

days. If you have not read any revisionist material, Tom Holland is an easy place to start.

Reviewed by *Elsie Maxwell*

Having completing her PhD in Tunisia in Islam and African Literature in the '70s, Dr. Elsie Maxwell has lived and ministered in England since the mid-eighties. She taught courses in Islam for several decades at the London School of Theology and served a member of AWM's ministry team in London until her retirement a couple of years ago. She continues to live and minister in London.

Qur'anic Geography: A Survey and Evaluation of the Geographical References in the Qur'an with Suggested Solutions for Various Problems and Issues

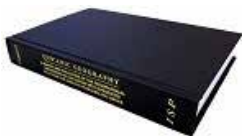
by Dan Gibson

Vancouver: Independent Scholars Press, 2011

The book is available on Starting Point Books (www.stpt.ca) in hardcover & PDF.

For most Muslims, their faith is defined more by orthopraxis than orthodoxy. At the heart of Islamic practice stand the five pillars and one in particular, *Salat*, daily unites millions of Muslims around the world as they pray facing Mecca.

Why is Muslim prayer focussed on Mecca? The obvious answer is, because that was where Islam began and where the Ka'ba and its Black Stone have always been, ever since Muhammad's day. *Everybody* knows this, don't they? Yet, an interesting thing about Islam is that there is much that we *assume*, but often very little that is actually *known*. Historians have long realised there are massive questions concerning Mecca – for example, Patricia Crone in *Meccan Trade* (Princeton University Press, 1987) notes that descriptions of the original Holy City of Islam in the early Islamic sources do not fit well with where Mecca is today. Thus Dan Gibson's book, *Qur'anic Geography*, sets out to explore these questions in detail: Where did Islam actually begin and was Mecca the original Holy City?



Three Northern Civilisations

Gibson begins his study by noting that the Qur'an contains little geography: just 65 references with only nine places mentioned by name, including 'Ad (23x), Thamud (24x) and Midian (7x). This immediately tells us these three civilisations were important to the Qur'an's original audience – so where were they located?

Beginning with 'Ad, the Qur'an offers a few clues: the people of 'Ad built altars, monuments and strongholds in the rock. They had gardens and springs and lived in lush mountain valleys. So where was 'Ad? Gibson suggests 'Ad is the Arabic rendering of a word from the ancient language from which the Semitic languages developed and that it is actually identical to biblical 'Uz, which was in Edom (Lamentations 4:21). Biblical descriptions of 'Uz match those of 'Ad in the Qur'an whilst the Qur'an and Bible agree the people of 'Ad / 'Uz were destroyed by fierce winds (Q. 89:6-8; Job 1:18-19). The Qur'an also sees a connection between 'Ad and Pharaoh (Q. 89:6-14) and Gibson offers extensive evidence that the Edomites were also the people known as the Hyksos, who invaded Egypt sometime between 1500BC and 1800BC. He writes, 'The moment we link the Hyksos, 'Ad, and Edom as one, many puzzling bits of history begin to fit together.' We suddenly realise their importance and understand why the Bible and the Qur'an mention this ancient civilisation so frequently.

Moving on to Midian, Gibson notes that this was another powerful empire that united the Arabian tribes. Their mention in the Qur'an again tells us that Muhammad's audience must have remembered them. Yet they, like the people of 'Ad, were a *northern* Arabian tribe, who appear to have lived between Tayma (their southernmost point) and the northernmost tip of Wadi Sirhan. The Qur'an also reports that the prophet Shueyb came to them (Q. 22:43-45; 29:36) and the traditional site of his tomb is in central Jordan, locating the Midianites even further north.

Turning to Thamud, Gibson suggests the Qur'anic word derives from *thuma* + 'Ad = 'after 'Ad'. According to the traditions, they were a people centred on al-Hijr, a northern Arabian city known today as Meda'in Salih. For centuries, its inhabitants were known as the Nabataeans. The Qur'an tells of how they were a people who had cut dwellings into the mountains (Q. 7:73-79; 11:61-68; 26:141-159; 27:25) and indeed Nabataean cities like Petra are famous for their rock cut tombs and palaces. When one visits Petra and wanders among the rock-cut buildings and fabulous architecture, one is struck by how rich and powerful this civilisation must once have been.

The Nabataeans achieved their immense wealth by dominating all three trade routes (the Incense Route, the Silk Road and the Red Sea ocean route). However, like all empires, their power eventually declined and following a golden age between 100BC and 100AD, their power waned. First through economic decline and then through disaster, as a series of earthquakes in AD363, AD551 and AD713 first weakened and then finally destroyed Petra. By the time of Muhammad, the Nabataeans were simply remembered by the Arabs as those 'after 'Ad' who were destroyed by earthquakes.

