Magic, Medicine, and Materiality:

Tawfiq Canaan and Assemblages of the Sacred in Palestine

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Abstract

Sacred landscapes are natural/cultural conglomerations designated for religious practice, often believed to have special power or to be inhabited by spirits that serve as intermediaries between humans and the Divine. This essay explores the significance of sacred sanctuaries and landmarks in popular beliefs, folklore, and cultural heritage in Palestine, with specific focus on the roles that such places traditionally played in healing practices. Authors Marshall and Qobbaj draw upon the work of Palestinian ethnographer Tawfiq Canaan, as well as the writings of his European contemporaries and earlier travel writers. They combine these historical ethnographic sources with oral history interviews with older residents of Palestinian villages and rural areas to examine the persistence and transformation of these traditional healing practices. The work draws inspiration from Canaan, who regarded Palestinian *fellahin* not as static figures within a fading cultural landscape, but as keepers of valuable knowledge and know-how contending with drastically changing socio-economic and political contexts. Examining a diverse array of sacred sites including stones, springs, and shrines, as well as a variety of different objects and utterances, this contribution presents a conceptualization of sacred places and objects as socio-spatial assemblages that blend diverse human and non-human elements and that entangle the metaphysical realm within the realm of physical landscapes and material cultural practices. Here, the authors highlight Canaan's work in theorizing the lived, material religion of early twentieth-century Palestinian peasants, not as mere inhabitants of a holy land, but as active (re) producers of sacralized landscapes.

Keywords:

Tawfiq Canaan; Palestinian peasants; sacred spaces; magic; cultural heritage; folklore; folk healing; sacred trees; holy shrines.

Introduction

> I went with my sister-in-law to the shrine of Shaykh Abdullah al-Falani because her son fell ill, and we took olive oil and salt with us, and we asked [the shaykh] to heal her son. We sprinkled salt to remove evil, and we dug in the dirt to place oil lamps, and we called on the shaykh to respond, and he responded to our request.
>
> Umm Riyad Idais (74 years old, Shu'fat)

People throughout history and across different cultural contexts have sought divine communion, healing, and protection in powerful places they deemed sacred. The notion that sacred places and practices enable physical transformation through metaphysical transcendence is central to the significance of sacred sites as spaces of healing.[1] In Eliade's classic conceptualization, sacred space is bounded and substantive, meaning that the sacred is distinct from profane space due to its very ontological essence, altered by hierophantic events or divine manifestation in place.[2] In contrast, Durkheim's (1912) sociological understanding of sacred space emphasizes how places are sacralized through human practices or rituals and made meaningful through cultural institutions and social structures.[3] What both these perspectives share is a dichotomization of the sacred and profane, summed up in Hassner's description of sacred space as "set apart" and "imbued with meaning."[4] In contrast, eco-philosopher Adrian Ivakhiv (2003) conceives of nature not as inherently sacred, nor as inert material made sacred by human hands, but as itself an active agent in a process of sacralization.[5]

This line of thought shares a critical impulse found within the "new materialist" turn in religious studies, which has likewise challenged human/non-human binaries and subject/object dualities.[6] Similarly, post-structuralist approaches have contested the enduring sacred/profane division, and its emergence out of the European Christian tradition.[7] Recent scholarly works in geography have emphasized the fluidity, contingency, and mutuality of these categories.[8] Seeking to bridge these conversations, this essay argues that sacred places and spatial practices in Palestine, especially those involving embodied folk healing practices, can help us to conceptualize sacred spaces as socio-spatial assemblages. Such sacred assemblages are made up of diverse human and non-human elements which vary in affective intensity at certain times and places and which blur the boundaries, not only between sacred and profane spaces but also between human and non-human worlds and physical and metaphysical realms.

The essay provides a detailed examination of folk healing practices in Palestine, emphasizing the significance of natural spaces and physical landmarks, including sacred stones, springs, and shrines. To do so, this study draws heavily upon the work of Palestinian ethnographer Tawfiq Canaan, as well as the writings of his European contemporaries and earlier travel writers. Highlighting the persistence of such healing practices, this study combines these historical ethnographic sources with oral history interviews with older Palestinian residents of villages and rural areas in the West

Bank of the illegally occupied Palestinian territories. In doing so, we draw inspiration from Canaan's valorization of Palestinian fellahin not as static figures within a fading cultural landscape, but active keepers and generators of knowledge and know-how surviving changing socio-economic and political conditions within the context of settler colonialism. Before turning to these sacred landscapes in Palestine, however, we first offer a conceptual framework for understanding sacred spaces and healing practices in Palestine as sacred assemblages, followed by an examination of Tawfiq Canaan's early contributions to understanding the material culture of Palestinian folk religious traditions.

