This chapter offers a broad overview of two interrelated phenomena: the cult of saints and pilgrimage among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, with a focus on the Middle East, the cradle of the three Abrahamic religions.¹

The Cave of the Patriarchs (Heb. Meʿarat ha-Makhpela, Arab. Al-Ḥaram al-Ibrāhimi [The Sanctuary of Abraham]) in Hebron, the burial place of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their wives, is an important pilgrimage site, especially for Muslims and Jews. Yet, the sanctity of this holy place was violated when in 1994 a Jewish settler murdered worshippers at the shrine, a heinous act that was condemned by leaders of the Abrahamic faiths. Violence at shrines has always been antithetical to the pre-Islamic and Islamic idea of the haram, an inviolable or sacred precinct.² In the biblical context King Josiah desecrates tombs and sacred places (2 Kings 23). Yet this was the exception and not the rule. In the Bible and post-biblical literature the Temple and by extension all of Jerusalem was regarded as holy. Sacred sites were treated with deference in contrast to the Hebron massacre or the persistent settler attacks against mosques and churches.

By contrast, in the history of the Hebron shrine under Islamic rule, no acts of violence were recorded against Muslim or Jewish worshippers. Like Jerusalem, Hebron today is a symbol of what has gone wrong with the practice of the Abrahamic religions—the ascendancy of militancy and the application of the contentious notion of ‘sovereignty’.³ Yet violence at holy places occurred under various historical

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¹ I would like to express my utmost appreciation to the editors for their helpful comments and suggestions and especially thank Guy Stroumsa for his patience and understanding.
² In ancient civilizations as well as in the Abrahamic faiths, approaching sacred space requires believers to perform certain rituals. For a discussion of the word haram and its use, see Serjeant 2005. For an understanding of the sacred as it relates to pilgrimage topography see Meri 2002: ch. 1.
³ Israeli scholars have argued over the controversial idea of vertical sovereignty over the Haram al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) or Temple Mount in Jerusalem. That is to say that anything above the
circumstances, including political instability, war, ideology and the theft of money and property. In 1009 the Fātimid Ismāʿīlī Shiʿi ruler al-Hākim bi-Amr Allāh (r. 996–1021 CE), who was believed to be insane, ordered the destruction of the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and of churches and synagogues. The church was only rebuilt under his successor al-Zāhir (r. 1021–36 CE). During the First Crusade in 1099 CE, upon entering Jerusalem the crusaders murdered tens of thousands of Muslims and Jews and tortured priests of the eastern churches. Moreover, they set fire to synagogues, destroyed the shrines of saints, including the tomb of Abraham in Hebron, and ransacked the mosque of the caliph ʿUmar in Jerusalem. Moreover, they launched attacks against Muslim shrines in Syria in 1124 and 1170. In 1124 Joscelin of Edessa set fire to a Muslim shrine outside Aleppo. In 1170 the crusaders attacked the Damascus countryside and destroyed shrines and mosques. In 1492 the Reconquista resulted in the systematic destruction and conversion of non-Christian sacred places to churches. In contrast with the First Crusade and the Reconquista where violence against persons and holy places occurred on a large scale, under Muslim rule this was not the norm.

Today Israeli ‘Sovereignty’ is invoked in order to justify or negate political claims over the holy sites of Jerusalem and the West Bank. Attempts to impose secular law over the holy sites have failed largely because sites of such importance as the Haram al-Sharif or Temple Mount and the Cave of the Patriarchs defy legislation. They possess a sacred history along with sacred narratives of more than one religious tradition, a history that is largely ignored. Moreover, while it is possible to speak of sovereignty over holy sites shared by two or more faiths, the very notion distorts sacred history by relegating the divine to the realm of the secular. Alternatively the belief that ‘Sovereignty belongs to God’, which embodies the universal nature of all holy sites in Islam and Judaism, is understood by Jews and Muslims as a way of approaching the issue of control and access to holy sites. In the Bible it is said: ‘The Lord shall reign for ever and ever’ (Exod. 15: 18). The same idea is expressed in the Quran: ‘Unto God belongs the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth and all this is therein, and it is He who has power over all things’ (Q. 5: 120).

Acts of violence at major shrines venerated by two or more faiths in the Middle East and North Africa are the exception not the rule. Yet such incidents serve as a poignant reminder that the veneration of Abraham as of other holy persons has always held profound levels of meaning for Jewish and Muslim worshippers. Tension has always existed in the background among Jews, Christians, and Muslims throughout history. Yet with notable exceptions this did not prevent the veneration of holy persons and places. A more immediate danger to shrines and their devotees were the predations of brigands and tribes which occasionally resulted in shrines being looted.

Temple Mount is to remain under Islamic waqf administration and everything below under Israeli government control. For a discussion of the types of sovereignty in Israeli political and legal discourse, see Breger and Reiter 2010: 1–21.

