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A Critical Analysis of Dan Gibson's Views on the Sanctity of Madinah

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Abstract

This study critically and analytically examines the contemporary Canadian revisionist Orientalist Dan Gibson's interpretation of Madinah and its religious status in the Qur'an. Unlike his reassessment of the geographical locations of several Islamic sacred sites, Gibson accepts the present geographical location of Madinah as historically authentic. Nevertheless, he questions the Qur'anic representation of the city and argues that Madinah is mentioned in a comparatively derogatory manner, particularly in verses 101 and 120 of Sūrat al-Tawbah. On this basis, he suggests that the Qur'an does not establish the same degree of sanctity and religious distinction for Madinah that is reflected in the Prophetic ḥadīth literature. This study employs a qualitative, analytical, and contextual approach, examining Gibson's claims in light of the relevant Qur'anic passages, their immediate textual contexts, and the broader Islamic exegetical tradition. The analysis demonstrates that Gibson's interpretation does not sufficiently distinguish between criticism directed at particular hypocrites and other inhabitants of Madinah and the religious status of Madinah itself. The Qur'anic criticism in the cited verses concerns the beliefs, attitudes, conduct, and failure of specific groups to fulfil their obligations toward the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, rather than constituting a negative evaluation of Madinah as a geographical or religious entity. The study further argues that the presence of hypocrites, unbelievers, or sinners within a locality cannot logically be regarded as evidence for the absence of sanctity or religious significance from that locality. Consequently, deriving a general conclusion about the diminished status of Madinah from these verses represents a contextually limited reading of the Qur'anic discourse. The study concludes that a proper assessment of Madinah's religious status requires a comprehensive reading of the relevant Qur'anic passages alongside Prophetic traditions and the classical exegetical heritage, rather than relying on isolated references to the conduct of particular inhabitants.

Keywords: Dan Gibson; Madinah; Qur'anic Interpretation; Revisionist Orientalism; Islamic Sacred Geography

Introduction

Dan Gibson is a contemporary Canadian revisionist Orientalist who seeks to reconstruct Islamic history by departing from the traditional Muslim historical narrative. He has raised numerous

doubts concerning the geographical identification of Islamic sacred sites and does not accept their currently established geographical locations as historically accurate. In particular, with regard to Makkah, he maintains that it was not the first sacred city of Islam; rather, he argues that the earliest sacred centre and *qiblah* of Islam were located elsewhere. Similarly, he does not accept the present geographical locations of *Zamzam*, the Cave of *Ḥirāʾ*, *al-Ṣafā* and *al-Marwah*, ʿArafāt, Ṭāʾif, and even the *al-Aqṣā* Mosque. Instead, he attempts to associate these sacred sites with other geographical locations.

In Gibson's view, Madinah is a notable exception to his reassessment of the present geographical locations of Islamic sacred sites, as he accepts the current geographical location of Madinah as historically authentic. Nevertheless, his position concerning the significance and sacred status of Madinah also deserves particular attention. He claims that Madinah is mentioned in the Qur'an in a disparaging manner. According to him, although Madinah enjoys a certain degree of significance and virtue in the ḥadīth literature, its mention in the Qur'an does not establish its sanctity and exalted status. Rather, he interprets the Qur'anic references to Madinah as conveying an impression of disparagement and diminished status.

The present brief research article critically and analytically examines Gibson's claim as to whether Madinah is indeed mentioned in the Qur'an in a disparaging manner and whether its sanctity and religious significance are thereby diminished, or whether the relevant Qur'anic passages, when considered in their textual context and in light of the exegetical tradition, point to a different conclusion.

