
Iconoclasm – A Geographical Viewpoint

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Iconoclasm mainly concerns the destruction of icons, based on the Commandment of the Bible ‘*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...*’ (Exodus 20:4). Iconoclasm can be presented in two different ways. One is that of an ‘inside aspect’, taking place within a given religious system. The other is an ‘outside aspect’, through which a religious system destroys the religious symbols of another religion. Dealing mainly with the ‘outside aspect’, one may find many religious sites which were destroyed or had their functions changed while these were occupied by another religious group. The holy city of Jerusalem, which lived under different religious regimes, can present this phenomenon, as each regime changed the landscape of the city according to its own perspective.

Introduction

Iconoclasm, which literally means ‘image breaking’, concerns mainly the breaking or destruction of icons for religious or political reasons, based on the Commandment of the Bible ‘*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image*’ (Exodus 20:4). This commandment, which was originally given to the Jews and is marked even today in the landscape of the modern Jewish state of Israel – where usually (there are some minor exceptions) no statue of persons or animals are presented in open public spaces – and later intermittently adopted by Christians, was also adopted by the doctrine of Islam, which, up to today, does not allow the presence of icons or pictures inside mosques.

Iconoclasm can be presented in two different ways. One is that of an ‘inside aspect’, taking place within a given religious system, usually as the result of sectarian disputes. The best-known case is Byzantine Iconoclasm, the struggle between opponents of religious icons in the Byzantine Empire from AD 726 to 842. The other is an ‘outside aspect’, through which a religious system destroys the religious symbols of

another religion. Whereas the ‘inside aspect’ can result in destroying pictures and statues within a given religious site, but without changing the landscape, the ‘outside aspect’ usually brings about changes in the landscape: sometimes minor changes, adding other religious symbols to existing sites; but sometimes major changes are presented by abolishing buildings and sites of holy places, changing the land use of cemeteries, even killing or expelling all people belonging to the defeated religions.

Dealing mainly with the ‘outside aspect’, one may find many religious sites that were destroyed or had their functions changed while these were occupied by another religious group. This was even commanded to the Israelis by Moses before entering the Promised Land: ‘You shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their groves and burn their graven images with fire’ (Deuteronomy 7:5). Thus, among numerous examples, Jewish synagogues and mosques in Spain were transformed into churches, churches in Damascus (St. John Basilica) and Constantinople (*Haghia Sofia*) became mosques or were used as secular sites, temples all over the Roman Empire were transferred into Christian basilicas, etc. Usually cemeteries, which still today in some countries are also religious sites, were destroyed while another religious regime held those corresponding areas.

There are basically three ways in which iconoclasm may bring changes to a landscape:

- Destroying – destroying the previous religious site.
- Changing – changing the previous religious sites into different religious sites.
- Transforming – changing religious into non-religious sites.

All these acts bring changes to the landscape. As an example, the influence of iconoclasm activity can be best seen in the area known today as ‘The Holy Land’.

The Holy Land

Where is the Holy Land?

This much-heralded ‘Holy’ area for Christians, Jews and Muslims, brought about, through history, a struggle as to which religious regime would ultimately rule over it. Anyhow, as will be presented here, the question regarding the boundaries of such an area is somewhat closer to an abstract idea than to a real one. Just to show this problematic notion: everybody knows that Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and the Sea of Galilee are located within the Holy Land, but what about the modern Israeli cities of Beersheba and Eilat? Do they belong to the ‘Holy Land’? What about the areas east of the Jordan River and the area east of the Sea of Galilee, which have an association with the stories of the Bible and the New Testament? Those who will try to find a quick encyclopaedia-like definition for ‘Holy Land’ will encounter some unclear definitions such as: ‘an Ancient country in southwestern Asia, on the east coast of the Mediterranean sea, a place of pilgrimage for Christians and Islam and Judaism’ (Princeton WorldNet 2022); or ‘a region on the eastern shore of the

Mediterranean Sea, reserved by Christians as the place in which Christ lived and taught' (*Oxford Dictionary* 2022); or 'the area between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean Sea' (Freebase/Wikidata 2022); or even 'the countries in the Middle East where the stories of the Bible are based and where Christians believe that Jesus Christ lived' (*Macmillan Dictionary* 2022). So where really *is* the Holy Land?