The nineteenth-century Jewish Orientalist Ignaz Goldziher was one of the first scholars to study the cult of saints and pilgrimage in Islam and its points of contact with Judaism and Christianity. In his *Muslim Studies*, Goldziher explores the origins of Muslim practices:

> There is an enormous gap between this concept held by early Islam and the position which the veneration and invocation of saints everywhere occupies shortly after the spread of the new religion. Within Islam as well, the believers sought to create, through the concept of saints, mediators between themselves and an omnipotent Godhead in order to satisfy the need which was served by the gods and masters of their old traditions... Here too applies what Karl Hase says of the cult of saints in general: that it ‘satisfies within a monotheistic religion a polytheistic need to fill the enormous gap between men and their god, and that it originated on the soil of the old pantheon’. (Goldziher 1967–71: II. 259)

In Goldziher’s view Islam renders the pre-Islamic elements of saint veneration into an ‘Abrahamic’ form (Goldziher 1967–71: II. 298). The same logic can be applied to other more complex ritual forms such as pilgrimage. While the issue of origins remains a central paradigm in the study of the relationship of Islam to Judaism and Christianity in many areas where points of contact existed between the Abrahamic religions, a more fluid model has been proposed by Jacques Waardenburg (2002) who differentiates between ‘popular’ practices such as saint veneration and pilgrimage to holy places and normative and official forms of Islam. In Judaism the veneration of saints existed at the margins of Orthodoxy (Cohn 1987). Yet, from the eighth and ninth centuries under Islamic rule the cult of the prophets and patriarchs found diverse expressions in such places as Iraq where Jews from across the Mediterranean and the Islamic world visited the shrines of Ezekiel and Ezra (Meri 2002: 229–38; Meri 2012: 22–5), Greater Syria (Elijah), Palestine (e.g. Isaac, Leah, Rachael, and Abraham), and Iran (Daniel, Esther). Jewish communal leaders in the Middle Ages, such as Moses Maimonides (d. 1204), often condoned or acquiesced to the veneration of holy persons and pilgrimage to their tombs, though like their Muslim counterparts they at times criticized the impious behaviour displayed at holy places (Meri 2002: 215, 236). Indeed the veneration of the Talmudic sages and local saints and pilgrimage to their shrines was a more widespread phenomenon than previously believed (Meri 2002: ch. 4; for the modern era, see Kosansky 2010). In the modern era Morocco and Tunisia remain major centres of Jewish pilgrimage among North African Jews (Kosansky 2010).

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6 Multiple shrines dedicated to Elijah existed throughout Greater Syria and Mesopotamia, see Meri 2002: ch. 3, esp. pp. 224–9; Meri 1999b.

7 The same is true of the Jewish veneration of the Talmudic sages in Palestine. The cult of the sages became institutionalized during the later Middle Ages, particularly from the sixteenth century, with the influence of Safed Kabbalah. See, for instance, Fenton 2000.
Late antique notions of holiness and sanctity provided fertile ground for the interaction of Judaism and Christianity and the emergence of Islam. Christian shrines dotted the landscape of Greater Syria (includes present-day Syria, Palestine/Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon) and Iraq. Christian shrines like the Shrine of the Virgin at Saydnāyā outside Damascus were for centuries revered by Christians and visited by local Muslims seeking cures (Meri 2002: 210–12). Yet this interaction of traditions should not merely be regarded as one of Christian and Jewish influence on Islam. Indeed commonalities exist in saint veneration historically. An equally important consideration is the mystical dimensions of the Abrahamic religions, particularly of medieval Islamic mysticism or Sufism, which contributed in large part to the spread of the veneration of holy persons and pilgrimage during the Middle Ages. In the Islamic context Sufis, ascetics, and others compiled pilgrimage guides that included the burial places of scriptural personages and other varieties of holy persons. With the spread of the Sufi orders in thirteenth-century Cairo and Damascus, pious visitations to tombs and shrines of the Family, Companions, and Followers of the prophet Muhammad and Sufi shaykhs became routinized. The pilgrimage places of Damascus associated with scriptural figures such as Cain and Abel, Moses and Elijah occupied pride of place in medieval Hebrew and Arabic pilgrimage and travel accounts.

Proposing a methodological framework for the interaction of the three Abrahamic faiths as suggested by the present volume’s theme is both useful and challenging. The paradigm of ‘Abrahamic Religions’ invites one to look at holy persons and places held in common by the three faiths rather than their significance in each of the traditions. This chapter will highlight a number of key aspects of pilgrimage and saint veneration and discuss the extent to which these phenomena may be considered ‘Abrahamic’ and how we may understand them in the light of this paradigm.

Echoing Goldziher, Francis Peters in his study of The Children of Abraham (2006: 113) argues that the veneration of saints was ‘not an entirely natural development in Islam’ and that it ‘placed an almost infinite gulf between a transcendent Allah and his creation here below’. Similarly Peter Brown in his seminal work on the Cult of Saints (1981: 10) has characterized the phenomenon of saint veneration in Islam as existing at the periphery. However, the veneration of saints and making pilgrimage to tombs and shrines were ubiquitous to the medieval Islamic landscape as they were to the medieval Christian experience (Meri 1999a). Within an Abrahamic context, saint veneration in the Middle Ages does not merely carry with it the baggage of late antique traditions. Rather a particular dynamic existed among the faiths from the perspective of the believer which explains the veneration of holy persons. No single factor can explain the rise of the veneration of the martyrs in Christianity, the Talmudic sages in Judaism, and the Companions and Followers of the prophet Muhammad and other classes of saints in Islam. The act of veneration in Islam does not necessitate visiting tombs and shrines, but rather in the first instance reading and reciting scripture, sacred, or

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8 See Meri 2002: chs 3 and 4.
edificatory texts (such as those dedicated to praise of the excellent qualities (Arab. fada’il) and miracles of righteous individuals) concerning a holy person or place. In Christianity this includes reading and reciting liturgical texts, in Judaism, reading texts (scripture and poetry) attesting to the miraculous virtues of the patriarchs and the Talmudic sages. In all traditions devotees routinely recounted the heroic deeds and exploits of holy persons, particularly on holy days or special festivals.

