A Comment on the Antiquity of Traditions Praising Jerusalem

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Our topic of discussion is closely related to the hadiths of Fadā'il Bayt al-Maqdis. Two of the most important problems in the analysis of these hadiths are determining their dates of composition, and when they were committed to writing. We can say with certainty that they were well-known and widely circulated as early as the beginning of the second century after the hijra. Decisive proof of this is the inclusion of a large chapter of hadiths extolling the merits of Jerusalem in the work of Muqātīl (d. 150 A.H./765 C.E.).

These hadiths—about 60 in number—are transmitted without isnād [chain of authorities] and contain most of the elements known to us from later works in praise of Jerusalem. Ibn al-Faqih transmits them in Muqātīl’s name in the chapter of his book devoted to praise of Jerusalem. Examples of these hadiths are: “Jerusalem is the land God has chosen from among other lands”; “He who chose to die in Jerusalem, has died as if in heaven”; “All sweet water originates beneath the Rock [foundation stone of the Temple]”; “The Rock is the navel of the universe”; “God will destroy Yādūḏi wa-Māḏūḏi [Gog and Magog] in Jerusalem”; “Before his death in India, Adam commanded that he be brought to Jerusalem for burial”; “The ingathering and resurrection of the dead will take place in Jerusalem.” It seems to me that all these hadiths may be attributed without hesitation to the latter half of the first century of the hijra (the end of seventh century C.E.).

No less ancient, in my opinion, is the hadith, “The establishment of the site of the Temple will be the destruction of Yathrib.” I would ascribe it to the period of the building of Jerusalem, i.e. the seventh decade of the first century, along with other hadiths of a similar nature: the tradition that Muhammad's nation will build the “Temple”,

1 See F. Sezgin, GAS I, p. 36-37.
dispute over Muḥammad’s place of burial, in which a group of his friends demanded that he be brought to Jerusalem, the resting place of the prophets, the stories about the construction of the Temple and the burning of the Temple, about Israfil standing on the Rock on the Day of Resurrection, or Jesus blessing Hebron, and the tradition about the Ka‘ba’s journey to the Rock on Judgment Day.

To summarize, Jerusalem praise literature emerged in the second half of the first century of the hijra (the end of the seventh century C.E.) and was put into writing in the first half of the second century of the hijra (eighth century C.E.). Hadiths in praise of Jerusalem may be found in the earliest collections of hadiths and Qur’anic exegesis.

Jewish converts to Islam played an important role in disseminating stories from the Bible and Midrash, and even held parties upon completion of reading the Torah. Although they had severed their ties with the Jewish community, they did not relinquish their heritage, passing this wealth on to Islam. These isra‘iliyyāt were absorbed in the Islamic system of values and eventually became an integral part of it. It is only natural, then, that praise of Jerusalem should be of such importance in the body of isra‘iliyyāt.

The role played by the zuhhād or pious ascetics has also been mentioned. There is evidence that these people did in fact circulate Jerusalem praise literature. It should also be noted that some of them served in the Umayyad government which was extremely interested in developing and promoting such literature.

8 Al-Fākhihi, Ta‘rikh Makka, ms. Leiden, Or. 463, f. 469b-470a.
10 Nu‘aym b. Hammad, K. al-Fītan, ms. British Museum, Or. 9449, f. 65a (and compare ibid., f. 65b).
11 Al-Fākhihi, ibid., f. 416b.