The Holy Land as a Mental Map

The map of the 'Holy Land' is a mental map. A mental or cognitive map is the space portrayed by individual consciousness or by social collective consciousness following the process of cognitive mapping. Mental maps usually consist of two main layers. One is the initial interaction, namely the experience of visiting or viewing a place or space. This layer mainly reflects how the individual perceives an immediate environment. The other is the secondary interaction, namely the experience generated from the introduction of maps as literature resources, and this interaction depends on the values, beliefs, and opinions of the social-cultural person.

Thus, a mental map is not objective because it is based on the awareness and experience of an individual or of a society. As such, 'the number of different boundaries for any region is equal to the square of the number of scholars consulted'. This 'theory' presented by Peter Haggett back in 1975 (Haggett 1975), seems to be even more valid when scholars are consulted about definitions of abstract areas, such as religious sacred areas. When Aristotle put the question 'where', within the ten properties needed for every entity, he set the status of the concept of 'place' as a central component in human consciousness. Two thousand years after Aristotle, Kant showed that the two ways by which a person sees the world are through both space and time, which are perceived through experience. This analysis helps distinguish between 'Place' and 'Space'. 'Space' is a geographic dimension, while 'Place' is the complex meaning provided by a person or a society to space at a time. Therefore, 'Place' depends on human consciousness. Consciousness provides meaning to 'Space' and changes it into a 'Place'.

This notion, in which the 'Place' is a product of the relationship between 'Space', 'Time' and 'Meaning', leads to differences in the way mental maps, produced by unique consciousness, are viewed by different people or different groups. Human intervention could create a situation where two different persons or two groups see the same 'Space' as two 'Places' because their cognitive loads are different. Another conclusion emerging from this definition is that, at different times, the same 'Space' may not necessarily be the same 'Place'.

Collective consciousness of a group is created out of a common view that is related to some cultural components: social reality, cultural traditions, and history. Thus, cultural, traditional and education backgrounds combined with geographical knowledge, create the perception of so-called 'sacred areas'. At any period, beliefs about the geographical nature of the world may be more important to the public than the real facts that are only known to a small group of knowledgeable persons.

Belief may have as much power as real fact, especially if this belief has strong traditional roots, as in the case of the Holy Land.

The Location of the Holy Land

Many sites in the Holy Land have long been pilgrimage destinations for Jews, Christians, Muslims and Baha'is. Pilgrims visit the Holy Land to touch and see the physical manifestations of their faith, confirm their beliefs in the holy context with collective excitation, and connect personally to the Holy Land. Research concerning historical geography involved attempts to identify places and names mentioned in the Bible, and to determine their actual location. Thus, Biblical texts as well as geographic knowledge about the Holy Land were combined in order to map the holy places in the Holy Land. Much literature was published dealing with the location and the role of those sacred places, both in the Holy Land and in other places. One of the most well-known historical geography research books, George Adam Smith's book *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, first published in 1894 (Smith 1973), had more than 50 editions, and is still being published today, even as an eBook, while his *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, first published in 1915 (Smith and Bartholomew 1915), is also still published today.