Saints

A few words about the cult of saints in each of the three traditions is in order. By the cult of saints we mean the veneration of holy persons in general, including but not limited to the prophets and patriarchs, martyrs, the righteous, pious sages, and Sufi saints (Meri 2002; Meri 1999a). Such designations are not mutually exclusive. We will not focus on how saints are designated in each of the traditions as this would require discussions of Sufism, mysticism, and early Christian ideas of sainthood and would take us far from the objective of looking at the Abrahamic context of the cult of saints and pilgrimage.⁹ The fundamental concept of the cult of saints in late antique Christianity is that the martyrs who were persecuted for their faith became loci of veneration.¹⁰ The martyrs and other saints like the apostles were imitators of Christ. In Christianity, the saints came to be venerated in the liturgical calendar.¹¹ Church fathers like Augustine (d. 430), the Bishop of Hippo in present-day Algeria, declared the importance of the martyrs to the Christian faith:

It is true that Christians pay religious honour to the memory of the martyrs, both to excite us to imitate them and to obtain a share in their merits, and the assistance of their prayers. But we build altars not to any martyr, but to the God of martyrs, although it is to the memory of the martyrs. No one officiating at the altar in the saints’ burying-place ever says, We bring an offering to thee, O Peter! or O Paul! or O Cyprian! The offering is made to God, who gave the crown of martyrdom, while it is in memory of those thus crowned. The emotion is increased by the associations of the place, and love is excited both towards those who are our examples, and towards him by whose help we may follow such examples. We regard the martyrs with the same affectionate intimacy that we feel towards holy men of God in this life, when we know that their hearts are prepared to endure the same suffering for the truth of the gospel. There is more devotion in our feeling towards the martyrs, because we know that their conflict is over; and we can speak with greater

⁹ On the theme in Sufism see Radtke and O’Kane 1996. References to sainthood in other traditions may be found throughout this chapter.
¹⁰ See for instance Peter Brown (1981: 1), who refers to the shrines of saints representing the ‘joining of Heaven and Earth’.
confidence in praise of those already victors in heaven, than of those still combating here. What is properly divine worship, which the Greeks call latria, and for which there is no word in Latin, both in doctrine and in practice, we give only to God.\textsuperscript{12}

Other church fathers like Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) mention the efficacy of prayer to the patriarchs, prophets, and apostles:

Then we commemorate also those who have fallen asleep before us, first Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, Martyrs, that at their prayers and intercessions God would receive our petition. Then on behalf also of the Holy Fathers and Bishops who have fallen asleep before us, and in a word of all who in past years have fallen asleep among us, believing that it will be a very great benefit to the souls, for whom the supplication is put up, while that holy and most awful sacrifice is set forth.\textsuperscript{13}

The church fathers cautioned against worshipping saints, instead encouraging their veneration and seeking their intercession. In the late antique context, Peter Brown’s magisterial study of \textit{The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity} (1981) brilliantly captures the dynamic of the veneration of the dead and the various catalysts and motivations for the veneration of the special dead. One of the major differences between Christianity on the one hand and Islam and Judaism on the other is the absence in the latter of a cult centred on touching human remains, which both traditions maintain were inviolable. The trade in corporeal relics became widespread in the medieval European context, though relics were handled and transferred in late antiquity. Yet within the Islamic world of the eighth century onwards, the veneration of the holy dead assumed various forms.

While the Mediterranean of late antiquity provided fertile ground for the emergence of living and dead holy persons in the Christian tradition to whose tombs and shrines devotees made pilgrimage, this phenomenon manifested itself in diverse and highly complex ways across the medieval Islamic world (Meri 1999a). In Judaism the Talmudic sages became foci of veneration because of their exemplary piety and learning. Yet as Robert L. Cohn (1987) has shown Jewish saintly individuals were the exception, not the norm. Jewish traditions concerning the veneration of the holy dead were consolidated long after the death of the Talmudic sages. As early as the ninth century, the Jewish veneration of saints took root in Palestine. Textual evidence suggests that their veneration became popular from the twelfth century. Within an Islamic environment the Christian and especially the Jewish veneration of holy persons at shrines took on peculiar characteristics associated with an Arabo-Islamic culture. At the commemoration of a holy person, whether a prophet or Talmudic sage, scripture and the Talmud were invoked and their miracles recounted. Later sages’ cults were centred on notable mystical and Kabbalistic figures.


\textsuperscript{13} The Catechetical Lectures, NPNF\textup{2}, XXVII. 154, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.ii.xxvii.html>.
Saints defy definition because they embody different characteristics, some that are universally recognized within a tradition and others that are shared between two or more traditions. The lack of a precise definition does not preclude the formulation of one. When collectively referring to the Abrahamic faiths, the word saint (Lat. sanctus) may be employed in a context which does not merely suggest a Christian holy person. While the Christian understanding of a saint has largely defined how the veneration of saints and their relics along with pilgrimage are understood in academic discourse, I have previously argued for a shift toward a more fluid paradigm which recognizes the complex nature of other traditions (Meri 1999a; Meri 2002: ch. 2). Thus, in addition to the qualities of exemplary piety and learning mentioned above, it may be said that a saint is a person who possesses baraka (blessing), a God-given quality to the righteous of all the Abrahamic traditions (Meri 1999c).

