

## **SACRED MONUMENTS AND STONE CIRCLES IN PALESTINE: A HISTORICAL, ETHNOGRAPHIC AND MYTHOLOGICAL INQUIRY**

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### ABSTRACT

Sacred stone veneration is a global mythical phenomenon historically practiced by many groups, including ancient Semitic-speaking peoples. In their physical capacity, sacred stones themselves are not the object of worship or veneration. Their sanctity comes from the divine spirit believed to dwell within them. The common denominator among the mythological traditions of sacred stones veneration is the belief that they possess enormous spiritual powers that enable them to act as mediators between the worshipper and the gods. Stones were employed as tools in the rituals of veneration in many types of sanctuaries, such as stone circles. This study highlights this type of religious folklore in Palestine, representing one of the bridges linking the Palestinian present to its distant Canaanite past. It traces the various patterns of sacred stones in the central region of Palestine, the rituals that were practised using them, and the remnants of these practices found in oral folklore traditions. To these ends, the researchers relied on religious and

historical primary and secondary sources, including oral interviews where available and possible.

KEYWORDS: Stone Circles, Palestine, Ancient History, Canaanite Deities, God Baal, sacred stones, sacred sanctuaries, legends, myths, narratives, ancestor worship, rituals, folklore, cairn, altar, enclosure

### **1. Historical and Mythological Roots of Stone Veneration and Sanctification**

It is difficult to study sacred stones in Palestine in isolation from their ancient historical and mythological origins. Although field interviews have revealed that sacred stone veneration was practiced in Palestine until not so long ago, the roots of this ritual run deep. All cultures have their own folklore, which consists of common religious beliefs, customs, and traditions inherited since ancient times. These elements of folklore did not begin as mere stories and legends. They were created to explain the creation of the universe, natural phenomena, life, and death. Ancient human cultures created intricate interpretations of the natural world in the form of mythical beliefs that took on a religious dimension, thus imbuing natural objects with sacredness. When the monotheistic religions emerged, they dealt in various ways with previously existing pagan beliefs, traditions, myths, legends, and folk tales, which were passed down from previous generations (Sahhab 1990: 4/2, 581). Yet, these traditions were not entirely erased. Rather, they remained embedded in stories, places, and practices, like traces of effaced text in a palimpsestic manuscript.

There is no 'pure' religion anywhere in the world, but rather a mixture of intellectual components and ritual practices. These components differ in their practice and emphasis from one place to another (Stockton 1974–1975:1). Since the early emergence and spread of human civilization, sites that one ethnic or religious group deemed 'sacred', another group often treated as worthless or unholy. However, many cultures have also reused and 'recycled' holy sites belonging to others, making modifications to align them with their own religious beliefs (Al-Houdalieh 2010: 127). In the study of the development of religious beliefs and practices among cultures, one of the most important factors to consider is the stability of major rituals and performances, which can be considered conservative, durable, or otherwise change resistant. Although memory of its vivid history may fade, once a place acquires sacredness, its sense of sacrality can persist and persevere, regardless of religious and political fluctuations and changes in social structures. For example, Tell Gezer, located eight kilometres southeast of the city of Ramla, dates

to the Neolithic Age. The archaeological evidence of this site today reveals a practically uninterrupted sequence of historical development and continuity of religious use, despite significant divergence between the cultural groups sequentially inhabiting the site (Cook 1908: 19). Elsewhere, similarities in the mythological beliefs of various ancient Asian tribes across substantial geographic and temporal spans support the concept of the endurance of sacred places, practices, and objects from era to era and place to place. The Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, and Arabs all believed in the existence of a god and a plurality of deities. Accordingly, the powers or beings they worshipped can be considered symbols of the spirit of God in later emergent monotheistic religions (Conder 1889: 73).