The uniqueness of the Holy Land is that it is not a 'Place', neither a mountain nor a site, but rather a whole Land – a large piece of area, all of which is considered a sacred area – *Terra Sancta*. Moreover, sacred sites usually belong to one religion or sometimes even to a particular sect within that religion. There are Catholic sites, Orthodox sites, Muslim sites, Jewish sites, and sites that are sacred to other religions. Rarely is it the case that two faiths are attached to one same site. The uniqueness of the Holy Land is that many of its sites belong to two, or even three, different religious groups. For instance, the Nativity Church in Bethlehem is taken care of by Catholic, Armenian and Greek Orthodox believers; while the Holy Sepulchre church in Jerusalem is taken care of by the same three sects and also by the Egyptian Copts, the Syrian Church and the Ethiopian Church. The Temple Mount is claimed by both Jews and Muslims; the Annunciation Church in Nazareth is fought over by Christian and Muslims alike. Above all, the entire Holy Land is held to be a sacred area by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Yet, its dimension, location and boundaries are not accepted by all.

The Holy Land Boundaries

The Holy Land, known to the non-religious world as Palestine, a name which was officially given to it in AD 134 by the Roman emperor Adrian, is an old historical-geographical concept. From Biblical times, when this part of the earth was first known as Canaan, without any particular sacred character, different names were bestowed upon it and its boundaries were changed according to its political status. Since the time of the Crusaders, in the twelfth-century AD, when it was called '*The Kingdom of Jerusalem*', Palestine has not been an independent state and every

attempt at political definition was merely an administrative convenience. The term ‘Palestine’ has been variously, and sometimes controversially, associated with this small region. Some have asserted it as encompassing today’s State of Israel, the Palestinian Authority areas (including the Gaza Strip and the West Bank) and sometimes also including the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Both the geographic area designated by name and political status have changed over the course of time. As Palestine, the Holy Land is held sacred among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Since the nineteenth century, it has been the object of conflicting claims on the part of Jewish and Arab national movements, and such conflicts have led to prolonged violence and, in several instances, to open warfare.

The word ‘Palestine’ derives from *Philistia*, the name given by Herodotus, the Greek historian to the ‘land of the Philistines’, who in the twelfth-century BC, occupied a small pocket of land on the south-eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, between modern Tel Aviv–Jaffa and Gaza. The name was revived by the Romans in the second century AD as ‘*Syria Palaestina*’, designating the southern portion of the province of Syria, and made its way thence into Arabic, as *Filistin*, where it has been used to describe the region at least since the early Islamic era in the seventh century. Later on, the name had no official status until after the First World War and the end of the Ottoman Empire rule, when it was adopted for one of the regions mandated to Great Britain. In addition to an area, roughly comprising present-day Israel, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the mandate included the territory east of the Jordan Valley now constituting the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, which Britain placed under a separate administration from that of Palestine itself immediately after receiving its mandate for the territory.

The name Palestine has long been in popular use as a general term to denote a traditional region, but this usage does not imply precise boundaries. The perception of what constitutes Palestine’s eastern boundary has been especially fluid, although the boundary has frequently been perceived as lying east of the Jordan River, extending at times to the edge of the Arabian Desert. In contemporary understanding, however, Palestine, but not the Holy Land, is generally defined as a region bounded on the east by the Jordan River, on the north by the border between modern Israel and Lebanon, on the west by the Mediterranean Sea (including the coast of Gaza), and on the south by the Negev desert, with its southernmost extension reaching the Gulf of Aqaba.

The Jewish Holy Land

For Jews, the Holy Land is known as ‘The Land of Israel’ (*Eretz Yisrael*). It is explicitly referred to as ‘Holy Land’ in only one passage in the Old Testament (in Hebrew – *Tanakh*). The holiness of the land is generally implied in the *Tanakh* as the land being given to the Israelites by God, that is, it is the ‘Promised Land’, an integral part of God’s covenant with the Israeli nation. In the Torah (the first five books of the Bible, considered to be written by Moses from the mouth of God), it is stated that many Religious Rules imposed upon the Israelites can only be performed in the Land of

Israel, which serves to differentiate it from other lands. For example, in the Land of Israel, 'no land shall be sold permanently' and the rule forbidding agricultural work every seventh year, 'letting the land to be resting' only applies to the Land of Israel. The observance of many holy days in the Land of Israel is usually confined to one day, whereas in the Jewish Diaspora an extra day is also observed.

