

**Merav Mack, Benjamin Balint.** *Jerusalem: City of the Book*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. 272 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-22285-2.

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To say that Jerusalem is well-trodden ground is no understatement. It is therefore invigorating to encounter a fresh approach. In *Jerusalem: City of the Book*, Merav Mack and Benjamin Balint give us a thoughtful tour of the city focusing on the variety of its numerous collections of books, manuscripts, and other kinds of texts held in a wide range of organizations from small family or institutional collections all the way to immense libraries like the National Library of Israel. Self-styled as a book-length “essay,” Mack and Balint’s work aims its lens at “how Jerusalem has been imagined, made legible, and shelved in libraries” (p. 2). They thereby give their project the dual foci of Jerusalem and its textual collections, the latter crisp in detail, the former by nature rather more hazy. Mack and Balint undertook their project as “a kind of *flânerie*, a form of getting lost in the city in order better to know it,” and in a Benjamin-to-Kazin jump, “As pedestrians we experienced Jerusalem not chronologically but with all the jumble of juxtapositions and incongruities a walker in the city would encounter. In fact, we take these very juxtapositions as the eloquent grammar of Jerusalem’s many languages” (p. 4). Indeed Mack and Balint do keep their eyes open to the intercultural dimension of the city as spatial history, and it is the attempt to present that diversity as an integral whole instead of disarticulated for discrete

analysis which is the book’s chief strength as a sensitive travelogue as opposed to an academic volume, which it is not.

Mack and Balint’s book is eminently readable, full of lovely descriptions and evocative writing, fluid and discursive in equal measures. (That despite some terminological infelicities that are irritating perhaps only to a rare book librarian, such as when they describe the Gulbenkian Library as containing “Armenian incunabula dating from 1512 to 1850” [p. 86]; an incunabulum by definition refers only to books printed *before* 1500.) They have organized their essay into seven chapters that follow a chronological plan: (1) antiquity; (2) what they call “the Arabic era” (637-1099); (3) the medieval or Crusader period (1099-1244); (4) the Mamluk and Ottoman period (thirteenth-nineteenth century); (5) the nineteenth century; (6) the interwar period; and (7) the twentieth century. While this organization is useful to structure a book and a readily digestible scheme, it does little to provide for the narrative architecture of the actual content. Perhaps that is by design. Perhaps the juxtaposition of chronological framework with discursive threads that telescope through time and locale is meant to highlight the palimpsestual image of the city (p. 5): a historical organization despite history. Perhaps.

Let me give a couple of examples of how the topical flow within this notional organization can have a dizzying effect on the reader. The section entitled “Mystical Languages” begins by briefly mentioning the great philosopher al-Ghazali and his masterwork, *The Revival of the Sciences of Religion*, partially written in Jerusalem, and a manuscript copy of the work being restored in the library of the al-Aqsa Mosque. The narrative quickly moves on to introducing the Budeiri Library, a two-hundred-year-old collection nearby that houses some eleven hundred manuscripts including a sixteenth-century copy of al-Ghazali’s work. A page later we completely lose trace of Budeiri for good as we follow al-Ghazali himself and his stay in Jerusalem. At this point we meet the holder of the al-Ghazali Chair at al-Quds University and are offered his interest in Islamic spirituality. The narrative is interrupted with an isolated excursus about esoteric knowledge and the elites who guard access to it. While taking note of the issue of access that plagues the Jerusalem collections and to which I will return later, it is not entirely clear what point the authors are trying to make with their digression. The narrative moves from there to a longer discussion of Sufi traditions in Jerusalem and ends on a brief discussion of a tomb in Jerusalem that holds some cultural connection to an important woman in Islam, the Sufi teacher Rabi’a al-Adawiyya. At this point the text pauses to begin an entirely new section on the legacy of the Karaites. Despite points of interest, this ten-page sequence ultimately makes little impact on any larger argument about what its collections tell us about Jerusalem.

Similarly, in the opening pages of the sixth chapter, we are introduced (in less than a page) to the German Orientalist Gustaf Dalman’s collection, a library which “most probably was the first research library in Palestine” (p. 133). The text immediately segues into three pages on the thrall or disenchantment with Jerusalem. The former is about books, the latter is not. The issue of Dalman’s collection is a telling instance of one of the

drawbacks of the book, namely the pesky missed opportunity. When Merav and Balint describe that collection and then quote the view of one scholar that “German librarianship had a decisive impact with long-term effects on the development of libraries in Palestine” (p. 134), the statement lands with a thunk. Intrigued, we are left asking, How? Clearly it must be a collection that deserves a little more treatment? Yet the text moves breezily along—leaving Dalman and German librarianship for good—and the reader puzzles over a bundle of questions unaddressed. Or take the engaging programmatic note, offered at the very beginning of the book, to take the “writers of Jerusalem” writ large “as a distinct school” (p. 3). What might the contours of such a school be? We do get glimpses and asides. For instance, Merav and Balint speak of “the literary heritage of the city: its prophecies, histories, eschatologies” (p. 23), in brief, the genres of Jerusalem’s particular literary heritage, of its school. And yet there it remains, unpursued and unparsed.

One of the more powerful aspects of the book is the attention it seeks to draw to the multicultural, intercultural, and sometimes hybrid cultural contexts of many of the works in these collections. The focus on Mar Saba Monastery, for instance, is especially compelling. This Orthodox monastery, active since the fifth century, about midway between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, houses a significant manuscript library. As Merav and Balint point out, “Mar Saba’s library bears witness to one of the great cultural transformations in the intellectual history of the region: the Christian adoption of Arabic as a literary and religious language.... The monastery ... acted as a crucial nexus of translation between cultures. In effect, Mar Saba introduced Christian literature to the Arabic-speaking world” (p. 54). Indeed, the monastery “served as the center of the thriving Arabophone monasticism that flourished between the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem and the Crusades” (p. 55). The manuscript collection is a precious archive of

that cultural nexus. My concern is the nature of the link to Jerusalem. The library seems less a Jerusalemite collection than a Jerusalem-adjacent one. In a book specifically about Jerusalem's libraries, that is not a picayune cavil.