Scholars believe that human religions originated from ancestor worship. Ancient humans related death to mysterious and unseen magical powers, whereas they associated breathing with the preservation of the essential life force. Out of the perception of breathing, the concept of the soul arose. If the breath stopped, the soul would leave, and the lifeless body would remain. Ancient humans did not separate the concept of spirit from the notion of God but conflated the two. They believed that departed souls passed to their new homes, residing in various natural objects and formations, such as mountains, caves, trees, and stones (Musa 2011: 9–10). Some also believed that the souls would return to their bodies one day. Because of this, in some Stone Age sites, corpses in graves were found laid out in the shape of a foetus, the position of rebirth, and they were provided with food, weapons, and clothing (Armstrong 2008: 7, 10). The ancient concept of God evolved from the perception of death and the spirits of the dead that settled in various creatures and turned into divine spirits found everywhere, especially in spots that were marked by some apparent evidence of divine presence. Since ancient times, humans have distinguished between the sacred and the mundane. They have likewise tended to invoke or manifest the divine spirit in natural objects to gain strength, power, and immortality. In this practice of ‘hierophany’, holiness is manifested in objects, such as trees, stones, or even human beings. This can even be seen in the deification of Jesus Christ as the manifestation of God (Eliade 1988: 17). Natural assets were not worshipped for their natural value per se, but rather for their spiritual worth, which exuded an extraordinary force. This corresponds with the concept that religious scholars have termed animism, a form of religious belief significant to ancient peoples. In animism, every creature or natural object, even if it is inanimate, has an embodied spirit that can convey the influence and power of the ancestors to the living (Muller 1892: 184). Fetishism takes this animistic belief a step further in maintaining that human-produced objects can become the receptacles of supernatural divine or spiritual power (Tylor 1871, 2: 132)

In addition to sacred objects, prehistoric cultures throughout the world left many sacred sanctuaries. Most of these were surrounded by enclosures, often in the form of stone circles, to delineate their boundaries and distinguish sacred from profane space. Many aboriginal peoples around the world share, in general, the belief in the power of certain elemental geometrical shapes, such as circles. From stone circles emerges shared conceptions of sacredness as revolving around the idea of a separate precinct (Simmins 2008: 10). As such, stone circles can be considered prototypical temples in human history (Conder 1889: 43). Early peoples, and some contemporary ones too, regarded stone circles as having powerful earthly energies or connections with the spirit world, and thus turned to them to purify and strengthen their spirits (Simmins 2008: 18). Among ancient Semitic peoples, the circle of stones is a pattern that represents the divine entity and serves as the place for sacrifice, as at Carthage (Stockton 1974–1975: 3, 14). Early peoples, particularly plains dwellers, had a special interest in circles because of their symbolic value conveying unity and connection (Simmins 2008: 16). Druidical culture made use of hilltop stone circles for dual religious and judicial purposes. They were constructed, albeit crudely in some cases, at a time when a great deity was worshipped under the open canopy of heaven, not in covered temples (Kitto 1841: 411).

Stonehenge, Silbury Hill, and Avebury in southern England are considered the world's best-known Neolithic stone circle sites. Stonehenge, for example, was built around 2200 BCE. It was used for many hundreds of years by several distinct cultures. There can be little doubt that the site was connected with astronomy. The Bighorn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming, a 2,000-year-old circular stone structure, was associated with the Crow, Arapaho, and Shoshone peoples (Simmins 2008:18, 23–24). In Wiltshire, a human skeleton was found under a standing stone in the middle of a circle of stones (Conder 1891: 145). In Rujm El-Hiri, in the Syrian Golan Heights, there are between five and nine stone circles, assumed to be about five thousand years old. The entrance to the center of the stone circle marks the line of sunrise during the summer solstice. Other entrances match the vernal and autumnal equinox. Stone circles bring blessings of gods and positive energy to the people and were used for treatment. Stone circles symbolise earthly gods and fertility. Each circle represents one season of the year (Osmanagich 2016: 79–80). At Tell Al-Qadi (Dan) there are large stones, each with a heap of small stones, as well as a circle of stones, all of which together serves as a monument to the worship of the sun and connection to the earth (Geikie 1887: II, 386).