The Jewish view of the Land of Israel boundaries has at least three traditional definitions, and even with those definitions there is much debate regarding precise boundaries. The first definition is that of *'The Promised Land'*, the area which was promised to Abraham in the book of Genesis: 'From the River of Egypt to the Great River, the River Euphrates'. Scholars argue about the definition of the 'River of Egypt', which could either be the Nile River, or the Al-Arish dry river in central Sinai Peninsula or even the Beersheba Dry River in today's southern Israel. No eastern or western limits are portrayed in this definition. Nearly all scholars, however, accept the notion that this definition is not an actual boundary but that it really is only meant for messianic times.

The second definition is *'The area of those who came from Egypt'* which stands for the area settled by the 12 Israeli tribes in biblical times. Jewish believers view this definition as that of the 'Land of Israel' mentioned in the books of Samuel and Kings. This definition excluded from its boundaries the present-day Israeli city of Acre and the whole area north of it, as that area was under Phoenician rule at the time. As Jews tried to be buried in the Holy Land, considered as a sacred area, Jews who lived in Acre, now part of modern Israel, were buried for centuries in an Arab village about 10 km east and considered to be included in the so-called 'Holy Land'.

The third and most important Jewish definition, which is used today by religious Jews, is: *'The area of those returning from exile in Babylonia'*. Even though this event took place in 538 BC, the declared boundaries it defined were only accepted in the third century AD. The Jewish Religious Rules for *Eretz Yisrael* implied in this definition concern Galilee, Samaria, Judea, northern Negev Desert and some areas east of the Jordan River, but exclude the area along the shore south of the modern Israeli city of Ashkelon, all of the southern Negev and the Arava Valley, which are today part of the state of Israel, as well as all of the Gaza Strip. The political changes that took place after this definition was established never changed this religious boundary and are still valid today for all the religious 'Rules' related to the Land of Israel. According to this, for example, the Jewish villages located outside of those lines, even though they may be located within the State of Israel, are allowed to cultivate their land in the seventh year and orthodox Jews can eat their agricultural yield. Thus, religious lines which were drawn about 1800 years ago, still play a part in modern Israel and the Jewish world.

However, these definitions have nothing to do with any actual political definition. Thus, the Israeli city of Eilat, known for its holiday resort facilities, is not considered to be inside 'the Land of Israel' or even within the Jewish Holy Land, as such. However, some Jews still claim their attachment to the old notion of the 'Promised Land' and claim that the whole area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean should actually be included in the Jewish State.

The Holy Land, or Terra Sancta for Christians

For Christians, Palestine, the Holy Land, *Terra Sancta*, is considered holy because of its association with the birth, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ who came from the city of Nazareth. Since the Holy Land was promised to the Jews, and since Jews did not welcome Jesus Christ, the Christian doctrine accepted that the Holy Land, which was originally promised to the Jews, was transferred to the New People of God, the Christians. The term *Terra Sancta*, in either Greek or Latin, is not mentioned in the New Testament or in the Gospels, nor in the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles or The Book of Revelation. Only afterwards, in later Christian writing from the third and fourth centuries AD was the expression *Terra Sancta* used, and Christians were advised to visit the area in order to feel the spirit of Jesus Christ in the places where He had been.

From the early days of Christendom, Christian books and editions of the Bible often had maps of the Holy Land (considered to be the areas of Galilee, Samaria, and Judea). Some scholars claimed that the structuring of the notion of the ‘Holy Land’ is the result of collective Christian views formed during the Middle Ages, an attitude based on the descriptions of travellers and visitors to the country at the time. Their imaginary map varied from period to period and from group to group.