In the way the theme of cultural polyphony percolates through the book one senses a major point dampened. Merav and Balint point, for instance, to the Riccardiana Psalter and a fifteenth-century Arabic-Frankish lexicon as samples of the kind of "hybridity of East and West" that forms "an underappreciated feature of medieval Jerusalem" (p. 92). While the operative adjective is "medieval" Merav and Balint seem to be making a point about "underappreciated"; cultural hybridity is a hallmark of Jerusalem's identity and a corrective to monolithic notions of national insularity, singularity, and chauvinism. So speaking of lexica, a brief glimpse at Mordecai Kosover's 1966 *Arabic Elements in Palestinian Yiddish* will lay bare the rich rootedness of hybrid exchanges that need not bracket itself off as a medieval relic.

Yet while the potential for multicultural creativity runs deeper than we may appreciate, the story of Jerusalem and its textual collections as it appears in this book is far more often one of tense cohabitation. In one of the book's many lively episodes, Merav and Balint turn their attention to the beautiful Queen Keran gospel, a late thirteenth-century illuminated manuscript held by the Armenian Patriarchate under the tightest of security. Merav and Balint detail how two leaves were stolen and the story of how they were, thankfully, eventually repatriated. Spoliation of book collections dogs the history of Jerusalem, and Merav and Balint's book outlines many of the more infamous instances, often pointing up a larger political story of empires and cultural clashes, mercenary greed and communal preservation. It would seem that the deep scars and traumas of the loss of cultural heritage represented in books—although a more searching analysis of *why* so much cultural importance gets focused on books is needed—prevent

many cultural institutions and their custodians from prioritizing anything but the safety of the objects they hold.

Time and time again Merav and Balint note the difficulty of gaining access to many of Jerusalem's collections. "Our petitions to access the library were repeatedly deferred" is a kind of refrain (p. 116). Sometimes their attempts are thwarted and sometimes their perseverance pays off. But the pathology of trauma is written over so many of these collections. Indeed, the book offers a condemnation of the greed and rapine attendant on colonialism and imperialism and lends a sympathetic ear to the groups and institutions that harbor a mistrust, often based in historical experience, of the modern world they see as guided by those baser instincts. And yet, as a rare book and manuscript librarian I see in such a stance a missed opportunity of perspective. In his classic *The Five Laws of Library Science* (1931), S. R. Ranganathan lays out the principles of modern librarianship, at once eminently practical and deeply philosophical. The first of these laws is "Books are for use," placing access as the single most important value in the operation of a library. In their first chapter, on Jerusalem's libraries in antiquity, Merav and Balint describe how "the earliest mention of a library in Jerusalem comes in the second book of Maccabees" where "in a letter to the Jews of Egypt the anonymous Jerusalemites wrote, 'If you ever need any of these books, let us know; and we will send them (2 Maccabees 2:13-15)'" (pp. 19-20). Merav and Balint use this text to make an historical point about the rootedness of libraries in Jerusalem; but they miss the ethos: to wit, what is crucial is not that it was the *first* library, but that the first library was a *lending* library. Books have always been for use. And yet in case after case in Merav and Balint's experience, this rule is inoperable. The central tension of Jerusalem's collections is openness versus secrecy, access versus obstruction: "Like families, Jerusalem's collections are riddled with secrets and concealments" (p. 8).

Perhaps the most startling moment in the book comes near the end. Merav and Balint have been speaking with Shimon Schwartz, who is responsible for the intellectual content of the Karliner Library, the library of the Karlin Hasidim. When the authors asked if they could see the actual collection, which is housed in the home of the Karliner rebbe, the head of the sect, they were rebuffed. Schwarz “gestured to a hard drive on his cluttered desk. ‘What do you need to visit the library for? It’s all here.’ If you know a text well, he implied, what could seeing a physical manuscript add?” What indeed! “As if to console us, he made an astonishing confession: in all these years, he himself had never been inside the Karliner library, the library he knew so intimately. After cataloguing and digitizing new acquisitions, he could access it only by means of a screen. He has been denied the exaltation of a bibliophile among his treasures. For now, the Karliner library, accessible and inaccessible both, remains in a kind of placeless purgatory. It is a ‘no place’” (p. 173). Digitization appears as the panacea of preservation and access. Yet there is a perversity at work here. “Jerusalem’s librarians fear both material loss and the destruction of memory, and for good reason. In this sense, a library may be a consolation in exile, a portable homeland” (p. 89). What consolation exists in a book you can never see?

The last of Ranganathan’s laws—“A library is a growing organism”—is perhaps the most historically minded of his observations. In a now famous book review, the librarian Maurice Line drolly lampoons the attitude of “the traditional research library” by retooling Ranganathan’s laws to fit the ethos of such institutions. In Line’s view the fifth law becomes: “The library is a growing mausoleum.”[1] That, sadly, is the image that rises through the welter of detail in *Jerusalem: City of the Book*: despite the immense and diverse wealth of intellectual, spiritual, and artistic creativity housed in Jerusalem, its libraries loom like a vast

textual necropolis to which Merav and Balint have given us a handsome and gripping Baedeker.

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#### Note

[1]. M. B. Line, “Review of Use of Library Materials: The University of Pittsburgh Study,” *College & Research Libraries* 40 (6): 558.

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