The typical Phoenician temple consisted of a sacred enclosure open to the sky, containing an altar and a cult object (Stockton 1970: 73–74). The

Phoenician temple of *Baal at Gebal* featured a circular stone enclosure, as depicted on a coin from Byblos dating from the reign of Macrinus (c. 218 A.D.), and had been in use from 2000 B.C. In some of the Phoenician sacred stone circles, the cult stones are very closely related to votive or sacrificial stones, suggesting a belief in the divine presence contained within the circle. Sometimes, the gods were venerated, not only in aniconic forms as stones or other objects, but also in ‘sacred emptiness’, that is, without the presence of a symbol of the god itself, only its seat or throne. In Hierapolis, the sun god appears outside and to the left of the entrance to the temple stone enclosure. Many Semitic groups built stone enclosures around tombs, as seen in the Tanit sanctuary at Carthage (Stockton 1974–1975: 5, 9, 19). The sacred stone circle tradition was transmitted to the Near East from the ancient Persians, who worshipped fire as a miniature form of the sun in circular fire temples made of pillars erected under trees. Archaeologists found an Amorite sun worship temple at Gath (Tell Al-Safi) dating back to the Bronze Age III 1600–1200 BC, which consisted of a series of standing stones arranged in a circle (Kitto 1841: 411. Duncan 1931: II, 61, 119). This standing stone circle custom was harnessed by the peoples of the Near East to practise early astronomical worship of the god Baal (Conder and Kitchener 1882: II, 372. Conder 1889: 44–45). Some of the Canaanite sites in which circular stone enclosures have been found are Tell Asur (Baal Hazor) and Thahrat Al-Taweel in the highlands of Nablus, dating back to the Iron Age I (1200–1000 BC). An archaeological survey revealed a long wall surrounding the site. Near its entrance was a standing stone surrounded by an enclosure of stones, possibly containing a sacred tree in the centre (Na’aman and Kissovsky 2008: 196). The pre-Islamic Arabs surrounded their idols and temples with enclosures of stones to demarcate their sacred geographical space, calling these sanctuaries *Hema* (the protected area of the gods) (Ali 2001: XI, 415). These ‘*Hemas*’ serve as prime examples of private religious property (Eliade 1988: 7).

The idea of the ‘Cosmic Mountain’ is closely related to sanctification and worshipping stones. It is believed that primitive worship throughout the world was initially associated with trees and sacred stones on mountains (Wood 1916: 23. Zwemer 1920: 208). Humans thought they could climb mountains or trees to reach the realm of the gods (Armstrong 2008: 19, 26). Since the universe consisted of three levels — the underworld, earth, and heaven — mountains were considered a connecting bridge between heaven and earth; thereby associating vertical vision with holiness. Out of this perspective, mountains were bathed in the brightness of sacrality. Hence, they appeared as if they were the centre of the world, as with Mount Gerizim in Palestine (Eliade 1988: 35–36). Ancient humans climbed mountain summits to invoke and worship the divine spirit, often

doing so under mountaintop trees. They erected statues, built altars, and offered sacrifices and offerings of thanks (Kitto 1841: 242). These stone monuments were viewed as symbols of heavenly aspiration, and circled stone enclosures were closely related to stars and other celestial bodies, as well as the prediction of the seasons (Simmins 2008: 23). Even in monotheistic traditions, most of the great divine actions took place on the tops of mountains, such as Noah's ark being anchored on Mount Ararat, and Abraham preparing to sacrifice Ishmael on Mount Moriah (Sahhab 1990: 4/2, 625). God spoke to Moses in the wilderness on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19: 3; Maryam 19: 52). The prophet Elijah received the word of God on Mount Horeb and defeated the priests of Baalon at Mount Carmel. Christ was tempted and transfigured and gave sermons and prayed on top of mountains (Sahhab 1990: 4/2, 625), and was crucified on the Mount of Calvary. The prophet Muhammad received divine revelation on a mountain northeast of Mecca (Eliade 1988: 36). The Palestinians revered deserted mountains and, for this reason, the shrines of their saints and holy sanctuaries were found on their peaks (Sahhab 1990: 4/2, 624), a practice derived from ancient religious beliefs.

