

THIS EARTH A MAṢJID?

*Basit Kareem Iqbal*

وجعلت لي الأرض مسجداً و طهوراً

The Prophet ﷺ recounts five things uniquely granted him in a fairly well-known tradition found in many collections of Ḥadīth and transmitted variously by Jābir bin ‘Abdullāh رضي الله عنه and Ḥudhayfa رضي الله عنه. The second of these is that the earth was made for him a maṣjid and a means of purification (“made for us a maṣjid”, the variant in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* says, “and its dust purification when we cannot find water”)—so, wherever a Muslim happens to be at the time of prayer, there she or he can pray. Ṣalāh, that is, does not require a sanctuary constructed specifically for the purpose of worship, as was required of other nations, and water ablutions may be replaced if circumstances so dictate. But it is this first segment of the tradition to which I would like to return, and not merely for its ramifications for the sacred law: the earth in its entirety is made a maṣjid. What does this mean?

If the meaning of this initial fragment of the ḥadīth were limited to the fact that it is legally permissible to perform ṣalāh anywhere in the world, one might expect the word used to denote a generic spatial location for the ritual prayer (such as, for instance, *muṣalla*) and not the far more specific ‘place of sujūd’ (*maṣjid*) that gained the technical valence of a site designated for the ṣalāh. ‘Muṣalla’ would seem (simply, lexically) to be a more immediate choice, and the use of the word ‘maṣjid’ there-

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fore provides the first impulse for this inquiry. ‘Muṣalla’ appears in the Qurʾān once (2:125), and denotes simply a place in which prayers are performed. ‘Maṣjid’, on the other hand, linguistically denotes the place of sujūd, which is a *part* of the prayer. Sujūd names the position in the prayer when one drops gently upon the knees, places the palms of one’s hands on the ground, and puts nose and forehead on the ground. It is the part of prayer when, the Ḥadīth tell us, we are closest to God; Martin Lings writes that it is when the body “pours itself out” and the self is humbled. Indeed, sujūd also means to humble oneself, with humility. To humble oneself physically, to lower one’s face to the earth; and to do with humility, knowing that to do this itself is a mercy, a great bounty, never a point of pride.

The terms muṣalla / maṣjid and ṣalāh / sujūd are not interchangeable, which means the choice to use one rather than the other is significant. Sujūd is an emblem, a sign, a metonymic icon for ṣalāh—commentators read *those constant in their sujūd* (9:112) as signifying those perseverent in their prayer—but involves other valences as well. The earth made maṣjid, therefore, enters us—and the earth—into a different semantic domain than that invoked by muṣalla. That the earth is figured as a maṣjid (site-of-sujūd) does not simply mean that it is a place one might observe ritual prayer, for sujūd is not limited to human beings. It is also performed by the rest of creation: *[before the Divine] prostrate themselves the stars and the trees* (55:6). All the earth is a place for prostration, which means too that all the earth is place for turning in humility. By bowing in prostration anywhere and everywhere we join the stars and the trees, the heavens and the earth.

This earth is described as—it is *made*—a site-of-sujūd, which means also that we can learn how to approach the earth by investigating the maṣjid proper: the transfer of sense occurs in both directions across the figuration. A structure dedicated to regular, congregational worship, the mosque as traditionally built involves simply a space where believers form lines to pray. This simplicity comes across in a phenomenological account of entering the mosque: “to enter the mosque,” Martin Lings writes, “is to be immediately and profoundly impressed by its emptiness, both as antidote to the ‘plenitude of the world’ and as symbol of the inner void of purity.” As the one constant architectural feature among variant domes, minarets, pulpits, calligraphies, and mosaics, the niche is in a sense the defining element of the maṣjid, the limit of the mosque. The prayer-niche itself is open, empty, and yet echoes with a further call: it “demands [worshippers] that they turn towards the All-Merciful, and it shows them how

to turn. Orientation implies (...) a turning towards Heaven in order to be attracted by Heaven.” “The chief orison uttered in the Islamic ritual prayer is *guide us upon the straight path* (1:6) and the Arabic word for ‘straight’, *mustaqīm*, suggests not only directness but also vertical ascent. [Orientation thus] points not simply from place to place on the same level but from periphery to center.” It is this center to which the niche points: “it must be remembered that primarily the niche is not an end in itself; it serves to indicate the direction towards something which is at a certain distance; and though that object, the Ka’bah, is often named ‘the House of God’, this must not be understood as a localisation of the Divinity. *Wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of God. verily God is Vast, All-Knowing* (11:115). The mosque’s emptiness, then, is a receptacle for the Divine Omnipresence.”

