



## History of Jerusalem under the Moslems from A.D. 650 to 1500,

by Guy Le Strange.

Reviewed by Issam Nassar

*Publisher unknown. 183 pp. with an appendix and a note on its reprinting.*

Walter Benjamin once wrote that "historical researchers must give up the tranquil, contemplative attitude toward the object in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past is positioned with regard to precisely this present."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker," in *Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), 2: 467-468, quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), pp. 289-290.

Although relevant to all historical research, Benjamin's advice is particularly illuminating when examining the writing of the history of Jerusalem. For the battle over this city revered by many has been fought on many grounds, not the least important of which has been the writing of competing historical narratives, each connected with one present nationalist discourse or another.

According to Rohricht's *Bibliotheca Geographica Palestinae*, between 1800 and 1878 more than two thousand works were written and published in Europe on Palestine or—to be more precise—on Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> A cursory glance at their titles reveals that most of them deal with topics relevant to Christianity, and, to a lesser extent, Judaism. The scarcity of any titles referring to Islam is conspicuous. The historical narratives surveyed by Rohricht selectively treat certain fragments of the history of Jerusalem while excluding others deemed incompatible or irrelevant. This exclusion illustrates a general trend in nineteenth-century European historiography on Jerusalem. For most of it focused on the connection between the city and the history of Christianity, that is, on the connection between the city and Christian Europe. Few nineteenth-century English books on Jerusalem concentrated on the city during the Muslim periods. In this respect, Guy Le Strange's 1890 book *Palestine under the Moslems: A Description of Syria and the Holy Land from A. D. 650 to 1500* (published in

Boston by Houghton and Mifflin) is a notable exception. As such, it quickly became an authoritative, classic text in English on Muslim Jerusalem.

Le Strange's book translates selected writings of medieval Arab and Muslim geographers and historians and connects them in a single narrative through the author's own commentary. It is perhaps because it contains selections of original medieval works that it has been reprinted several times since 1890. Two reprints are currently available, one produced in Beirut in 1965, and the other in New York in 1990.<sup>3</sup> The text under consideration here, *Jerusalem under the Moslems*, is a reprint of the sections that deal with Jerusalem in the original text of 1890. No publishing information or date of reprint is provided.

Because *Jerusalem under the Moslems* is a facsimile reprint of selections from the original book, notes on the sources of the original materials are absent. In its current format the book is composed of four chapters. Three of them deal with Jerusalem, the fourth with Ramlah, Hebron, Acre and Tiberias. A description of the Dome of the Rock together with accounts of its construction and its significance to Islam occupy most of the book. Between the current third and fourth chapters, eighty pages have been omitted, which appear in the original as two chapters entitled "Damascus" and "Legends and Marvels." The current publishers do not explain why they have

<sup>2</sup> Rohricht, *Bibliotheca Geographica Palestinae* (London: John Trotter Reprints, 1989), pp. 338-597.

<sup>3</sup> The Beirut reprint was published by Khayats, with an introduction by Walid Khalidi, and the New York reprint by AMS.

omitted these chapters or why in a book on Jerusalem they have added a chapter on other Palestinian cities. It is also unfortunate that the current reprint does not include Le Strange's preface to the original book. For it is in his preface that he explains the method that he adopted in selecting and arranging the texts that compose his history.

Despite its title, *Jerusalem under the Moslems* is not a book on the history of Muslim Jerusalem as much as it is a book of events and places in Jerusalem as described by medieval Muslim historians, geographers, and travelers. No chronology of the city's history is provided, and no consideration is given to its social, cultural, and economic life during the period in question. Nor does Le Strange make any attempt to explain the political and economic significance of Jerusalem for the rest of Palestine or for the Islamic world at the time. Rather, his book is about the religious significance of Jerusalem to Islam and, secondarily, to Christianity.

Specifically, it collects descriptions of the great religious locations in the city. The various accounts are put together from Muslim medieval writers who visited or wrote about Jerusalem, mostly between the tenth and the fifteenth centuries. Among the historians cited in this book are Ibn al-Fakih (d. 903), Al-Maqdissi (985), Ya'kubi (874), Ibn al Athir (twelfth century), al-Tabari (d. 932), Nasir Khusru (1045), al-Idrisi (1154) and Mujir al-Din al-Hanbali (1496).

As a selection from different Muslim historians, the book is of great value to English readers interested in Jerusalem. It

not only introduces the reader to the work of important historians who are normally unknown to English readers, but also reveals the diverse ways they had of perceiving and describing the city. We should keep in mind, however, that despite its exclusive use of Muslim sources, the book presents essentially a nineteenth-century European view of Jerusalem and of Islam. All the accounts, without exception, deal with issues relevant to Christianity or to Christian knowledge at the time. It is therefore no accident that most of the book treats matters concerning the Dome of the Rock and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Additionally, if the book is considered as a whole, its perspective on Jerusalem is not that of the original Muslim authors, but that of Le Strange. For he has not only selected and arranged the text according to his own criteria, but has also inserted his own conclusions at the end of each section as a way of imposing his unifying perspective onto the whole.

Despite its limitations, this book represents a valuable contribution to the English library. In particular, readers unfamiliar with Jerusalem's importance to Islam will find in it first-hand, original historical accounts that cannot be easily obtained elsewhere.

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## Stories from Jerusalem's Far Side

*Readers' contributions are welcomed.  
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Nassar*

### The Mayor and the Lamb

The *Mukhtar* of *Jabal al-Mukaber*, a village southeast of Jerusalem, submitted a complaint against the inspectors of the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture, protesting their confiscation of two lambs that his son was transporting in his car. In his letter, sent to the Israeli mayor of Jerusalem, Ehud Olmert, in September 1998, the *Mukhtar* explained that the inspectors stopped his son's car and confiscated the animals on the grounds that they were about to be slaughtered without a permit. In addition, the inspectors, who were accompanied by the border police, physically attacked the son, who tried to plead with them to let go of the animals. Ironically, the two lambs were on their way to the village to be prepared as lunch in honor of mayor Olmert himself, who was scheduled to visit the village that same day. Not only did they confiscate the animals, but also on top of it the officials made the *Mukhtar* pay a fine of 150 shekels (about \$40) for violating the Israeli law regarding this matter. Protesting the treatment received by his son and animals, the *Mukhtar* complained in the letter: "they do not respect our traditions that require us to receive guests of honor with freshly slaughtered animals. Where is Israeli democracy? What is next, will they tell us

what to have for breakfast?"

It is not known whether the mayor replied to the letter or not. It is also not known if the mayor will be served lamb on his next visit to *Jabal al-Mukaber*. (From *al-Quds'* weekly supplement, *Aswaq al-Quds*, Saturday, September 19, 1998).

### No More House Demolitions in Jerusalem!!!

A rather significant shift in the Jerusalem municipality's attitude towards unlicensed houses may be underway, if we can trust a report in the Hebrew weekly *Yerushalyem* in early December 1998. According to the paper, the deputy mayor of Jerusalem, Haim Miller, built a warehouse in the yard of his West Jerusalem home, but failed to obtain a building license. Despite repeated complaints from the neighbors who share the building where he resides—and whose yard was used for the illegal construction—no demolition orders were issued. A resident in the building complained that upon arriving at the scene, inspectors said they intended to wait until Miller finished the building before bringing charges against him. It is not clear whether this is a hopeful sign for the Palestinians of Jerusalem, whose homes are regularly being demolished under the pretext of building without permits.

(From *al-Quds*, December 5, 1998)