The early Semitic peoples, especially the Canaanites, elevated spirits and avoided demonic powers (polydaemonism) residing in trees, rocks, springs, caves, and tombs, often elevating such objects to the stature of gods, worshipping them on hilltops (Paton 1919: 51). It was on these heights that the prototype of sanctuaries appeared in the shape of mythical gardens belonging to the gods (Baalim), and where pilgrims would gather to bow down under sacred trees, statues, and pillars (Wood 1916: 22). The Canaanites worshipped outdoors on barren rocky roofs and under trees, later building enclosed temples (such as Beth El: the house of the god El). They constructed these enclosures by surrounding the statue of a god and its altar with a stone wall or a circle of stones to protect the sanctity of the sanctuary and to make the middle of the circle the central point of contact with the sky (Paton 1919: 51. Duncan 1931: II, 119). The Arabs inherited pagan religion from neighbouring Semitic tribes. They also sanctified the graves of their ancestors, believing them to be alive with souls that could understand, hear, perceive, rejoice, get angry, respond, benefit, and harm them (Ali 2001: XI, 142, 405). An example of a sacred stone for the Arabs, in addition to the Kaaba itself, is the Black Stone located on its wall. Believing the stone (a meteorite) to have fallen from heaven, pagan Arabs used to circumambulate it and caress it with their hands (Westermarck 1933: 97). For similar reason, a comparable practice of stone worship emerged in the Indian archipelago (Zwemer 1920: 16). Although Islam forbids idolatry, many pagan places of worship, rituals, and ancient folk beliefs have nevertheless been absorbed into the popular religiosity of Muslims.

The religious heritage of Palestine is not purely Arab Palestinian. It was inherited from earlier peoples of the ancient East. They made simple changes to suit their religious, social, and economic needs (Sahhab 1990: 4/2, 581). The idea of asking for intercession, whether from dead or living saints, is deeply rooted in Palestinian popular folk culture. Traditionally, Palestinians wishing to request a favour from their lord would do so through a third-party intercessor who could grant their request (Wilson 1906: 29), a custom that can be considered as a form of fetishism (Zwemer 1920: 221). Many sacred stone sites exist in Palestine. In the popular imagination, conditions must be met for a site to be classified as sacred, such as seeing strange lights and shapes or hearing religious chants. The second condition is that anyone who violates a ritual, social, or religious norm at the site experiences divine torment. Finally, sacred sites are places that serve as sites of religious rituals, such as prayers, supplications, swearing oaths, and making vows (Sahhab 1990: 42, 621). In general, a sacred sanctuary is a unique natural or cultural place designated by individuals or groups for performing religious beliefs out of the human need to build up a certain bond with unseen supernatural forces. They invoke such forces through and in these sites out of the belief that the spirits of their ancestors and saints inhabit them. These spirits play the role of mediators with God. They also have the power to influence people. Such sanctuaries may be tombs, caves, shrines, water sources, trees, stone circles, stones and rocks (Al-Houdalieh 2010: 127).

## II. Sacred Standing Stones, Altars and Stone Circles

Stone circles can be considered a form of existential manifestation (autophany). People revered stones for their self-evident strength, solidity, and continuity and how they represented an ideal form of existence completely different from the fragile condition of human beings. In and of themselves, stones were not objects of worship; rather, they were revered because they represented manifestations of a hidden power whose presence could be seen in them as well as in all other natural objects or creatures in which humans perceived the divine spirit dwelling (Eliade 1988: 114. Armstrong 2008: 21).