Some scholars claim that the description ‘Holy Land’ encompasses modern-day Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan and sometimes Syria. Thus, some Christian scholars tried to map the boundaries of the political entity of Judea under the Romans, in the first half of the first century AD, in order to present it as the Holy Land. Others tried to follow the place where the activities of Christ and his 12 Apostles allegedly took place. This view brings about some confusions as to the area included in the Holy Land since the activities of the Apostles extended far away from the area of the activities of Christ himself. This means that the Holy Land included part of today’s Jordan, Syria, Turkey and even Malta. Thus, the religious Christian world cannot provide a precise definition of the Holy Land.

The Holy Land from the Islamic perspective

Although Palestine holds a position of high importance in Islam, as can be seen from the amount of writing about its history and geography throughout the years, Islamic scholars seldom dealt with a definition of the boundaries of their Holy Land (*Al-Ard Al-Muqaddasah*), as they mainly dealt with Holy Cities – Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem – or even only with holy sites, such as mosques in those cities. It is reported (but not written in the Qur’an) that their Prophet Muhammad said:

There are only three mosques to which you should embark on a journey: the sacred mosque [Mecca, today in Saudi Arabia], this mosque of mine [Medina, Saudi Arabia], and the mosque of Al-Aqsa [Jerusalem, Palestine/Israel].

The Islamic tradition concerning the holiness of Palestine mainly refers to the holiness of the city of Jerusalem which was the first *Qiblah* – the place toward which

Muslims turn in prayer. Later, Muhammad changed the *Qiblah* from Jerusalem to Mecca.

According to Muslim tradition, it is Jerusalem that Muhammad visited during his night journey and ascension. It is said that, one evening, the angel Gabriel miraculously took the Prophet from the Sacred Mosque in Mecca to the *Furthest Mosque* (Al-Aqsa). He was then taken up to the heavens to be shown the signs of God. The Prophet met with previous prophets and led them in prayer. He was then taken back to Mecca. The whole experience (which Muslim commentators take literally and Muslims believe in as a miracle) lasted the few hours of a single night. The event of a journey is mentioned in the Qur'an, in the first verse of Chapter 17 titled 'The Children of Israel.'

Glory to Allah, who did take His servant for a journey by night, from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts we did bless – in order that we might show him some of our signs. For He is the One who hears and knows all things. (Qur'an 2017)

Later Muslim scholars have said that this 'Farthest Mosque' stood on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which made it a sacred place for Muslim believers. The night journey further reinforced the link between Mecca and Jerusalem as Holy Cities and served as an example for every Muslim's deep devotion and spiritual connection with Jerusalem.

In the Qur'an, the expression *Al-Ard Al-Muqaddasah* – 'Holy Land' is mentioned at least seven times, once when Moses proclaims to the Children of Israel:

O my people! Enter the holy land which Allah hath assigned unto you, and turn not back ignominiously, for then will ye be overthrown, to your own ruin. (Qur'an 2021)

The exact region referred to as 'Holy' or 'Blessed Land' in the Qur'an is described by scholars as including Damascus, Palestine and a bit of Jordan, or the area between al-Arish and the Euphrates River. However, some referred to it only to include 'the land of Jericho', or the area between Beersheba and the Plain of Esdraelon, between Haifa and Beit She'an in northern modern Israel.

Recently, Arab, and Islamic scholars, members of the clergy and political leaders, use the designation *Palestine* to imply a Palestinian religious claim to sovereignty over the whole former territory west of the Jordan River, including all of Israel. As a political act, Muslims declared the whole area of British Palestine, established in the 1920s 'a Holy Land', placed under the authority of the *Waqf* (Muslim charity trust institute), which belongs to the whole Muslim world, not only to its inhabitants. A land under such status could not be sold to anyone, especially non-Muslims. As such it could not be used by anyone other than Muslims.

Thus, a political entity became a sacred area – 'Palestine is an Islamic *Waqf*; the liberation of Palestine is an individual duty binding on all Muslims everywhere' – defined by known boundaries. Not every Muslim has adopted this view, and the area and boundaries of such Muslim Holy Land are still under debate.