Assemblages of the Sacred

Both the "new materialism" turn in religious studies, and the non-representational turn in geography, have sought to critique strictly semiotic readings of sacred places and practices, emphasizing their spatial, material, affective, and symbolic qualities.[9] Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "assemblage" has informed recent scholarship in this vein.[10] Assemblages are relatively durable sets of interactions between heterogeneous human and non-human agential elements – including people, places, things, images, and ideas – which form and transform in relation to the other. Drawing upon notions of assemblage, non-anthropocentric phenomenological approaches to the study of material religion have emphasized the need to recognize the agency of material objects and their role in co-constructing religious experiences.[11] For instance, Nakamura and Pels mobilize the concept of assemblage to analyze how ritual magic involves a "distribution of agency" among people, places, and things across time and across boundaries of the material and spiritual, the seen and unseen, and the living and dead, articulating a distinct kind of social power and agency.[12] Similarly, examining contemporary Afro-Cuban religious practices, Espírito Santo eschews notions of a singular self, and instead emphasizes the concept of spiritual practice as a form of social self-assembly, combining self, matter, and spirit.[13]

In geography, non-representational theory has likewise drawn upon notions of assemblage to examine the affective immanence as well as the material/embodied situatedness of sacred spaces. Specifically, Dewsbury and Cloke argue that spiritual landscapes emerge out of a mesh of material places and objects (existence), embodied practice (performance), and emergent affect (immanence).[14] Such complex constellations are characterized by interconnected and dynamic distributions of energy and agency among human and non-human constituencies as well as varying affective intensities.[15] This approach highlights how power and agency are distributed to and through the various components of sacred milieux, including, supplicants, spirits, saints, relics, objects, animals, elements, and Divine presence. Rather than discretely bounded objects, places, or practices, this notion of sacred assemblages instead directs our attention to spatial/temporal affective intensities of the sacred, and how the sacred may at times feel otherworldly or folded into the ordinary.

It is often a connection to "something greater" that gives sacred spaces their healing quality,[16] be it a shrine,[17] a pilgrimage site,[18] or other space of worship.[19] Practices of shrine visitation have long been a means to achieving physical and mental well-being within various popular expressions of Islam throughout Bilad al-Sham.[20] These shrines are typically associated with the grave of a Christian saint or Muslim *wali* (holy person). In this region and elsewhere throughout the world, natural spaces and even trees may serve as sacred sites for ritualistic healing, due to their association with revered figures.[21] Along with shrines and trees, Christians and Muslims in Palestine have historically used a diverse array of sites and objects in everyday healing rituals. We turn now to the pioneering work of Tawfiq Canaan in documenting these spatial/material practices.

Magic, Medicine, and Materiality: The Contributions of Tawfiq Canaan

Tawfiq Beshara Canaan was born in Bayt Jala in 1882 and grew up in a religious family, as his father held several religious positions. Tawfiq Canaan studied medicine at the Syrian Evangelical College (today's American University of Beirut), graduating in 1905. He first worked at the German Hospital in Jerusalem before eventually becoming general manager. He then worked in various hospitals and medical centers, especially in Jerusalem.[22] Canaan was elected president of the Arab Medical Association in Palestine, which was founded in Haifa in 1944. Prior to the Nakba of 1948, he was one of the most distinguished doctors in Jerusalem. In addition, Canaan also played an active role in resisting the Zionist movement and British colonialism, and authored a number of political articles on the Palestinian issue.[23] His political activities would eventually land him and his wife and sister in prison.[24] Following the Nakba, Canaan contributed to the founding of Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem in 1950 (al-Mutala' Hospital) and was appointed its medical director until 1955.[25] He lived and worked in Jerusalem until his death in 1964.