All three of these Qur'anic civilisations, Gibson argues—the people of 'Ad, Midian and Thamud—share some commonalities. All were powerful empires that

Muhammad's audience remembered. But most importantly, *all occupied the same area*—northern Arabia. So if these three major Qur'anic civilisations were located in the north, what about the Holy City itself. What about Mecca?

Where Was Mecca?

The Qur'an names Mecca just once (Q. 48: 24). The Ka'ba is mentioned many times, but nowhere are we told its location. Gibson believes there are many difficulties with the idea that its original location was Mecca. For example, the Qur'an describes the Ka'ba as residing in the 'Mother of Cities' (Q. 6:92) yet the archaeological record at Mecca is blank before 900AD — we have no evidence of an ancient walled city with houses, gardens, buildings and temples. No maps before 900AD mention Mecca whilst the first literary reference only appears in 740AD.

There are also problems with descriptions of the Holy City found in early Islamic literature. The Qur'an and Hadith describe it as being in a valley, with another valley next to the Ka'ba and there being a stream. None of this fits Mecca. We also read that the Holy City had fields, trees, grass, clay and loam. Once again, this is not true of Mecca, which is arid and inhospitable; there is no archaeological evidence that agriculture ever took place at Mecca.

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Qiblas and Confusion

So what about the *qibla*, the direction indicated for prayer? Surely, Muslims have always prayed toward the Ka'ba and its Black Stone, located in Mecca, haven't they? The answer is no. It is well known that the *qibla* changed early in Islam, the Qur'an mentioning the change (Q. 2:143-145), without explaining where it was changed *from*. (Most Muslims believe the original *qibla* was Jerusalem, but this idea is not recorded until 300 years after Muhammad).

Gibson believes archaeology backs up the *qibla* change, only much later than traditionally thought. Surveying over a dozen early mosques, Gibson found a surprising number have their *qibla* orientated not on Mecca but on *Petra*. Sometime during Islam's second century, Mecca began to be introduced, and then, by Islam's third century, all new mosques' *qiblas* were pointed at Mecca.

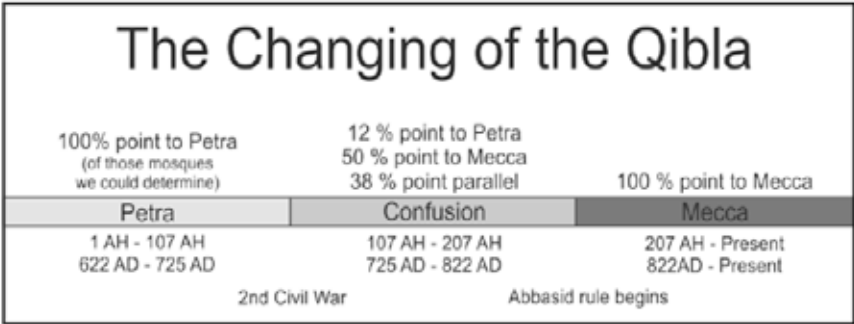


Chart borrowed from Qur’anic Geography, p. 274.

Gibson thinks archaeology can help date the change in *qibla*. The earliest buildings on the Amman citadel complex, built around 700AD are aligned on Petra, whereas later construction, circa 740AD, is orientated on Mecca. What happened between 700AD and 740AD that began to cause a change?

The Historical Context

In 64AH (683AD), Abdallah ibn al-Zubayr rebelled against the Umayyads in Damascus. Declaring himself caliph in the Holy City, Al-Zubayr destroyed the Ka’ba, removing the Black Stone for safekeeping. The following year, Tabari reports, Al-Zubayr claims to have discovered the foundations of the true Ka’ba, laid by Abraham. Gibson thinks this was at Mecca, a location chosen because it was far from Umayyad power.

The rebellion spread and in 71AH, Kufa in Iraq joined Al-Zubayr, claiming ‘we are people who turn to the same *qibla* as you’. In 73-74AH, Syrian armies attacked the Holy City, using a trebuchet (a large catapult) against it. (Archaeologists have unearthed masses of trebuchet stones in Petra, but none in Mecca.)

Around about 85AH, mosques begin hanging signs to indicate a new *qibla* and then in 89AH, the *mibrab* (prayer niche) was introduced to show worshippers which way to pray. In 94AH, the last of a series of earthquakes more or less destroyed Petra. Gibson thinks this would have been seen as divine judgement on the former Holy City. Finally, in 132AH the Abbasids begin to rule from Iraq and follow the pattern set by Kufa, formally adopting the new *qibla*. Henceforth all new mosques are now orientated toward Mecca.

