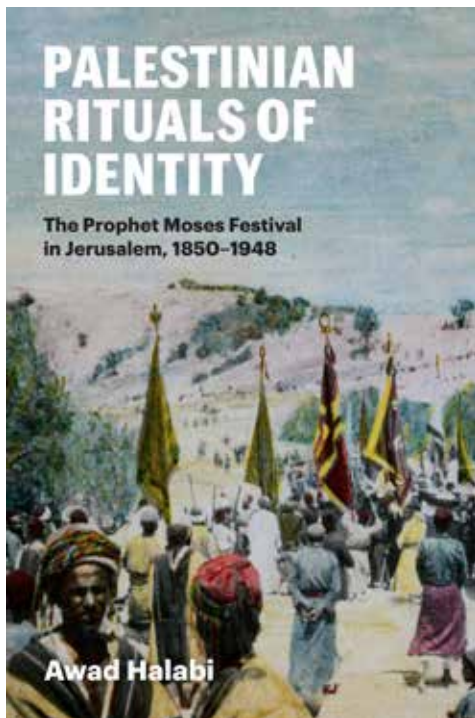


The Rise and Fall of Nabi Musa

Review by Jacob Norris

Awad Halabi, *Palestinian Rituals of Identity: The Prophet Moses Festival in Jerusalem, 1850–1948*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2022. 271 pages. \$55.00 hardcover.



Abstract

Awad Halabi's monograph breaks new ground in uncovering the societal changes contained within Palestine's most popular Muslim festival. Focused mainly on the Mandate period, the book charts the festival's reinvention in the early twentieth century as a major vehicle for Palestinian social and political protest. Far from constituting a platform for purely elite concerns, Halabi demonstrates the multiple ways that subaltern actors expressed their concerns and priorities through the festival's rituals.

Keywords

Palestine; pilgrimage; Nabi Musa; Jerusalem; British Mandate; Ottoman Palestine; Islamic history; shrines.

The Nabi Musa festival has long been assigned a special position in the Palestinian imagination. As Palestine's largest Muslim pilgrimage, worshippers have gathered in Jerusalem on the Friday before the Christian Orthodox Good Friday since at least the early Ottoman period. From this starting point, pilgrims embarked on the twenty-one-kilometer walk eastward to the shrine believed to contain the tomb of Musa (Moses), nestled in the barren hills of the Jerusalem area wilderness. While the festival has been subject to constant change and reinvention over the centuries, it was the events of 1920 – when the first mass protests against Zionism and British colonialism erupted during the gathering in Jerusalem – that cemented Nabi Musa in the Palestinian national consciousness.

Despite its prominent religious and political status, we know surprisingly little about Nabi Musa's longer history as a regional pilgrimage and how that history intersects with the sociopolitical upheavals of Palestine's modern era. Enter Awad Halabi's new monograph, *Palestinian Rituals of Identity*, the first book-length study in English of the Nabi Musa festival through the late Ottoman and Mandate periods (1850–1948). Packed with previously unused documentary sources and fresh analytical insight, the book represents an important and impressive new contribution to the historiography of modern Palestine.

Halabi's core method consists of applying classical anthropological writing on pilgrimage and ritual (Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Talal Asad, and so on) to the festival's ever-changing panoply of practices, all with a view to teasing out how Palestinians "understood the challenges of modernity, particularly the expansion of market capitalism, the arrival of Western culture, and the formation of new social hierarchies" (3). This means that much of the book sees Halabi unpacking specific ceremonial elements of the festival, examining how such rituals "do not just represent power, but also help forge power" (72), in an echo of Geertz's classic axiom that "power served pomp, not pomp power." At times, the application of anthropological theory feels a little forced – can we really describe the elite Nashashibi family as employing Scott's "weapons of the weak"? – but overall the approach is effective in taking us beyond the surface level of pageantry and political rhetoric, illuminating the festival's role as a key site of contestation within emerging social formations.