Representing an intellectual movement that made its way to the wider world, Canaan has been described as one of the greatest Palestinian thinkers of his time and the forerunner for ethnography research in Palestine. Canaan became a member of the American School of Oriental Research and Study in Palestine, founded in Jerusalem in 1900 (later the American Schools of Oriental Research). In 1909, he published his first article in *Globus*, the German Geographical journal, on agriculture in Palestine.[26] In 1913, the journal of the German Palestine Society published an article by Canaan titled "The Calendar of Palestinian Fellahin," followed soon after by his first book, *Superstition and Popular Medicine*, in 1914.[27] Between 1924 and 1927, he authored the book *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries*.[28] By 1939, Canaan had published more than fifty articles in English and German on Palestinian folklore and popular beliefs. He also wrote thirty-seven medical studies in his field of expertise, including tropical diseases and bacteriology, particularly malaria, leprosy, and tuberculosis

in Palestine.[29] Combining his role as a physician and an ethnographic researcher, Canaan challenged prevailing European medical and psychiatric prognoses, offering a perspective contextualized within Palestinian cultural traditions, and aiming at holistic integration of modern and traditional practices.[30] Indeed, with colonial and missionary medicine being yet another force of Palestinian cultural erasure, Canaan's medical ethnography represents a form of cultural resistance and resilience.[31]

Canaan's work in the field of medicine, his political writings, and his pioneering ethnographic research, when taken together, reveal a profound concern with assessing his country's conditions under the British Mandate and Zionist colonization, while also articulating a distinct Palestinian cultural presence that could resist such oppressive forces. The general framework of Canaan's thought is an interest in Palestinian popular spiritual beliefs linked to the daily practices of peasants and lower-income urbanites, and how such popular beliefs are connected to a deep cultural heritage from various historical periods in Palestine's past, including eras predating the arrival of Abrahamic monotheism. Canaan was influenced by his father, Beshara, who was attached to the enchanting nature of the Bayt Jala region and interested in customs, traditions, and popular beliefs. Later, when working as a physician, Canaan's own interest in folklore and popular beliefs was awakened when treating patients who wore charms and amulets and engaged in other traditional healing practices.[32] Such charms derived their supposed healing power from contact with shrines or other sacred sites in a form of magic known as "contact magic." Canaan also observed how people would "transfer" their illness to cloths which would then be placed on shrines which could absorb these maladies, in a process referred to as "sympathetic magic."[33] In either case, the folk healing practices Canaan observed were deeply intwined within the sacred landscapes of Palestine and everyday material culture.

In contrast with European Orientalist depictions of the Holy Land as stuck in the past, Canaan's work draws an image of a vibrant and dynamic Palestinian society, living and breathing with people, objects, sites, stories, spirits, and natural features, which think, speak, and act. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Canaan felt that this vibrant civilization in Palestine was coming under attack by rapid social, political, and economic transformations, so he began collecting the endangered oral heritage. Moreover, by attending to how the stories and religious practices of Palestinians were intimately entwined within the physical landscape and rooted in the natural environment, Canaan's heightened sensitivity to place-based knowledge production signifies a research methodology grounded in *sumud*, or steadfastness in the land. [34]

Methodology

For this research we draw upon both historical ethnographic writing and travelogues as well as traditional folk knowledge as recounted in oral history interviews conducted with elder residents of rural villages in central Palestine. As with Canaan's use of ethnography, oral history has long been a method for centering the stories, voices, memories, and practices of ordinary Palestinians to counteract cultural erasure and

settler-colonial knowledge production.[35] For this research, the authors conducted oral history interviews in Arabic in 2020 and 2021 with Palestinian elders about sacred sites and practices. After identifying sacred sites of interest in villages and cities throughout the West Bank, elder residents familiar with the folklore and traditional stories of these sites were identified and interviewed in Arabic. They were firstly informed of the nature of the research project and asked questions about healing methods and traditions from the past, and whether they were still used. These recollections were then correlated with historical accounts of sacred sites and healing rituals as recorded by Canaan and others.

Taken together, these sources demonstrate the deeply rooted and enduring nature of many folk healing rituals, but also their gradual disconnection with and disappearance from the physical landscape. Such disconnection is not the result of some inevitable process of secularization, but the result of a century-long process of settler-colonial dispossession and intentional cultural erasure that has sought to disentwine people, culture, and religion from land in Palestine. This dispossession has been justified, in part, by European ethnographic writing, which, in its cataloguing of superstitious beliefs, often portrayed Palestinian Arabs as backward and irrational and thus incapable of political autonomy. The following section examines traditional sacred sites and practices of healing in Palestine, their depictions in historical ethnographic writing, and their presence in the living memory and practices of Palestinians today.