In Christianity the earliest saints were the martyrs who were persecuted by the Romans. In medieval Europe, the saint came to be recognized through a more formal process of identification, namely through beatification and canonization by the church. In eastern Christianity, the icons of saints became central to the veneration of saints, while in western Christendom, the body of the saint became central to the cult. In the case of the multiple shrines throughout the Middle East dedicated to the prophets and patriarchs, the body was not always present and many an oratory was established as a result of a dream or vision as in the case of the prophet Elijah and his Islamic counterpart al-Khadr (Meri 1999b).

In Judaism and Islam the display of relics or physical remains of the saint was never central to the act of venerating the saint (Meri 2010). In fact Jewish and Islamic traditions emphasize the inviolability of the body. Thus, in an Abrahamic sense, a saint is a person who acquires through the grace of God a measure of sanctity in their lifetime or after death regardless of their official designation in edificatory, exegetical, literary, or historical sources. In the Middle East and North Africa holy persons came to be identified as such through their acts of exemplary piety and learning, their charismatic or thaumaturgic gifts in their lifetimes and posthumously.

All three Abrahamic religions acknowledge the universality of the prophets and patriarchs, though Jews do not acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah and Jews and Christians do not recognize Muhammad as a prophet within their traditions. The central figures of Moses in Judaism, Jesus in Christianity and Muhammad in Islam are essential to understanding how the believers articulate their experiences vis-à-vis the performance of ritual and the creation of centres of devotion. In Christianity the saints sought to imitate Jesus in their acts of piety and devotion. The pilgrimage to Jesus’ reputed tomb is attested in late antiquity by Jerome and Egeria among others. The

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14 An excellent website documenting Egeria’s travels is to be found at: <http://www.egeriaproject.net/about_egeria.aspx>.
purported tomb of Christ in the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was empty, yet the process of discovery was somehow an essential part of his veneration among Holy Land pilgrims. The veneration of a holy person is not always bound to a specific location as in the case of Moses whose tomb according to biblical tradition is unknown. However, this does not prevent Muslims from seeking to rediscover the location of Moses’ tomb near Jericho and Damascus, and Jewish travellers from visiting the Jericho shrine. Muslims to this day make a pious visitation, or a lesser pilgrimage, to the tomb of the prophet Muhammad. However, this did not constitute canonical pilgrimage as does pilgrimage to Mecca.

Varieties of Saints

Jews, Christians, and Muslims venerated different types of holy persons, the greatest varieties being in late antique Christianity and medieval Islam. As mentioned earlier, saints possessed exemplary piety and learning, sometimes one or both. Indeed, some led an ascetic lifestyle and renounced the worldly life, while others were said to have performed miracles. Some saints were shared among traditions like the prophets and patriarchs while others were officially acknowledged only within a given tradition. Yet in Islam others like the muwallah (lit. the one enamoured of God) were considered by theologians to be heterodox, insane, and in a state of ritual impurity (Meri 2002: 61, 91–9, 100, 117, 119).

The most important category of holy person shared by the three monotheistic faiths is the prophets and patriarchs. Throughout the Middle Ages the shrines of the prophet Elijah and his Islamic counterpart al-Khaḍır were the most important centres of devotion among Muslims, Jews, and Christians throughout historic Syria and Iraq (Meri 2002: ch. 3; Meri 1999b).

In Judaism the veneration of the Talmudic sages occupied an important place after the veneration of the prophets and patriarchs. Those frequently mentioned in historical and literary accounts include Ḥoni the Circle Drawer and his descendants, who were efficacious for producing rain in their lifetimes and posthumously (Meri 2002: 64).

Apart from the prophets and patriarchs whose authority derives from God and whose veneration is normally associated with their mention in scripture, in Islam the process of recognizing the sainthood (here read state of holiness) of an individual was through popular acclimation. Muslim authors produced hagiographical biographies and other works about the better-known saints that attested to their acts of piety and charity as well as the lesser miracles (karāmāt) they worked (Meri 2002: ch. 2; Meri 1999a).

15 To this day Muslims visit his tomb near Jericho. For the medieval context see Sadan 1981. For a more recent discussion with a focus on the early Ottoman period, see Cohen 2006. For a more comprehensive overview see al-ʿAsali 1990.
Medieval Hebrew travel accounts frequently contain references to the **avot** (the ancestors), the **zaddiqim** (the righteous), **hasidim** (the pious), and the **qidshim** (the holy ones). From the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the veneration of Jewish saints in North Africa became common, down to the twentieth century, particularly in Morocco and Tunisia.

In the Christian context as mentioned above in the accounts of the church fathers, saints included the martyrs, the apostles, church fathers, to which may be added other male and female clergy, anchorites, and ascetics who were posthumously recognized as saints.

In the Islamic context, Shīʿis venerate the twelve imams, the prophet Muhammad’s male descendants through his cousin and son-in-law ʿAli b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 661) and his descendants through his son Ḥusayn, who was martyred at Karbalāʾ in 680. The earliest extant pilgrimage manuals focus on the veneration of ʿAli, his son Ḥusayn (d. 680) and the fifth and sixth imams Muhammad al-Bāqir (d. 733) and Jaʿfar al-Sādiq (d. 765). The earliest guides are essentially a compilation of traditions attributed to them.