Surprisingly, and a little frustratingly, Halabi skips through the tumultuous events of 1920 relatively quickly, largely summarizing existing work on the riots that broke out that year. But perhaps this is part of the wider point. For Halabi, the festival was not suddenly politicized that year; rather it had always been political, reflecting and shaping ever-shifting power relations within Palestinian society. Thus, the goal is to see events such as 1920 within a longer-term picture of change and continuity. As Halabi insists, "The violence [of 1920] did not evolve from Arab protesters suddenly introducing politics into the festival, but from a new, sectarian environment that Britain had stoked in Palestine" (52). Building on this, the book posits three discursive goals pursued by the British at the festival: historical continuity with the Ottomans, a racialized understanding of Palestinian society, and a vision of the British as bearers of communal tolerance and harmony. If these seem potentially contradictory, that is probably because they were. Indeed, Halabi does a good job of dissecting the underlying tensions within and between these discourses, etching them onto a wider canvas of colonial violence and willful ignorance. Nabi Musa, it seems, could be anything to anyone, as long as you willed it hard enough.

The book seems most at home in the Mandate period, devoting five chapters to the period (chapters three to seven), while the periods before 1850 and from 1850–1917 receive only one chapter each. Moreover, the sweeping labeling of the pre-1850 pilgrimage as "the traditional festival" sits somewhat awkwardly against the book's wider goal of seeing the festival as a constant reimagining of social relations, serving instead to flatten out this earlier period as simply "the singular essence of

pilgrimage: attaining proximity to the sacred” (3). Likewise, the chapter on the late Ottoman period feels a little rushed, making sweeping statements on the “modernity” projected by Ottoman elite actors, with relatively little concrete examples to explore the complexity of such concepts or the messiness of their enactment. No doubt a relative paucity of sources from the Ottoman period played a role in this unevenness, but the reader inevitably comes away with the impression that chapters one and two are simply a prelude to the main event: the Mandate years.

From chapter three onward, the book comes into its own, presenting a more vivid picture of the festival’s rituals and their significance for understanding the wider social changes sweeping Palestine at that time. Through a rich variety of source material – diaries, memoirs, newspaper reports, colonial documents, photographs – the reader gains a more visceral sense of the great cacophony of sound, color, and fervor that descended upon Jerusalem every spring and then made its way twenty-one kilometers eastward to the sanctified shrine of Moses. Banners, songs, dances, sword fights, and votive prayers all feature, demonstrating the enormous variety of meanings inscribed into the festival by its multifaceted participants.

Following chapter three’s assessment of Britain’s colonial ambitions, chapter 4 examines the hold exerted by Palestinian elites over Nabi Musa for much of the Mandate period. A good deal of this chapter is devoted to the Husayni family, and in particular the newly appointed “grand mufti,” Hajj Amin. As well as implementing a host of new ceremonial rituals emphasizing the mufti’s pre-eminence, the Husaynis broadened the range of participants by inviting delegations from beyond the country’s hilly interior. Jaffa, Ramla, Haifa, and a host of other towns and villages in the northern and coastal areas that sent processions for the first time, alongside scouts and other youth groups, giving the festival a national coverage. But rather than an expression of burgeoning national identity, Halabi insists they were merely attempts to solidify the personal power of the mufti. We might question why we cannot see both personal gain *and* rising nationalist sentiment in this widening of the festival’s parameters, but Halabi’s gaze in this chapter remains firmly focused on the cultivation of elite sensibilities. Various other wealthy families (most notably the Nashashibis) challenged Husayni dominance over the festival, but they all shared a common set of “modern” values. These included a Western-oriented sense of civic duty, the propagation of orthodox Sunni Islam, a rhetorical commitment to the inclusion of women and religious minorities, and, perhaps most significantly, a commitment to non-violence that ultimately rendered these families complicit in Britain’s colonial project.