The sacred standing stone, the pillar, the heap of stones, and the cairn '*qantara*' all served as miniature versions of the cosmic mountain. Ancient humans believed that the spirits of their ancestors inhabiting them provided them with the possibility of contact with the sky, where the gods were (Curtiss 1902: 88). It is believed that the standing stone was erected at the edge of the grave of the dead so that the soul could rest in it, and it did not rest until after it was erected in order to ensure contact with the gods in heaven (Wood 1916: 35). The sacred standing stone phenomenon was

one of the most important symbols of Amorite worship, and an example of it was found near a crematorium cave in Tell Gezer. However, it was not the god himself but his dwelling, and it was merely a visible symbol of an invisible god (Duncan 1931: II, 55). Then, it was worshipped by the Canaanites, who contributed greatly to early religious traditions that crystallised in Palestinian popular religion (Conder 1889: 70). In Palestine, a Canaanite stone was found in Tell Hazor in the form of a pillar showing hands rising towards the sun (Simmins 2008: 23). At the eastern end of Tell Gezer, near the town of Abu Shusha located in the district of Ramla, there is a Canaanite temple with 10 pillars, each one representing one god. In the middle, there is a pillar with an altar, and next to it is a stone bowl. At the bottom, there is a fireplace, where sacrifices are offered after boiling blood (Mustafa Kabha, 60 y.o., Umm Al-Qutouf, 8/4/2022).

It is known that ancient people set up stone altars in places of worship for religious offerings. The dolmen, a prehistoric monument, was the first altar used by early tribes (Conder 1891: 151). It was also associated with the observation of sunrise and sunset; thus, it was associated with calculating the succession of the seasons (Conder 1889: 43). The stone altar was an idol, representing the tangible abode of a venerated deity whose power and influence was invoked through sacrifice and offerings (Wood 1916: 23). Thus, this sacred place welcomed a special divine presence within it and facilitated the process of communication with it. Usually, the altar was erected near a standing stone on which small offerings were placed, although sometimes the offerings were placed on the monument itself (Conder 1889: 265). Altars were also built with stones and mud, so they appeared as miniature models of the world. The water with which the clay was stirred represented the sky, the clay used as the base of the altar symbolised the earth, and the side walls represented the atmosphere or space (Eliade 1988: 31).

In the land of Canaan, the early method of making offerings to the gods was to hang them on a particular god's tree or to throw them into a stream or sacred spring, which was the case especially with sacrifices to Baal. However, another method appeared. For a sacrifice to be accepted, people began offering them in places where the spirit of the gods resided, including stones and rocks. Therefore, stone altars were established, on which food and drink could be offered (Wood 1916: 42). The altars of the Canaanites and Philistines consisted of a rock that had an opening through which the blood (the 'home' of the soul in the living body) of a victim could flow into a cave below, whereupon the gods dwelling in the cave would seize it (Luckenbill 1910: 368). Sometimes, they chose rocks with odd edges and multiple holes for ritual sacrifice and bloodshed and anointed their edges with blood (Cook 1908: 26). Bowls were also sometimes used in place of holes in the rocks (Wood 1916: 23). Sacred



pillars were also a form of religious sacrificial altar. It is believed that the Amorites were the first to introduce such pillars to Palestine as well as new types of devotional practices and rituals (Duncan 1931: II, 119). In the Canaanite period, many pillars were erected as altars, especially fire altars, on heights near sacred trees and next to the Mother Goddess (Wood 1916: 23, 35). Rock altars with cup marks abound in Palestine, often located next to a shrine, under a sacred tree, near a cave, or at the top of a mausoleum. These alters were used for offerings or libations, or to collect the refreshing rain for the soul of the deceased (Cook 1908: 20, 35). The Samaritan altar on Mount Gerizim serves as an ideal example. It has a hollow surface and carved channels connected to it. A similar alter can be found near Deir Ghazala on Mount Faqu'a and five or six others are in the upper Galilee, one of which is called the 'blood stone'. There is another such alter near Geba, north of Jerusalem (Conder 1891: 153, 155) and at the eastern end of Tell Megiddo (Cook 1908: 17). Among the Canaanite sacrifices that were offered on the altars of the gods were oil, water, food, milk, honey, wine, and burnt incense (Wood 1916: 32. Duncan 1931: II, 119–120), but the common feature in their worship was the slaughtering of sacrifices. All worshippers participated in eating the sacrificial meal and left the blood to the gods, as blood was the basis of life (Zwemer 1907: 11. Luckenbill 1910: 368). A rock at Tell Gezer was found with human and animal bones and stone knives next to it (Cook 1908: 18).