In the modern context, the varieties of saints includes marabouts, or pious individuals, commonly referred to as awlijāʾ (friends of God), ṣāliḥūn (pious persons), or ṣiddiqūn (righteous persons).16 Many of these saints are venerated within the context of the Sufi orders.

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**Pilgrimage: Introduction**

Jerusalem and Mecca are not only the two archetypal pilgrimage cities; they are cities of Abraham and Abrahamic cities. The sacred topography of the Middle East consists of intertwined spaces and places which believers associate with events from sacred history such as from the lives of the prophets and patriarchs and other holy persons. Worshippers perpetuated the memory of these places by offering prayers, supplications, and sacrifices among other rituals.

In Judaism, following the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, pilgrimage ceased to be obligatory for adult males. Synagogues emerged as centres not only of worship but also for pilgrimage and the veneration of holy persons. One of the earliest preserved examples of the veneration of holy persons in the Middle East is from the Dura Europos synagogue in Syria, which contained murals of the prophets and patriarchs at which pilgrims made supplications (Meri 1999b: 239–40), the synagogues of Moses at Dammuh in Egypt (Meri 2002: 222–4) and the various synagogues of Elijah throughout Syria and Iraq (Meri 1999b; Meri 2002: chs 3–4). Medieval Hebrew and Judaeo-Arabic accounts routinely mention that Jews visited pilgrimage places during

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16 In Islam the categories are not mutually exclusive and are fairly extensive. For discussion, see Meri 2002: ch. 2 and Meri 1999a.
the high holy days, especially on Passover, the Festival of Weeks, and Sukkot. After Saladin’s conquest of Jerusalem in 1187 Jews were once again permitted to take up residence in Jerusalem and visit the Western Wall.

In late antiquity, church fathers such as St Jerome urged pilgrimage to Jerusalem as did subsequently the Byzantine emperors and their families who led by example. The fourth century marked a revival of pilgrimage interest in holy places. The Byzantines patronized Christian pilgrimage sites and encouraged pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The Emperor Constantine had the tomb of Jesus consecrated in 326 CE.

Only in Islam is pilgrimage ritual so intimately connected with Abraham and the intended sacrifice of his son Ishmael. Pilgrims re-enact the Farewell Pilgrimage of the prophet Muhammad whose rituals they believe Abraham and Ishmael began. In Islamic sacred history, Abraham and Ishmael raise up the foundations of the Ka’ba (Q. 2: 127). Muslim pilgrims re-enact the rituals attributed to Abraham, including sacrificing livestock to commemorate the intended sacrifice. In Quran 22: 26, God commands Abraham to purify the house for those who circumambulate it: ‘And when We settled for Abraham the place of the House: “Thou shall not associate with Me anything. And do thou purify My House for those that shall go about it and those that stand, for those that bow and prostrate themselves.”’

Other forms of pilgrimage such as ziyāra (Arab.; a visitation, pious visitation), while not explicitly Abrahamic, may be seen as illustrating the intersection of texts and rituals of saint veneration. Ziyāra is the act of pilgrimage or pious visitation to any holy place in Islam. As discussed later the word was used by Jews and Christians in the medieval Islamic world. Christian Arabic texts also mention that Christians would travel to Jerusalem in order to derive blessings from the holy sites.17 In the Islamic context it refers to non-canonical pilgrimage, that is pilgrimage other than the hajj and ‘umra to Mecca. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem is an example of ziyāra which appears in the ḥadīth traditions of the prophet Muhammad and in travel and pilgrimage accounts. The prophet Muhammad is believed to have ascended to Heaven from Jerusalem on his miraculous night journey mentioned in Quran 17: 1. As he ascended the heavens he encountered the various prophets and patriarchs.

In the medieval Islamic world Muslims as well as Jews and Christians venerated Abraham, who was known by the Arabic name of Ibrāhīm. Abraham is a saint, that is a holy person in the general sense of the word, and in Islam he is referred to as a Friend of God (al-khalīl).

Aleppo (Arab. Ḥalab), whose name may derive from the Arabic word for milk, is a pilgrimage city that Muslim historians connect to Abraham based upon popular traditions of Abraham milking his flocks there and distributing the milk to the poor. A shrine of Abraham was found near the Jews’ quarter. Yet the shrines of other prophets and patriarchs throughout Syria and the Middle East, particularly Ezekiel, Elijah, Moses, Ezra, and Daniel, were popular among medieval Jews.

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17 Zayyāt 1982: 111.
The Arabic language became the lingua franca among Jews, Christians, and Muslims throughout the Islamic world from the seventh century. It provided a common vocabulary to refer to pilgrimage. Jews used the word *hageg* (a word related to the Arabic *ḥajj*) as they made pilgrimage to their holy places. They also used such words as *baraka* (blessings) to refer to the divinely inspired quality possessed by righteous individuals. In this light pilgrimage was an Abrahamic phenomenon (Meri 2002: ch. 4).

**Holiness**

The Jewish conception of holiness was rooted in the Land of Israel. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE synagogues became metonymies for the Temple, wherein the liturgies of the holy days were performed, though Jews no longer offered up sacrifices. In Christianity, the holiness of places associated with Jesus, the martyrs, and the apostles became part of Christian sacred history.