Madinah

Madinah is situated in the western region of present-day Saudi Arabia, at approximately 24.46° N latitude and 39.60° E longitude, with an average elevation of about 2,000 feet above sea level. Mecca is located approximately 340 kilometres to the south of Madinah. The city was historically known as Yathrib. In Ptolemy's Geography, its name is recorded as Jathripa, generally identified with Yathrib. It has also been suggested that the city was referred to as Madinat Yathrib, as the Byzantine lexicographer Stephen of Byzantium reportedly recorded its name as Medinta, which may represent an abbreviated form of Madinat Yathrib. South Arabian sources, particularly the Minaean inscriptions from Yemen, are also reported to refer to the city as Ḥakr.[i]

Following the migration (*Hijrah*) of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ to Yathrib, the city became known as *Madīnat al-Nabī* ("the City of the Prophet"). With the passage of time and through frequent usage, this designation was commonly shortened to Madinah. The ḥadīth literature also preserves a number of other names and epithets associated with the city, reflecting its religious and historical significance in the Islamic tradition.

A Brief Pre-Islamic Historical Background of Madinah

According to traditional Muslim historical accounts, the earliest settlement of the city is associated with a figure named Yathrib, after whom the city was subsequently named. His lineage is traditionally given as follows: *Yathrib ibn Qāniyah ibn Mahlāyīl ibn Īram ibn ʿAbīl ibn ʿAwṣ ibn Īram ibn Sām ibn Nūḥ*.[ii]

Traditional historical sources generally identify three principal groups among the early inhabitants of Yathrib:

The ʿAmālīq (Amalekites)

According to traditional historical accounts, the ʿAmālīq were among the earliest inhabitants of Yathrib and are sometimes credited with establishing the settlement. Yathrib, the individual after

whom the city was traditionally named, is reported to have belonged to the ʿAbīl branch of the ʿAmālīq. These groups are traditionally associated with regions of the ancient Near East, including Babylon, before their subsequent dispersal across different parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Some accounts maintain that a branch of them eventually settled in the region of Yathrib.[iii]

The Jewish Tribes

By the time of the Muslim migration to Madinah, several Jewish tribes were established in and around Yathrib. Traditional Muslim historical sources generally associate these communities with earlier migrations from Palestine. Some accounts connect their arrival to the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar II (*Bukht Naṣṣar*) in 586 BCE, while others associate subsequent migrations with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the revolt of 132 CE. Among the Jewish tribes traditionally reported to have inhabited Madinah were Banū Qurayẓah, Banū al-Naḍīr, and Banū Qaynuqāʿ, along with other Jewish groups.[iv]

The Aws and Khazraj

The Aws and Khazraj were two Arab tribes traditionally regarded as belonging to the Qaḥṭānī lineage. According to the traditional historical narrative, they migrated from Yemen and eventually settled in Yathrib following the decline and destruction of the Maʾrib Dam. Their settlement marked an important stage in the demographic and political development of pre-Islamic Yathrib and laid the foundation for the prominent role that the two tribes would subsequently play in the history of Madinah during the Prophet's ﷺ lifetime.[v]

Dan Gibson's Views Concerning Madinah

Dan Gibson does not raise any objection to the geographical location of Madinah. He accepts its present geographical location as historically authentic. Nevertheless, he expresses doubts concerning the sacred status of Madinah. According to Gibson, although Madinah is accorded a degree of sanctity and distinction in the Prophetic ḥadīth literature, its representation in the Qur'an is comparatively derogatory. He writes:

The Qur'ān mentions the city of Medina in Sūra 9 in a way that is slightly derogatory……. In verse 120 Allāh continues to speak against Medina, because they and some of the nomads of the area were refusing to work with Muḥammad……. In the ḥadīths, Medina receives little praise.[vi]

In support of this interpretation, Gibson refers particularly to two verses from Sūrat al-Tawbah. The first is verse 101:

وَمِمَّنْ حَوْلَكُمْ مِنَ الْأَعْرَابِ مُنَافِقُونَ وَمِنْ أَهْلِ الْمَدِينَةِ مَرَدُوا عَلَى النِّفَاقِ لَا تَعْلَمُهُمْ نَحْنُ نَعْلَمُهُمْ سَنُعَذِّبُهُمْ مَرَّتَيْنِ ثُمَّ يُرَدُّونَ إِلَى عَذَابٍ عَظِيمٍ [vii]

"And among those Bedouins around you are hypocrites, and among the people of Madinah as well. They have become accustomed to hypocrisy. You do not know them, but We know them. We will punish them twice, then they will be subjected to a tremendous punishment."