It is in chapters five and six that the focus shifts to rank-and-file participants at the festival. Chapter five looks at nationalist youth activities, documenting how a new generation of activists articulated a more militant, Arab-focused vision of the nation through the tactics of mass politics: chants, slogans, and the reification of figures both historical (Salah al-Din) and contemporary (Izz al-Din al-Qassam) that valorized anticolonial resistance. Chapter six, meanwhile, explores a wide range of “non-national inflections,” emphasizing the multiple ways in which subaltern actors

subverted the authority of national and colonial elites. Peasants and Bedouin – both men and women – are given center stage here, revealing themselves capable of imposing their own visions of Nabi Musa on the annual proceedings. In the gathering of pilgrims in Jerusalem we find villages like Baytunya and ‘Ayn Karim defying the festival’s organizers by demanding to march as separate contingents complete with their own banners. At the shrine itself, “folk culture” (Halabi’s term) comes to the fore, as ritual practices of devotion – based on localized understandings of sacred geography far removed from orthodox Sunnism – flourished with little oversight from religious officials. Among this jamboree of “folk culture,” village and nomadic women reveled in the festivities, not as passive subjects of segregation and patriarchy, but as complex actors whose experiences of the festival mirrored the multilayered social relations of their home village or tribe. For Halabi, the festival was no “liminal” space where women could liberate themselves from patriarchal hierarchies. Rather it was an expression of continuity with their daily lives, a regular form of *ziyara* (a visit), or simply “a local outing with family members and friends, feasting and eating sweets” (146).

The final chapter and conclusion push the narrative into the late Mandate period (post-1937) and then the post-Nakba. In both cases, the festival is diminished by increasingly repressive regimes of control (British, Jordanian, Israeli), appearing as a shadow of its former self. Gone is the sense of vibrancy, contestation, and spontaneity as colonial powers strip proceedings of any meaningful political expression, constantly fearful of its potential to foment social unrest and articulate Palestinian national sentiment. I was left wondering how much this view of a submissive and subdued Nabi Musa is itself the result of nostalgia for the pre-1937 festival. As Halabi regularly points out in earlier chapters, the reality of those earlier incarnations of Nabi Musa was far more complex than national memory suggests, subjected as they were to colonial and elite forms of manipulation. What, then, is so different about these more recent years? Ultimately, the conclusion does not have the space to address this question fully, but we are given glimpses that a more profound shift has taken place, especially since the onset of Israeli control over Jerusalem’s holy sites. No longer an arena for new forms of social ordering to be trialed and contested, Nabi Musa now appears as an ossified re-enactment of an imagined past. In this sense, the author’s accounts of his own experiences at the pilgrimage in 2014 are poignant and revealing. The most striking absence, in Halabi’s view, is the revered banner of the Prophet Moses itself, once the centerpiece of the procession’s departure from Jerusalem but now kept in the personal possession of a member of the Husayni family. Somehow it seems fitting that the banner is now guarded from view, preserved as a historic artifact, rather than a living totem of Palestine’s most fervently celebrated festival.

Taken in its entirety, Halabi’s book artfully illuminates these tensions between family, village, town, region, and nation that have cut through the Nabi Musa celebrations since its inception. He has provided us with a valuable contribution to our understanding of modern Palestinian history, reminding us of the rich possibilities religious practice holds for the study of social and political change. From the

Ottomans' transformation of the festival into a pageant of civic modernity, through the British reimagining of Nabi Musa as an expression of colonial benevolence, to local Palestinians' tussles to inscribe their own beliefs and identities on the celebrations, the festival has always been so much more than a set of religious rituals. Thanks to Halabi's richly textured and thoroughly researched book, we can now incorporate these struggles into our own summations of Palestine's modern story.

Jacob Norris is senior lecturer in Middle Eastern history at the University of Sussex, UK. His latest book is The Lives and Deaths of Jubrail Dabdoub (Or How the Bethlehemites Discovered Amerka) (Stanford University Press, 2023).