Accessing the holy required the enactment of various rituals such as donning a garment, saying prayers, and making supplications, the act of remembering the holy person and remembering God and the Hereafter. Jews, Christians, and Muslims identifiedholiness through similar means (Meri 2002: ch. 1 and throughout). Jewish, Christian, and Muslim devotees of saints had similar spiritual needs which they sought to fulfil, such as approaching God and seeking intercession, as well as worldly needs, such as bestowing a child, good health, and wealth. Nevertheless, each Abrahamic tradition had its own particular prayers and supplications which included verses from scripture and Arabic supplications requesting in prayer that God through the shrine’s inmate (not all shrines were associated with physical remains particularly in medieval Islam) fulfil spiritual or physical needs, heal the visitor, and provide relief from adversity. Whenever they condoned visiting holy places, Muslim theologians maintained that prayer should be made to God directly on behalf of the dead and that seeking the direct intercession of holy persons was tantamount to the major sin of associating other deities with God (Meri 2002: 126–40).

**Defining Pilgrimage**

Pilgrimage is any sacred journey to a sacred or holy site that may be venerated in one or more traditions. Any definition of pilgrimage and saints must take into account both the general and local characteristics of what constitutes a saint and pilgrimage.

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18 Also see Zayyāt 1982: 112, where the text has '[The monk] sought blessings (*tabāraka*) from the holy sites [of Nazareth]."
By general we mean that which is universal to the Abrahamic faiths (e.g. common places of pilgrimage, the essential forms of pilgrimage etiquette, and fundamental rituals) and by local that which is associated with a given tradition, e.g. a pilgrimage site recognized locally or regionally, but which does not necessarily have any official status within a faith, such as the grave of a medieval saint. Scholarship which seeks to understand both phenomena has historically focused on the origins of one tradition or another within a distinctly Christian or Judaeo-Christian framework. While it is not our intention to entirely reject this limited traditional approach, this has created a false standard by which to define scholarship on the Jewish and Islamic traditions, which in turn negates the unique qualities and characteristics of both these traditions, or at least subsumes them to a dominant paradigm. Furthermore it has the potential to marginalize the beliefs of a given religion.

Studies of origins abound, yet they do not impart a real sense of these phenomena within a genuinely Abrahamic framework. Herein we shall strive to create such a framework which not only recognizes the universal qualities and attributes of the respective traditions but also examines their peculiar characteristics.

The origins of pilgrimage and the veneration of saints are to be found in the ancient Near East, the cradle to the three Abrahamic faiths. Ultimately it is the sacred centre, which historians of religion such as Mircea Eliade (1958: 367–87) saw as sites in which the sacred manifests itself and encompasses the landscape around it. While on one level one may regard shrines as fulfilling a basic desire, such a perspective offers a limited understanding of the Abrahamic context. By contrast to primitive pilgrimage places, Abrahamic pilgrimage places are centres vested with scriptural authority dedicated to exemplary figures from the monotheist past, endowed with divine blessings by virtue of their association with such figures, and often translatable and made intelligible to devotees of other monotheistic faiths through the public display of ritual at or surrounding it.

Both the veneration of saints and pilgrimage are often regarded as ‘popular religion’. Popular should not merely be understood as the practice and custom of the common people. In fact we find Jews, Christians, and Muslims from all walks of life undertaking pilgrimage to holy places and venerating saints. The term ‘popular religion’ is useful for categorizing certain religious phenomena. In the Near Eastern Christian and Jewish contexts, saint veneration emerged as a central aspect of popular religiosity. By popular we specifically mean normative practice among Jews and Christians.

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21 Especially useful in this regard is Waardenburg 1978.
Shrines dedicated to Abraham existed throughout the Middle East. The best-known shrine of Abraham today is the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron which Jewish, Christian, and Muslim pilgrimage and travel accounts routinely mention. One of the earliest pilgrimage accounts that mentions holy places associated with Abraham is Egeria’s fifth-century itinerary, in which she visits the House of Abraham in Harran:

Then, after three days spent there, it was necessary for me to go still farther, to Charrae, as it is now called. In holy Scripture it is called Charran, where holy Abraham dwelt, as it is written in Genesis when the Lord said unto Abram: Get thee out of thy country, and from thy father’s house, and go to Charran and the rest...He took us at once to the church, which is without the city on the spot where stood the house of holy Abraham; it stands on the same foundations, and it is made of the same stone, as the holy bishop said. When we had come to the church, prayer was made, the passage from Genesis was read, one psalm was said, and after a second prayer the bishop blessed us and we came out. (Egeria 1919: 36)

The twelfth-century Muslim traveller and ascetic ʿAlī b. Abī Bakr al-Harawī (d. 1215 ce) mentions multiple shrines dedicated to Abraham throughout Greater Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq. In one instance he mentions a church in the Valley of Kidron in Palestine which was a Christian pilgrimage place (Harawī 2004: 74). In 1192 al-Harawī visited the Cave of the Patriarchs after first visiting it while Hebron was under crusader rule. He mentions the account of a scholar who visited some years earlier:

[The scholar] al-Ādamī sought to visit Hebron and became friends with the place’s custodian, who was a Byzantine. He sought to gain his favor with a gift and requested to descend to the grotto. He promised him [that he could do so] when the pilgrimage traffic ceased in the winter. When the people stopped coming, [the custodian] took him to a tile that he uplifted and took a light and both of them descended approximately seventy steps and came to a large spacious grotto where the wind blew. It contained a slab upon which was Abraham the Friend covered in a green garment and the wind was playing with his white hair. (Harawī 2004: 30–1)\(^\text{22}\)

Other shrines dedicated to Abraham were to be found at the Citadel of Aleppo where one of Saladin’s son’s al-Malik al-Muʿayyad Najm al-Dīn Masʿūd was buried (Harawī 2004: 12 and n. 1).