The earth in its entirety is figured as a masjid: a site to prostrate, an occasion to turn in humility, space awaiting dhikr. The earth as masjid, however, also forces us to rethink the indexicals. The world-picture naturalized by the Western metaphysical tradition and its teletechnescientific culture encourages us to understand space and time as purely formal concepts, as framing the moment, the here-now; but also, and most egregiously in the empiricist tradition, as *empty*, neutral, homogeneous, and uniform—and, moreover, as proper objects for modern-scientific, calculative enquiry. Conceptualizing space as formally empty does not account for its ‘consecration’ or the theophany potent at every point. The emptiness of space is an emptiness-in-waiting, an emptiness-approaching, an emptiness-reaching. An emptiness awaiting and respondent to the Divine. This earth is a masjid. Spatial relations must be understood as undergirded by the originary relation described in the ḥadīth.

To understand the earth in this way demands more than mere ratiocination—as suggested above, rather than constituting a *proposition* one might deliberately assess, affirm, or deny, the ḥadīth refers to a *relationship* to space in general. This earth is a masjid, and this has ethical, environmental, and spiritual implications. It is personal; we must take seriously the complex relationship between the self and the space it engages. An American anthropologist visiting the synagogue he attended when young writes, fleetingly: “and I am one who be/comes there.” While the space under question is not that of a masjid, something of the relation to place remains. Something of that sense is carried over—through metaphor, the trope of tropes, a transfer of qualities between one Abrahamic temple and its Semitic affine. He “be/comes” there: he comes, he arrives; and through that he becomes. Alternately, he becomes—and through that

he arrives. The two gestures are distinct and inextricable. Both involve a passage-from (both spatially, “coming”, and discursively and ontologically, “becoming”), as if to say he is not, as he arrives, the self he was when he left, and that he more fully comes into his being: I am, here, what I was not, there. I am newly, here. I am on this earth newly, at every point; and at every point I am called to turn in humility, for this earth is a masjid. My self has arrived in this space that is a site of sujūd and, having arrived, has melted. I am, before the niche: and there I turn, re-turn, be/come. The niche is only a marker, and gestures beyond.

We are always-already in a state of return to God, and our movement upon the earth-that-is-masjid thus becomes a constant motion of (re-)turning toward the niche, the focal point of that masjid. This turning is a humbling, in humility—the turning as sujūd and of sujūd, on the earth-as-masjid—and too as a turning in expectation: because every spatial point upon this earth is the site of sujūd, and every niche is open, and every prostration is a melting of the self toward the Center, and every empty space is a site of Omnipresence. That *this* earth is a masjid levels a demand on us. An onus: we are accountable not only for the things that we do and the narratives we author but for the very earth we walk upon. By how they walk ye shall know them, the psalmist might well have sung. The Qurʾān is explicit: *the faithful servants of the Beneficent are they who tread gently upon the earth* (25:63). To walk lightly (*hawnan*) is to respect this essential nature of space as named in the ḥadīth, as the Prophet spoke in language learned from the God. Another ḥadīth tells us that everywhere one has bowed in prostration—each site of sujūd—rejoices in the remembrance of God and will testify for us on a Day beyond days when spacetime itself will be called to witness. The earth will speak.

Concomitant with the rise of the modern calculative rationality is the insistence that other ways of dwelling on this earth are ‘unscientific’. Situating such modern reflexivity against premodern enchantment, however, serves only to deligitimate alternate modes of thought and being. The levelling effects of secular modernity process even how we conceptualize space and time, and thinking them as uniform and empty erases their orienting focus, their constant gesturing beyond. To make of space simply a calculable object of science refuses to recognize the earth’s nature as masjid, and the immediate responsibilities generative of that fact. That this earth is a masjid requires us to walk in such a way that our walking testifies for us, that it witnesses us turning, humbled and in humility.