Conclusion

Gibson’s thesis that the *qibla* changed in 70AH and not from Mecca, but from Petra, blends Qur’anic exegesis, a careful reading of the Islamic sources, along with archaeology, literature and history. Multiple lines of evidence, he argues, support the idea that the original Holy City was Petra. One significant observation is that the Qur’an’s overall

focus is on northern Arabia which contributes to the mismatch between descriptions of the Holy City in the literature, which fit Petra perfectly, and the present location of Mecca. There are other fascinating lines of evidence, such as the reports in historians like Tabari that when military interactions occurred between the Medinans and the Quraysh (the Meccan tribe), they happened *north* of Medina. Yet if the Quraysh came from Mecca, 300km to the south, why does the action take place to the north?

Gibson's thesis is a bold one, but his argument steers between both 'traditionalist' and 'revisionist' approaches to early Islam. Too many 'traditionalists' ignore the Qur'an's context and merely parrot the early sources, whereas 'revisionists' often mistrust the Islamic sources entirely. Gibson's book, however, attempts to take the Qur'an, hadith and Islamic sources seriously. Rather than ignore them, he simply argues they are more

coherent if one reads 'Petra' for 'Mecca' before 700AD, a conclusion that history, literature and archaeology strongly suggest.

Part of the challenge of engaging Muslims is finding ways to generate good questions from within Islam itself and Gibson's book is a wonderful example of how to do just that. ...The book offers a wealth of material that can be turned into questions that one can raise with Muslim friends to help gently insert a wedge between them and their trust of the Muslim tradition and 'what they've always been taught.'

The book is not without a few weaknesses. At times Gibson attempts to cover too much ground, with some sections feeling a little rushed. For example, his treatment of early Qur'anic manuscripts is a little thin and might have benefited from interaction with some of the critical literature, such as Keith Small's work

on Qur'anic textual variants. Overall, however, *Qur'anic Geography* builds a powerful case. Much of Islamic history appears to make more sense in the light of Gibson's thesis, which arguably sheds light on other issues too, such as the Qur'an's apparent strong connection to another northern phenomenon, Syriac Christianity.

Who Should Read This Book?

I believe that *Qur'anic Geography* is a book that all that live or work amongst Muslims would benefit from reading for three reasons. First, to understand our Muslim friends we need to understand the Qur'an and Gibson's book is tremendously helpful in that respect. It is a timely reminder that the Qur'an has a *context* — geographically as well as historically — and when one reads the Qur'an with an eye on that context, much more makes sense. The book especially helps connect the Qur'an to a *place*. I visited Petra earlier this year and now having its canyons, streets, and rock dwellings in mind as I read certain Qur'anic passages helps one see them in a new light and obtain a fresh perspective on the background to the earliest years of Muhammad's career.

Second, part of the challenge of engaging Muslims is finding ways to generate good questions from *within Islam itself* and Gibson's book is a wonderful example of how to do just that. Indeed, early on in *Qur'anic Geography*, he explains that what first got him thinking about this issue was talking with Muslim friends who were freshly returned from

the *hajj* and were disappointed that Mecca did not match up to their mental picture of it. The book offers a wealth of material that can be turned into questions that one can raise with Muslim friends to help gently insert a wedge between them and their trust of the Muslim tradition and ‘what they’ve always been taught.’

Finally, as I finished reading the book, I realised it was also a reminder of an area of profound theological difference between Muslims and Christians—that the God of the Bible is both bigger *and* smaller than the God of Islam. On the one hand, in the incarnation He stepped into geography and history, limiting himself to time and space, getting His feet dirty with Middle Eastern dust. But, at the same time, He is far bigger than geography and history—Christians do not need to pray to a particular location, in a particular language, for us to talk with our Father. If Gibson’s thesis in *Qur’anic Geography* is correct, perhaps we can use the book as a conversation starter as we seek to introduce Muslims to the God who desires not to be encountered through a Black Stone, but to transform our hearts of stone.

Reviewed by Andy Bannister

Dr. Andy Bannister is the Director of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries in Canada (www.rzim.ca) and lives in Toronto with his wife and baby daughter. He speaks regularly throughout Canada, America and further afield on Islam, apologetics, philosophy and culture. Before moving to Canada, Andy lived and worked in the UK, where for ten years he was involved in evangelism and outreach amongst Muslims in London. His PhD was in Qur’anic studies, developing computer software tools to analyse the Arabic text of the Qur’an, demonstrating that it shows all the signs of having been generated live, in oral performance. This explains a number of features of the Qur’an, including its high use of formulaic language and phraseology, performance variants (multiple versions of the same stories, each differing slightly) and its allusive use of Jewish and Christian traditions. Andy’s book, based on his dissertation, Retelling the Tale: An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur’an should be published in late 2013 or early 2014.

Miraculous Movements: How Hundreds of Thousands of Muslims Are Falling in Love with Jesus

**By Jerry Trousdale
Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012, 208 pages**

How can anyone *not* be excited and curious when reading a subtitle that tells us that ‘Hundreds of Thousands of Muslims Are Falling in Love with Jesus’? Curiosity is stirred even further when the subtitle promises to tell us ‘How’ this is happening!