In the myth narratives of the Old Testament the 'patriarchs' considered the places where the Lord appeared to them as sacred sites, so they also set up altars there and offered sacrifices on them. The altar that Abraham erected for the Lord under an oak tree at the foot of Mount Gerizim near Shechem in the land of Canaan, where the Lord appeared to him, was his first sanctuary in Palestine (Genesis 12: 5–7). Then he built another one on a mountain at Bethel (Luza), about a mile east of Shechem (Genesis 12:8). Under the aforementioned oak, Jacob built an altar to the Lord and dedicated it to Jehovah (Geikie 1887: II, 208). On his way from Beersheba to Haran, Jacob arrived at Bethel, and, resting his head on a stone, he saw a staircase reaching heaven, the angels of God ascending and descending by it, and the Lord himself above them (Theoderich 1891: 62. M'Cheyne and Bonar 1845: 205). He was convinced that this place was the gate of heaven, and that was why he erected a stone as a pillar, anointed it with oil, and called it Bethel, meaning House of God (Genesis 28: 10–12, 16–19). After Jacob set up the altar in Bethel in the place where the Lord appeared to him, and after his return from Iraq, Deborah, a nurse of Rebecca, died during her stay in Bethel. Jacob buried her in the valley under an oak, which became the oak of weeping, and a stone pillar was erected over the burial place (Kean 1893: 103. Bourassé 1867: 378. M'Cheyne and Bonar

1845: 205–206). When Joshua arrived at Shechem, he went to the oak of Moreh, and, under it, he set up a large stone on which was written the law of the Lord (Joshua 24: 26–27). The stories of the Torah should not be read literally or treated as historical facts. However these stories refer to the sacred stones in Joshua's account of the massacre of the 12,000 inhabitants of the Canaanite city of Ai and the capture of its king by Joshua's army. After Joshua was killed, a large heap of stones was placed on his body (Joshua 8: 29).

In the later periods reaching the time of Jesus, religious and historical sources refer to many sacred rocks and stones. In the stories of the Old Testament during his fight against the Philistines in Michmash, Saul commanded his fighters to erect a large stone. He made it into an altar to the Lord and invited them to slaughter a sheep and present it as a sacrifice to God (1 Samuel 14: 33–35). David used a sacred rock as an altar at Gibeon (2 Samuel 20: 8). Other stones include the Serpent's Stone, the Stone of Zohemoth, and the Rock of Ophel, located under an oak tree at Job's Well (Ain Rogel) south of Jerusalem. On this stone, Adonijah, son of King David, held a feast during his unsuccessful attempt to establish himself as king in place of King Solomon (1 Kings 1: 9. M'Cheyne and Bonar 1845: 205). Under an oak tree near the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, there was a rock on which animal sacrifices were offered. On this rock, Samuel prepared a sacrificial meal when he appointed Jesse's younger son as the king of Israel (1 Samuel 16: 4–5). Among the archaeological evidence of altars in Palestine is a stone called Hajar Al-Nasara (Stone of Christians), or the altar of the prophet Dahi, located a short distance below the summit of Mount Moriah, north of Mount Tabor. Christians and Muslims alike have sanctified it and made vows and offered sacrifices to it (Paton 1919: 64). To the south of the shrine of Sheikh Mathkur, between Beit Natif and Surif, is the altar of the prophet Saleh, which is a bare piece of rock. It is said that he offered a camel as a sacrifice on it, and traces of its blood appear on it in the form of red stripes (Conder and Kitchener 1883: III, 382). At the entrance to the old mosque in the town of Abu Ghosh, there is a stone pillar with a height of 120 cm called Al-Uzayr. Above it, there is a pit for burning offerings. Though the reason for its sanctity is unknown, it is known that people used to sanctify it, visit it, light candles there, and make vows.