Healing with Sacred Rocks and Stones

The Palestinian cultural landscape is replete with the presence of sacred spaces, where human-constructed shrines, tombs, and monuments, combined with surrounding trees, springs, stones, and soil, to form assemblages of the human/non-human and seen/unseen realms. By serving as a bridge between the physical and meta-physical, such sacred sites and objects take on distinctive characteristics and display important forms of power and influence, including healing powers.[36] As such, these places have traditionally served as sites for worshipping and experiencing closeness to God; pleading for forgiveness of sins; appealing to the Holy Spirit to remove harm; making vows and pledging to fulfill them; giving thanks; and seeking blessings and protection for children or healing from diseases.[37]

Writing in the late nineteenth century in his revealingly titled book *The Immovable East: Studies of the People and Customs of Palestine*, naturalist Phillipe Baldensperger, the son of French missionaries to Palestine, wrote disapprovingly of how Muslims and Christians alike in Palestine believe that stones, rocks, and springs once used by prophets retain a holy spirit or blessing that can heal the sick.[38] Similarly, German missionary and folklorist Leonhard Bauer observed that the sanctity of the rock within the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem was believed to cure sterility and promote fertility, leading to a custom of Muslim newlyweds washing their clothes upon the rock.[39] American missionary, folklorist, and archaeologist Chester McCown, and author of another tellingly titled book, *The Ladder of Progress in Palestine,*[40] also observed people rubbing their bodies against sacred rocks with the aim of healing various ailments.[41]

Writing more sympathetically, Tawfiq Canaan also observed the use of sacred stones in folk healing practices among Muslim and Christian Palestinians.[42] For example, at the Milk Grotto in Bethlehem, where Mary is said to have first nursed the infant Jesus, Canaan observed pregnant and breastfeeding women taking stones to use as amulets or tablets to dissolve in water for the treatment of infertility or difficult lactation. This is a practice still observed today by Palestinians and pilgrims alike. Similarly, stones from the shrine of Shaykh Abu Yamin in the town of Bayt Anan were believed to cure fever if soaked in drinking water. In the Maqam Nabi Yaqin in the town of Bani Naim, where a rock bears the footprints of the Prophet Ibrahim (or the Prophet Lot), people used to tie pieces of an ill person's clothing to the shrine for a period of time and then take the cloth to apply to the patient's body. Although Christian missionaries wrote disapprovingly of such practices, this ritual seems to have biblical precedence, as recorded in Acts 19, 11–12: "God gave Paul the power to perform unusual miracles. When handkerchiefs or aprons that had merely touched his skin were placed on sick people, they were healed of their diseases, and evil spirits were expelled."

Figure 1. Cloth tied to a tree at the Cave of Shaykh Hammouda in Talfit. Photo by 'Amer Al-Qobbaj, 18 September 2021.

As Canaan also observed, tying rags or other pieces of small cloth to sacred sanctuaries is an ancient Semitic practice symbolizing the connection between the

hopes and pleas of the supplicant and the spirit residing in the shrine. According to this belief, when a person ties cloth to a sacred site, it absorbs some of the spirit's power, which is then transferred to the individual who tied it. These shrine cloths, worn around the neck or wrist, serve as healing and protective charms shielding the wearer from diseases caused by the jinn, as also observed by American missionary Rev. Dr. Samuel Ives Curtiss in his 1902 *Primitive Semitic Religion Today*.[43] In contrast, tying rags from a sick person's clothes to the windows of a shrine or the headstone of the saint's tomb would transmit illness from the person to the saint, as also observed by British military officer and geographer Col. Charles Wilson (who led the Ordnance Survey of Palestine and the PEF Survey) in 1881,[44] as well as A.E. Breen (a Catholic priest) in 1906.[45] An 80-year-old man from the village of al-Lubban al-Gharbi, Abd al-Jalil Radwan, confirmed that he used to see rags adorning shrines in his town for the sick, adding that this phenomenon began to gradually decrease until it disappeared in the village in more recent times, although it is occasionally seen in other shrines at other villages today.[46] Although the specifics of such practices vary from place to place, we see a consistent connection between the sanctity of holy people, the power of particular places like rocks, and the absorptive ability of materials like cloth to transfer healing properties and blessings between the co-constitutive parts in such sacred assemblages.

