the individual and God, which is why Muslims must be ritually pure before performing ritual actions, and why spitting and urinating in the direction of the *qibla* are also prohibited.⁷⁵ In this way, the act of performing the ritual generates an area of sacred space, albeit temporarily.

In Islamic tradition angels are also seen to bless and support Muslims in

73. Q 3:123-124; A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford: One World, 1998), 61; cf. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 303-309.

74. Mahmoud Ayoub, "Thanksgiving and Praise in the Qur'an and in Muslim Piety," *Islamochristiana* 15 (1989): 2.

75. Cf. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Ṣalāt* 33-34.

the ritual prayers. In this respect the presence of angels could indicate a sense of the presence of God during the performance of the ritual prayers in both spatial and temporal contexts. A number of hadith in Al-Suyūṭī's collection and in the hadith material more generally, show angels (and by extension God), encouraging particular religious observances such as attendance at Friday prayers and recitation of the Qur'an. The main manifestation of this support is the presence of angels with Muslims as they pray:

When a man stands up to perform the prayers in the desert of the Earth, he performs the prayers with two angels behind him. If he is called to prayer, and stands up to perform the prayers, angels like the mountains are behind him.⁷⁶

The presence of the angels is important because they create an area of "sacred" space around the person performing the prayers.

The existence of sacred spaces in addition to the centre of holiness or *axis mundi* can also be seen in the form of Judaism that emerged after the destruction of the Temple.⁷⁷ Without the presence of the Temple, Judaism began to transfer sacredness to other spaces, particularly the synagogues.⁷⁸ In this sense 'sacred space' widens its compass beyond specific areas and sites.⁷⁹ The same blurring of sacred and profane space is found in Islam:

However, whilst Islam does, as we shall see, designate certain places as "sacred," it never loses sight of its fundamental conviction that all space is sacred place, and, through worship, architecture and traditional city planning, tries to sacralise all space by extending the "sacred" into the "secular."⁸⁰

As with other religious traditions, Islam integrates religious symbol-

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76. Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Haba'ik*, 152 (§568); see also 152-3 (§569-572); the number of angels differs from four thousand (§571) to seventy thousand (§569), or just "many" (§570).
77. See also Michael E. Stone, "Reactions to the Destructions of the Second Temple: Theology, Perception and Conversion," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 12 (1981): 195-204.
78. Harold W. Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House: The Phenomenology and Theology of Places of Worship* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979); Steven Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue during the Graeco-Roman Period* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997). In later Judaism a holy person was sometimes conceived as an *axis mundi*, see Arthur Green, "The *Zaddiq* as *Axis Mundi* in Later Judaism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 43 (1977): 327-347.
79. The effects of widening the sacred space from one centre, such as the Temple, can be seen in the way in which believers prepare themselves spiritually before performing religious actions, cf. Baruch M. Bokser, "Approaching Sacred Space" *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985): 279-299.
80. Clinton Bennett, "Islam." In *Sacred Place*, edited by Jean Holm, with John Bowker (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994), 88-114.

ism and iconography into the secular world, which, as Clinton Bennett argues, moves the realm of the sacred into the secular. However, whilst sacred imagery and symbolism may be integrated into the secular or profane spaces, not all spaces are sacred; rather all spaces have the potential to become sacred.

Whilst the sacredness of the Ka'ba and its precincts is not disputed, the sacredness of particular locations becomes more vague; and the presence of angels plays an important part in describing a place as being sacred. This is particularly important in cases where a Muslim performs the ritual prayers alone. The angels surround such individuals making the area around that individual temporarily sacred.

Angels, Ritual and Sacred Space

Muslim notions of sacred space in the tradition literature bear much in common with articulations of holy spaces in Judaism and other religious traditions. The Ka'ba has a heavenly archetype, the *Inhabited House*; the Ka'ba is the central focus of religious activity; there is a mythic tradition associated with the Ka'ba, and so on. However, the Ka'ba is not the only sacred site in the Muslim worldview. Other cities, especially Jerusalem, contest the status of Mecca, as do the shrines of Imams and Sufi masters. Furthermore, the act of performing the ritual prayers appears to generate an area of sacred space, albeit only temporarily. In all these spaces angels can be seen to interact with the space—authenticating its sacredness.

Whilst these different loci can claim a degree of sacredness, there are a number of factors that establish the Ka'ba as the premier sacred place. First, the Ka'ba is has a direct link to a heavenly archetype: such archetypes of other sacred sites on earth are far less common in Islamic tradition. Secondly, only the Ka'ba is the focus of ritual action. Whilst individual rituals are performed at other sacred sites, these are supererogatory and devotional—not the formal ritual prayers. Whilst angels are often said to be present in a wide range of sacred sites, including around believers at prayer and in mosques, the Ka'ba has a vast number of angels visiting and performing rituals both there and in its counterpart in the heaven. Lastly, the mythic history surrounding the Ka'ba extends back to the period immediately after the fall of Adam, and in some cases links are made to its existence before then. No other sacred site, not even in Jerusalem, can claim such an old history. The interaction of the various prophets with the Ka'ba gives a continued sense of religious engagement with the location, authenticating its sacrality further.

Angels, ritual action, a divine prototype or mythic history cannot act as the sole mechanisms for authenticating sacred spaces individually. Rather, a mixture of these concepts are used together to develop and articulate the belief in a location's sacredness. These factors are also used to construct a loose hierarchy of sacredness. The Ka'ba, being the most sacred, has the most angels visiting it, the most frequent performances of ritual associated with it, the longest mythological history. At the opposite end of the spectrum the space around a believer performing the ritual prayers can include a great number of angels, but only for a limited period and with no mythological history. In Islam, as in Judaism, the presence of angels forms an important component in the articulation of sacred space. It is through the presence of angels that sacred places can be understood to have their sacredness authenticated, but they way in which the angels behave can also differentiate a range of sacred places into a loose "hierarchy." The traditions associated with the Ka'ba ensure that it is accepted as the spiritual centre and focus of Islam through a mixture of material on its mythology, its role in the religion's salvation history, through ritual and through the presence of angels.

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