Conclusions – Where is the Holy Land?

The larger the number of descriptions studied, the more confused a reader becomes. But even though descriptions may differ, the area of agreement is still considerable. The ‘core area’ of the Holy Land, accepted by all, lies between the Jordan River includes the Sea of Galilee to the east and the Mediterranean Sea to the west. The southern limit is the pre-modern inhabited area which runs along a line between the Dead Sea and the city of Gaza, while the northern line runs somewhere in the Galilee area between Acre and the Jordan River. This definition can be accepted by the religions that used the expression ‘Holy Land’ for that part of the world. Others, mainly motivated by modern political aspirations, place the lines along the boundaries of British Palestine. Others even include areas located east of the Jordan River, as appears in the Jewish description of ‘The boundaries of those returned from Babylonia’ and the Christian cities of Pella and Madaba.

Thus, it seems that even a supposedly known world area can raise definition problems both for scholars and for the general public at large. When dealing with such an abstract area as the Holy Land, it is necessary to be aware of both problems of definition and of the personal perception of the writer who prepared the source material being studied. Note should also be taken of British historical geographer Alan Baker’s warning that:

in order to understand fully the limitations imposed by a particular source material, it is imperative that the scholar is aware of the manner in which, and the purpose for which, his material was originally committed. (Baker 2003: 19)

Thus, although millions of pilgrims come each year to visit the Holy Land and many people live in it and perform rituals devoted to its holy nature, no valid clear areal definition of it exists.

Palestine was transformed from pagan Canaan (about 1200 BC) to a Jewish area (1200 BC to 586 BC), then to a Babylonian-ruled regime (568 BC to 526 BC), to a Persian regime (526 BC to 332 BC), to a Hellenistic regime (332 BC to 146 BC), to a Jewish regime (146 BC to 4 BC), to a Roman regime (4 BC to AD 332). It was then ruled by Christian Byzantium (332–638), Muslim Arabs (638–1099), Christian Crusaders (1099–1187 and partly up to 1291), again by Muslims (Saladin, Mamluks, Ottomans) (1187–1917), Christian British (1917–1948), before becoming a Jewish State (1948 onward), with some areas under Jordan and Egypt (1948–1967) and now claimed by Palestinians. This eventful history brought with it numerous changes, as every regime arranged the landscape according to its needs and beliefs.

Instances of the three ways in which an area can be transformed, as part of iconoclasm, can be ascertained in Jerusalem.

Destroying:

- Israelis destroyed pagan temples while conquering Canaan.
- Babylonians (586 BC) and Romans (AD 70) destroyed the Jewish temples in Jerusalem.

- Persians destroyed the Christian churches in Jerusalem and in Palestine in AD 614.
- Muslim Arabs destroyed all Jewish Synagogues in the old city of Jerusalem in 1948.

Changing:

- Christian Crusaders changed the Muslim Dome of the Rock into a *Templum Domini* and Al-Aqsa Mosque into a *Templum Solomonis*.
- Saladin, the Muslim conqueror, changed Santa Anna Church (the alleged Virgin Mary's birthplace) into a *madrassa* (religious school). It is now a Christian church.
- Israel changed many Muslim's noble tombs into tombs of Jewish historical personalities.

Transforming:

- Christians changed the Temple Mount into a garbage dump during the Byzantine Empire.
- Crusaders' churches became stables after Saladin reconquered Jerusalem in 1187.
- The Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives became a road after 1948.
- A Muslim Mosque in Beersheba (out of Jerusalem) became a museum after 1948.

Iconoclasm is not just about destroying images, pictures or statues, it is also about changing a given landscape. It comes to be when one religious nation takes over an area belonging to another religious nation and tries to make that landscape look like its own landscape, while levelling all unwanted traces of the landscape's previous appearance.

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