Healing with Sacred Water Sources

Like healing stones, the phenomenon of healing by sacred water sources is found in various religions and cultures, including in Palestine. In the north of Palestine, near the border with Syria, there is the Canaanite Tall al-Qadi (Leshem or Laish). The hill acquired its holiness from its association with the biography of the Prophet Abraham, who is believed to have stopped at this site. Some call the Dan River, which runs through this area, the River of God. Due to the sanctity of the site, a belief prevailed that the waters of the Dan River could cure infertility. For this reason, childless women used to bathe in it to become pregnant, as observed in 1883 by the U.S. Consul in Palestine Frank DeHass,[47] as well as by American biblical scholar Lewis B. Patton in his "Survivals of Primitive Religion in Modern Palestine."[48]

Water sites associated with Christ are, of course, also considered sacred, including the Jordan River, where John the Baptist famously baptized Christ (Matthew 3, 13–16). The Bible refers to the story of the Syrian Naaman's recovery from leprosy after he washed seven times in the Jordan (Luke 4: 27). There is also the story of the blind man whom Christ sent to ʻAyn Silwan (Pool of Siloam), where the man regained his sight by washing his eyes with its water (John 9: 7). Christians and Muslims alike still visit this spring to treat fever, infertility, eye diseases, and mental illnesses. Two small mosques were built near the spring, indicating Muslim reverence for the site.[49] Blind and paralyzed people also used to visit the Pool of Bethesda (House of Mercy, in Aramaic), marked by five porticoes near Bab al-Asbat (Lion's Gate) in Jerusalem, until the beginning of the twentieth century. Christ healed a paralyzed person there (John: 2-9), and popular belief held that its water was inhabited by a benevolent spirit

who would awaken and heal the sick when an angel stirred the water.[50] Near this site is the Church of Saint Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, and inside it is a well where the sick would bathe with its water for healing, according to the fourteenth-century travelogue *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (published in modern form in 1915).[51]

Although European ethnographers were particularly interested in the sites associated with Abraham and Jesus, and especially the sites in Jerusalem, Canaan sought out such sites far and wide across Palestine, and sites associated with local saints and other prophets. The people of the southern coast of Palestine believed that the Prophet Ayyub (Job in the Bible) had bathed in seawater near al-Majdal ʻAsqalan (Ashkelon), especially at the site of the shrine of a female wali known as Sittna al-Khadra (Our Lady "the Green"), with the aim of obtaining a cure for his illness. For that reason, the site was called *'abriyyit 'Ayub* (Ayyub's healing place), and people used to visit it to be healed every year on the Wednesday before Orthodox Easter. People would also bring their sick sheep and livestock to be washed with seawater at that site.[52] Similarly, childless women would cleanse their bodies with water from al-Mutabaʻa Pool located between al-Shaykh Ibrik and Tall al-Shimmam south of Haifa to cure infertility and promote pregnancy. People would also apply mud from this site to their joints to cure rheumatism.[53]

In the living memory of Palestinians today, we find other similar stories. For example, in the area between Shuqba and Shabtin to the west of Ramallah, there is a *maghara al-shifa* (Cave of Healing), in which men and women from Rantis, Shuqba, Shabtin, and other areas used to bathe with its water and practice sexual intercourse at the site to treat infertility, because they believed that the cave was inhabited by the spirits of righteous saints.[54] In a cave bearing the same name south of the village of Kafr ʻAbbush in the Tulkarm region, people practiced similar customs for the same reason.[55] In all such examples, we see an intermingling of water, the spirits of saints and prophets, and other natural elements combine to produce sacred assemblages with healing power.

Healing at the Shrines of Saints

As noted above, the healing properties of certain stones, tombs, springs, and shrines often derive from the power of holy people buried by or associated with the site. As American Methodist minister and archaeologist Elihu Grant observed in 1921, the sanctity of most of these sites is owed to their association with prophets, saints, dervishes, and madmen (believed to be inhabited by good *jinn*), all of whom were revered by Christians and Muslims alike.[56] Along with stones, tombs and shrines mark sites associated with these saints. Marked with white and green domes on hills, mountainsides, and other high areas, Christians and Muslims would regularly visit shrines for protection, worship, blessing, closeness to God, and prayer. As Canaan recorded, visiting shrines would bring blessings that, according to local belief, would bestow health, cure diseases afflicting people and their animals, and protect against diseases, envy, and harm. Healing rituals at such shrines exhibited a range of practices

associated with the treatment of specific ailments. For example, Canaan observed that the shrines of al-Khadr were linked to the treatment of psychological disorders.[57]

Specific stones and shrines were also known to heal fevers, with the intercession of saints. When a child had a fever or some other illness, the mother would take them to a saints' shrine hoping for a cure, and beseeching the saint with the words: "I beg of you, O saint of God, to heal my son" or more modestly: "I am your servant, O Friend of God, protect my only child," as in this *du'a* (prayer) recorded by Canaan.[58] Similarly, a sixty-year-old resident from the town of Kafr al-Dik recalled from personal experience that visitors to the shrine of Abu 'Ataf located in his town would say: "Oh God, for the sake of my master Abu 'Ataf, heal this child."[59]