\(^{22}\) One of the most detailed accounts of the shrine is Mujir al-Dīn al-Ḥanbali’s (d. 1522 ce) Al-Uns al-Jalīl bi-Taʿrīkh al-Quds wal-Khalīl which incorporates earlier Muslim traditions about the Cave of the Patriarchs and its founding.
Common pilgrimage sites were an integral part of the medieval landscape. They were not claimed exclusively by a particular religious community. Access to them was not forbidden to devotees of various faiths.

In twelfth-century Aleppo we find a telling example of a common pilgrimage site and the rituals performed there:

[Aleppo] contains a rock visible at the Jew’s Gate on the road to which votive offerings are made (yundharu lahu al-nudhūr) and upon which rosewater and sweet fragrances are sprinkled. Muslims, Jews, and Christians hold it in regard. It is said that beneath it is the tomb of one of the prophets . . . or saints (awliyā’) . . . (Harawi 2004: 12)

As significant an Abrahamic cult was that of the prophet Ezekiel (Arab. Hizqil), which became a leading centre of pilgrimage throughout the Islamic world from Egypt and North Africa to Syria and Palestine. Jews visited the shrine during the High Holy Days, at the New Year and the Day of Atonement. On the Day of Atonement, they read from a Torah scroll believed to be in Ezekiel’s handwriting, while a lamp burned day and night over the tomb. Benjamin of Tudela, writing in the twelfth century, states: ‘The light thereof has been kept burning from the day that he [lit] it himself, and they continually renew the wick thereof, and replenish the oil unto the present day.’ Regular vows of oil from devotees ensured that the place would glow with the light of holiness.

Rabbi Petahiyah of Regensburg reports that ‘Whoever wishes to go to a distant land deposits his purse, or any valuables, with Ezekiel, saying: “Our Lord Ezekiel, take charge of this valuable for me until I return, and let nobody take it but its heir”. And many purses with money lie there rotting because they lay there many years. There were books there, and a worthless person wished to carry away one of the books, but could not, for pain and blindness seized him; therefore everyone fears Ezekiel.’

Before entering Ezekiel’s shrine, and quite possibly others, devotees removed their shoes, as was the custom up until the early twentieth century. Muslims remove their shoes before entering mosques. At Ezekiel’s shrine as elsewhere, devotees pronounced formulas before depositing their possessions for safekeeping. Ezekiel’s presence was perceived by devotees and those who violated the sanctuary’s sanctity.

The shrine of Ezekiel was always an object of edification and continuous pilgrimage for the Jewish inhabitants of Iraq and Iran and their Muslim neighbours. The earliest mention of Muslims making pilgrimage there is from the twelfth century at least. Benjamin reports that prominent Muslims (bnei gdolei Yishma’el) went there to pray because of their profound respect (hiba) for the prophet Ezekiel. They also venerated Ezra the scribe and prayed at his tomb in Basra. ‘They love the Jews on that account.’ Jews lived at peace with their Muslim neighbours and both Jewish and Muslim servants served at the shrine.
Muslims also sought the saint’s protection before undertaking long journeys. Peta-
hiyah mentions that ‘Every [Muslim] who makes Pilgrimage [and visits] the tomb of [Muhammad] makes his way over to the tomb of Ezekiel . . .’

We find other interesting accounts such as that of an Egyptian Jew writing c.1371 visiting the shrine of Aaron at Petra who goes so far as to praise the Muslims who visit the shrine:

In Petra inside the cave of Aaron the Priest the Holy of the Lord . . . the inner cave is sealed. Great miracles were produced many times. Many come to bow down (’hishtahavot) and prostrate themselves. The Gentiles [i.e. the Muslims] maintain the place in great purity and for the honour of the Prophet (Aaron) . . . They respect and conduct the Jews and allow them to enter and prostrate themselves and pray there. May the Lord answer their prayers and our prayers and those of His nation Israel. Amen.23

One of the most extraordinary examples from the Middle Ages of the three faiths coming together is of the shrine of a Muslim saint Shaykh Arslān (d. c.550/1155) who fought against the Crusades through prayer and supplication and spiritual exercises. The shrine remains popular among Muslims down to this day outside Bāb Tūma or Thomas’s Gate. Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians visited the tomb of Shaykh Arslān. Since Arslān was a patron saint of sorts, it was natural that monotheists would come together to venerate him. Furthermore, the shrine appealed to a common Damascene identity rooted in mysticism which may have attracted broad segments of the population, including Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, who otherwise would not have necessarily visited the shrine. The occasion of the saint’s mawlid or birth would have been another central occasion. It is also likely that it was a place of congregation for Damascenes at times of popular festivals.