The second verse cited by Gibson is verse 120:

مَا كَانَ لِأَهْلِ الْمَدِينَةِ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهُمْ مِنَ الْأَعْرَابِ أَنْ يَتَخَلَّفُوا عَنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ وَلَا يَرْغَبُوا بِأَنْفُسِهِمْ عَنْ نَفْسِهِ [viii]

"It was not appropriate for the people of Madinah and the Bedouins around them to remain behind the Messenger of Allah, nor should they have preferred their own lives to his."

Gibson's inference from these two verses to the supposedly derogatory status of Madinah, however, is problematic. A contextual reading of the verses indicates that the criticism is directed at particular hypocrites and groups who failed to fulfil their religious and social obligations, rather than at Madinah as a city. In verse 101, the Qur'an explicitly identifies hypocrites among the

inhabitants of Madinah and among the Bedouins in its surrounding region. Likewise, verse 120 addresses the obligation of the people of Madinah and the surrounding Bedouin communities to support the Messenger of Allah ﷺ rather than remain behind or prefer their own interests to his.
Therefore, these verses cannot, in themselves, be taken as evidence that the city of Madinah was regarded by the Qur'an as inherently insignificant, contemptible, or devoid of sanctity. A distinction must be maintained between criticism of certain inhabitants of a city and a judgment concerning the religious status of the city itself. The presence of unbelievers, hypocrites, or sinners within a particular city does not logically entail that the city itself lacks religious significance or sanctity. If the conduct of some inhabitants were sufficient to determine the religious status of a city, the presence of sinful or disobedient individuals in any sacred locality would necessarily negate its sanctity—an inference that is neither logically necessary nor consistent with the broader Qur'anic and Islamic conception of sacred places.
Accordingly, Gibson's interpretation appears to conflate the Qur'anic criticism of particular groups residing in Madinah with a negative evaluation of Madinah itself. Establishing whether the Qur'an accords Madinah religious distinction therefore requires a broader examination of its Qur'anic references, their immediate and wider contexts, and the interpretations of the classical exegetical tradition, rather than relying solely on verses that censure specific categories of its inhabitants.

Conclusion

This study has critically and analytically examined the views of the contemporary Canadian revisionist Orientalist Dan Gibson concerning Madinah. While Gibson challenges the traditional geographical identification of several Islamic sacred sites, he accepts the present geographical location of Madinah as historically authentic. Nevertheless, he expresses reservations regarding its sacred status and religious significance. In this context, he particularly draws upon verses 101 and 120 of *Sūrat al-Tawbah* to suggest that Madinah is referred to in the Qur'an in a somewhat derogatory manner and that it receives comparatively little recognition for its virtues in the *ḥadīth* literature. The analysis of Gibson's argument demonstrates that his interpretation does not adequately distinguish between the Qur'anic criticism of particular individuals and groups residing in Madinah and the religious status of Madinah itself. The aforementioned verses primarily address the conduct of certain hypocrites among the inhabitants of Madinah and those in the surrounding areas who failed to fulfil their obligations toward the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. The criticism expressed in these verses is therefore directed at their attitudes, conduct, and failure to support the Prophet ﷺ, rather than at the city of Madinah as a geographical or religious entity. Accordingly, the condemnation of particular individuals on account of their beliefs or actions cannot logically be extended to the city in which they reside. The presence of hypocrites, unbelievers, or sinners within a particular locality does not, in itself, negate the religious significance or sanctity of that locality. Gibson's argument therefore appears to conflate the moral condemnation of certain inhabitants of Madinah with a negative assessment of Madinah itself. The study concludes that Gibson's interpretation is based on a selective reading of the relevant Qur'anic passages, in which their broader textual context and the identity of their immediate addressees are insufficiently considered. Consequently, deriving a general conclusion about the diminished religious status of Madinah from these verses does not adequately correspond with the Qur'anic context or with the broader Islamic exegetical tradition. A comprehensive assessment of the status of Madinah requires consideration not only of verses referring to the conduct of particular inhabitants but also of the wider Qur'anic discourse and the relevant Prophetic and exegetical evidence concerning the city.

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