To treat fever, mothers in Palestine would wash the hands and feet of the sick child next to the tomb of the saint, as observed by Canaan.[60] Trees, stones, grass, water, and soil connected to a shrine were also considered sacred, as were the grave's coverings, offerings of oil left at the shrine, rags hung on surrounding trees, and even the sweepings of the shrine. Because these materials are connected to the spirit that resides in the shrine, they can heal the sick, provide protection, and relieve pain. In a practice called *da'q*, mothers would collect and dry grass or tree leaves from near a shrine and then burn them near a sick child to cure their fever. Leaves were likewise used in amulets or veils to be hung around the patient's neck or within their clothing.[61] Canaan paid special attention to the prayers and utterances at such sites, and the physical materials from the earth and surrounding fauna used in healing rituals.

In addition to rags, olive oil used at shrines was doubly blessed, by virtue of the inherent holiness of olives and olive oil, as well as by the blessing the oil acquires from the spirit of the wali who inhabits the shrine. As such, oil from shrines was believed to be extremely effective for healing the sick. In addition, people would anoint their bodies with this oil to prevent evil and bring blessing.[62]

The recollections of people who practiced or witnessed these rituals corroborate historical ethnographic accounts. As seventy-three-year-old Umm Nizar al-Mallah from 'Ayn Qinya recalls:

> We, the women of the town of 'Ayn Qinya and the neighboring villages, used to visit the shrine of Abu al-'Aynayn to seek healing from diseases, and one of us would say: "If God healed me of such-and-such illness, I will light oil lamps in the shrine of Abu al-'Aynayn and under his tree." That is why the site was filled with them.[63]

Religious rituals at shrines are found in both Muslim and Christian religious sites. 'Abir Khoury, from the Christian-majority town of Taybeh northeast of Ramallah, recalled that candles and oil lamps would be placed in the Cave of Mar Ilyas, and the olive tree that stood in front would be decorated with multicolored pieces of cloth.[64] People would take some of its branches and leaves for blessing, healing, and protection, demonstrating the extent to which these sacred assemblages could stretch from their sacred locus to become connected to everyday sites and objects.

Conclusion

The oral testimonies of Palestinian elders, combined with the historical observations of Palestinian ethnographers and foreign missionaries, indicate the central importance of sacred sites in Palestinian folk heritage, and the special importance they played in everyday Palestinian life as sites of religious devotion and health-related rituals. These folkloric beliefs manifested in rituals related to disease prevention and treatment performed at sacred sites associated with holy people, including caves, rocks, graves, trees, and springs. These beliefs also manifested in the everyday use of amulets, veils, and rags, as well as the ritual use of oil, henna, votive offerings, and sacrifice. Taken together, these sites form a network of sacred assemblages of human, non-human, and spiritual elements that distribute healing influence and protective power through forms of contact and sympathetic magic. [65]

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Practices associated with these sacred landscapes are multifaceted, including worship, seeking blessings, forgiveness, protection, healing, and making vows. As Canaan emphasizes, the roots of such practices can be traced back to ancient Canaanite sites, beliefs, and rituals, repurposed by Christian and Muslim Palestinians alike. Similar practices can be found in neighboring regions and throughout the world indicating the cultural influence of Egyptian and Babylonian civilizations, as well as the universal nature of the need for physical connection to unseen spiritual realms and the desire for their protection from harm and healing. Though the spread in access to modern scientific education and healthcare reduced the reliance on such sites for healing and fertility, the cultural and religious significance of these sites persists to the present, serving as a link between popular Palestinian traditions and cultural practices that are deeply rooted in the land and history of Palestine.

In our examination of these sacred sites and practices, what emerges is not a map of territory made sacred solely by divine decree but, rather, living sacred landscapes of healing and care, cared for by Palestinians of different denominations and involving diverse natural and supernatural elements. As such, these sacred places are not inert sites of historical religious significance but are actively sacralized through cultural practices, folklore, and healing traditions. Canaan's ethnographic work, which spans the boundaries between medical and religious ethnography, challenged European perceptions of Palestinian peasants as passive parts in an undeveloped territory. Instead, Canaan's observations positioned Palestinians as active participants in shaping and preserving sacred landscapes, as well as the stories and practices associated with such sites. Despite the ongoing destruction of cultural and religious heritage in Palestine and the continued fracturing of the landscape, ordinary Palestinians continue to keep the memories and traditions of these places alive.

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