According to one late medieval account:

The people of [Greater Syria] believe in [Shaykh Arslān] greatly and allege that he possessed the power to manage nature (walāyat al-ṭaṣarruf) after his death as he did in life, that his tomb is efficacious for the fulfilment of supplication (gabrīhu mustajāb), that the four religious communities—Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians believe in him (ya’ taqidūnahu) and go to him with votive offerings (nadhr), such as oil, candles, dirhams and dinars for the sake of getting near [to God] (’alā sabīl al-qurba), and whoever seeks him at an occasion of great importance or severe affliction and seeks the intercession (tawassala) of God the Exalted through him, his need is fulfilled (qudiyat hājatuhu).

They compete among themselves in serving [his tomb], attaching themselves closely to his shrine and seek honour through its upkeep and bring Sultanic decrees for taking charge of his tomb. One person is removed from office and another appointed who is in turn replaced by another person. Scarcely had one person settled in place for a whole year than he was removed and another appointed in his stead. This is an indication of the high value of Shaykh Arslān. May God requite us

23 Ilan 1997: 135.
and the Muslims with his blessings in the world and the Hereafter. (Meri 2002: 209–10)

It is likely that Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian attraction to Shaykh Arslān was due to adherents of faiths other than Islam being attracted to and adhering to a Sufi order which was founded after his death.

More than any other religious phenomena the cult of saints and pilgrimage illustrate a dynamic quality of the confluence of popular ideas and practices as well as individuals and communities coming together at certain times to venerate holy persons.

**MEMORY**

Ultimately, the veneration of holy persons and pilgrimage is rooted in the memory of the holy person by the individual and the nation. *Memoria* is at the heart of the veneration of holy persons. Medieval Jews, Christians, and Muslims sought to perpetuate the memories of the holy persons, places, and objects in a number of ways. First, medieval scholars and travellers composed texts which edified the deeds of holy persons. The prophets are memorialized in scripture and saints in the Talmud, liturgical texts, and hagiographical accounts. Written texts as well as oral accounts in the case of modern saints such as the Jewish and Muslim saints of North Africa perpetuate their memory for eternity. The Sīra or Biography of the prophet enumerates various miracles attributed to him in his life. A number of these miracles are associated with the signs of prophethood. Hagiographical traditions mention that at Muhammad’s birth a brilliant light emanated from his mother’s womb and illuminated the lands of Syria.24

In medieval Damascus such texts proliferated at the times of the Crusades but had their origins in the early Islamic period. In the Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa, hagiographical traditions did not exist as such. Rather, we find pilgrimage and travel accounts and inventory lists of shrines such as those found in the Cairo Geniza, a cache of medieval documents rediscovered in the nineteenth century in Fustāţ, which enumerate the miracles of the patriarchs and the Talmudic sages (Meri 2002: ch. 4). Two of the most important works in this regard are the itineraries of Benjamin of Tudela and Petahiyah of Regensburg.

Second, rulers and the elite contributed to constructing tangible repositories of memory by constructing shrines. In so doing they not only perpetuated the memory of a holy person but their own legacy. This may be regarded as a form of memory common to all faiths. Yet in the medieval Islamic world, one finds that the endowment and construction of shrines was an activity associated with the Muslim ruling class and elite.

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24 e.g. Ibn Kathīr 1998: I. 147, where the prophet’s mother has a vision of herself while she bore the prophet of ‘a light coming forth from her that lit up the castles of Syria’.
Conclusion

The notion of sovereignty over holy places is antithetical to the universal principles of saint veneration embodied in the Abrahamic faiths. Abrahamic faiths are repositories of collective memory, memories of holy persons and places, and events from scripture and the sacred past. At the heart of the veneration of saints and pilgrimage is belief in the prophets and patriarchs, as exemplars of piety and learning. The exemplary behaviour of the prophets, including that of Jesus (for Christians and Muslims), was emulated by the Jewish sages, the Christian martyrs, Muslim saints (awliyāʾ), and others. Reflecting on the meaning of the cult of saints and pilgrimage within the Abrahamic religions requires an appreciation for the role that Abraham played in propagating the monotheistic message of devotion to the One God. Ultimately Abraham’s legacy manifested itself in shrines and other holy places and spaces, many dedicated to him, throughout the Islamic world. In historic Syria, the cradle of the monotheistic faiths, the pilgrimage places associated with the prophets and other holy persons are being threatened. In 2013 the Synagogue of Elijah at Jobar outside Damascus suffered extensive damage after shelling by Syrian government forces. While the secular regime has in the past protected Jewish and Christian holy places in order to guarantee its survival and project itself as a defender of minorities, it and its allies have waged a war targeting and destroying Sunni Muslim shrines and mosques and have employed the imminent threat to a historic shrine of Sitt Zaynab, the prophet Muhammad’s granddaughter, as a rallying call to perpetuate the war. In marked contrast, the Abrahamic legacy of the veneration of holy persons serves to inspire Jews, Christians, and Muslims throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Postscript

In 2014 and 2015 ISIS systematically destroyed numerous Christian and Muslim shrines in Iraq and Syria, including the shrines in Mosul of the prophet Jonah (Nabī Yūnus), Seth, son of Adam, and the shrine of St George (Nabī Jirjis), the fourth-century Christian monastery and shrine of St Benham and St Sarah, as well as other Sunni and Shi’i shrines.

References


Muslims regard Jesus as the Messiah and a prophet and messenger (i.e. a bearer of a Revelation), and believe that he was taken up by God to Heaven.