The sacred enclosure of a sanctuary is made of stones arranged in a circle. This sanctuary may consist of stones placed next to each other or in the form of walls of different heights and areas from one enclosure to another (Conder 1889: 43). T. Canaan (1998: 77–79, 239) mentioned that the enclosure was called *huwita* or *huwatiya* in the Palestinian dialect. It was made of random loose stones placed next to each other in the shape of a circle, usually with a diameter of 30–40 cm, often found around the

trunks of sacred trees or central standing stones. He saw many of this type in the south of central Palestine at the following sanctuaries: Qalandaia (Al-Sheikha Mubarak), Kafr Aqab (cave of Sheikh Abdullah), Gibya (Sheikh Abdul-Mohsin's sacred oak), Biddo (tomb of Sheikh Ali Al-Tallal), Yalo (Sheikh Murad and Sheikh Gharib) and Qatanna (Sheikh Abu Al-Kfir). There were also enclosures built with stones and mud tightly packed in the form of low round or square walls with an opening for a door, and some of them included in their inner walls niches for placing oil lamps and offerings, such as the shrine of Sheikh Hamdallah on the eastern side of the town of Biddo. Its enclosure was at a height of one metre and was built of stone and mud. It had a door on the northern side and a *mihrab* pointing to the *qiblah*. The shrine of Sheikh Sa'id in the town of Ithna had an enclosure decorated with henna, and people with fever lay in it for the purpose of recovery. Southwest of Al-Khader, the shrine of the prophet Daniel is located in a vineyard on a high mountain, which includes oak trees. The residents believe that the prophet Daniel performed prayers at this spot. Pieces of cloth and tufts of hair can be seen on the tree. People used to light oil lamps at the site. Finally, the enclosure of Saint George's Footstep is located to the left of the road between Beit Jala and Al-Khader. There, passers-by place bread, figs, or grapes in it so that others can eat, thus obtaining St. George's blessing.

In the town of Jifna, there was a small stone enclosure around the trunk of a large walnut tree growing inside the sanctuary of the Church of St. George, which was very large before it was demolished. Inside the enclosure, there was an altar where Holy Mass was celebrated (Robinson and Smith 1841: III, 78). The practice of erecting sacred stone enclosures in Palestine persisted to the present period (**Table 1**). Although some of these stone enclosures have been removed from their original locations and used as border stones for other sacred sites, they still bear the same sanctity (Duncan 1931: II, 55).

Since the enclosure represents the sacred space of a sanctuary, popular narrations state that saints preserved the space and protected it from aggression. They appeared to people to show them the sanctuary's boundaries. For example, in Rantis, Sheikh Saa'dah appeared wearing white clothes to a woman at night and said to her, 'These are your limits, and these are mine' (Sharifa Al-Taweel, 110y.o., Rantis, 21/10/2021). In Qabalan, the righteous saints who used to come to the cave of the rock of *Sullah* appeared to a woman in her dream and said 'we want to make a wall between us and you', and then they moved to sit under a nearby carob tree (Ratiba Yusef Salman, Qabalan, 100 y.o., 16/9/2021)

Regrettably, land reclamation operations have led to the removal of many stone enclosures, such as the site of the sacred Sheikh Sharaf trees in the town of Al-Tira, although traces of some ancient stones are still visible

**Table 1. Sacred enclosures found during field visits**

<b>Town – sanctuary</b>	<b>Brief description of the enclosure</b>
Marda – tomb of the prophet Thiryā	Enclosed on all sides except for an entrance from the west, shaded by a sacred oak tree.
Kafr Malik – tomb of Sheikh Shamayel	Contains the sheikh's tomb and other ancient and modern tombs, shaded by a sacred oak tree.
Al-Libban Al-Gharbi – shrine of Sa'd and Sa'id	Built at the height of some rows of stones.
Deir Ammar – tomb of the prophet Tamih	A low stone wall with a floor paved with stones, shaded by a sacred grape tree.
Yabroud – a sacred celtis (Hackberry) tree (Misat Yabrud)	Built with large stones, with a floor paved with stones.
Zeita – tomb of Sheikh Erkin	A sacred olive tree is still standing over the site of this tomb.
Kafr Thulth – oak of Um Zaben	Built with large stones in the form of a room without a roof.
Rantis – shrine of Al-Arba'in (40men)	Paving stones surrounding a carob tree.
Rantis – a sacred <i>sidr</i> ( <i>Ziziphus spina-christi</i> jujube) tree	A stone wall and a paved floor around the tree.
Rantis – a sacred carob tree of Sheikh Saa'dah	Partially destroyed, but some of its stones show traces of burning oil lamps.

