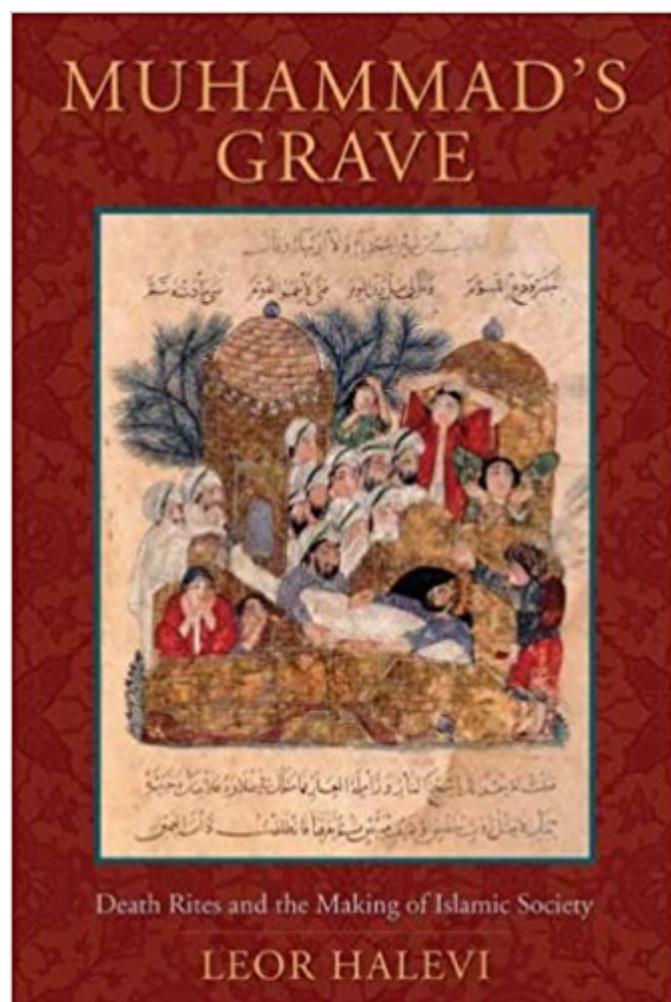


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Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites And The Making Of Islamic Society



Synopsis

In his probing study of the role of death rites in the making of Islamic society, Leor Halevi imaginatively plays prescriptive texts against material culture and advances new ways of interpreting highly contested sources. His original research reveals that religious scholars of the early Islamic period produced codes of funerary law not only to define the handling of a Muslim corpse but also to transform everyday urban practices. Relying on oral traditions, these scholars established new social patterns in the cities of Arabia, Mesopotamia, and the eastern Mediterranean. They distinguished Islamic rites from Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian rites and changed the way men and women interacted publicly and privately. In each chapter Halevi explores a different layer of human interaction, following the movement of the corpse from the deathbed to the grave. In the process he analyzes the real and imaginary relationships between husbands and wives, prayer leaders and mourners, and even dreamers and the dead. He describes how Muslims wailed for the deceased, prepared corpses for burial, marched in funerary processions, and prayed for the dead, highlighting the specific economic and political factors involved in these rituals as well as key religious and sexual divisions. Offering a unique perspective on the making of Islamic social and religious ideals during this early period, Halevi forges a fascinating link between the development of funerary rites and the efforts of an emerging religion to carve out its own, distinct identity. Muhammad's Grave is a groundbreaking history of the rise of Islam and the roots of contemporary Muslim attitudes toward the body and society.

Book Information

Hardcover: 416 pages

Publisher: Columbia University Press (May 8, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0231137427

ISBN-13: 978-0231137423

Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 1.2 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.5 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (1 customer review)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,841,282 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #219 inÂ Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > Muhammed #347 inÂ Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > Theology #377 inÂ Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > Rituals & Practice

Customer Reviews

Western policymakers and academics often concern themselves with death in Islam only in the context of suicide terrorism. But the Islamic treatment of death is far more complicated. Halevi, professor of history at Vanderbilt University, has written a masterful, well-written work filled with original research that shows how Islamic notions of death coalesced in the first centuries of the new religion. Well-organized by theme, the separate chapters in Muhammad's Grave (on such topics as cover tomb stones, the washing of corpses, shrouds, wailing, processions, and tomb construction) will primarily interest medievalists and theologians. At the same time, Halevi's work makes for interesting reading to all Middle Eastern experts. Halevi is an expert linguist and, with training at Princeton, Yale, and Harvard, equally at ease with Muhammad bin Isma'il al-Bukhari's compilations of the sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, with the Babylonian Talmud, or with the essays of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French and German scholars. Because Halevi has mastered such a breadth of sources, he is able--as is Qur'anic scholar Khaleel Mohammed at the University of California--to provide the context to Islam's early years. [1] Islam did not arise in a vacuum. Classical Muslim scholarship--lost to a generation of modern scholars who have mastered neither language nor historiography--acknowledges how both Judaism and Christianity influenced Islam's development and the evolution of its rites more than some contemporary studies suggest. Hence, when discussing the washing of corpses, Halevi is able to provide the Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian contexts with a bit of humor. Why, he asks, did "Basrans and Kufans stray from the Medinese [prevalent in Medina] model?

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