on this site. Some have considered scattered stones to be the property of nearby sacred trees and thus not to be discarded. Therefore, people were keen to place them in and around the cavities and cracks of the trees. This was noted in Abu Abed's sacred oak in Farkha, the sacred trees of Sheikh Abu Lemon in Beit Iksa, and the sacred carob tree of Sheikh Ramadan in Qatanna. Nasr Al-Atari from the town of Atarasaid 'My grandfather owned a piece of land adjacent to the Qatrawani shrine, and he was afraid to take any of the stones scattered in its surroundings' (Nasr Al-Atari, 60 y.o., Atara, 10/11/2021).

### III. Sacred Cairns and Heaps of Stones

Distinct from stone circles or alters, a stone cairn is a collection of individual stones placed on top of each other, sometimes in the fashion of a miniature column. Most cairns consist of several stones skilfully arranged one above the other in a balanced manner (McCown 1921/1922: 66). A small cairn may consist of two to five stones (Canaan 1998: 90). In other words, it may be a foot or 18 inches high (Wilson 1906: 28). The lowest stone is the largest, while the uppermost is the smallest (Canaan 1998: 90). Cairns are similar to stone borders defining the division between lands, though cairns are more carefully organised (McCown 1921/1922:

66). In central Palestine, some sites were famous for their abundance of cairns, so they were called by names indicating that, such as the tomb of Said Abu Al-Qanater (Father of Cairns) in Zbouba, the shrine of Sheikh Muhammad (Abu Al-Qanatir) in Umm Al-Toot, and Kharubat Al-Qahaqir (Carob of Stone Cairns) between Jalaboun and Bisan. Cairns and heaps of stones on the tops of mountains are called *mufazat*. Upon reaching the cairn at the top of the mountain, one would offer a prayer and throw a stone at it (Sahhab 1990: 4/2, 626). The stone heap is considered one of the most sacred stone monuments. Among its varieties are those not connected to any sacred landmarks; these are only stones with niches for oil lamps, such as Sheikh Obaid in Sataf, Sheikh Sa'd in Wadi Khader (east of Abu Dis), and Sheikh Ahmed in Khirbat Al-Qusour (opposite Al-Jura). The second type consists of fenced heaps of stones, such as Sheikh Abdelmohsen in Qubeiba and Sheikh Al-Burdaq in Beit Rima. The third type is a heap of stones inside a cave, such as Sheikh Marjan near Ein Karem (Sahhab 1990: 4/2, 626). Muslim and Christian peasants in Palestine on their way to visit a sacred sanctuary or while travelling along roads that also led to a sanctuary used to erect cairns and heaps of stones or add one stone or more to a standing cairn or heap at the point where the sanctuary came into sight (**Table 2**).

Since most of the sacred sanctuaries in Palestine were located on the tops of mountains and high hills, numerous monuments were found along the roads leading to the holy sanctuaries or in close proximity to them (DeHass 1883: 312. Geikie 1887: II, 378. Baldensperger 1893: 204. Wilson 1906: 28. McCown 1921/1922: 66). When a visitor arrives at any sanctuary or passes by one, they commemorate their visit by placing memorial stones in the form of a cairn or a heap in memory of visiting the site. During his stay in Palestine, Jerome saw many memorial stone monuments under sacred trees (Conder 1889: 265–266). Sometimes, a person would place a 'stone of witness' on the tomb of a saint (Canaan 1998: 129). Field visits and interviews revealed many sanctuaries where the rituals of building cairns and heaps of stones were practised until recently. Some of those interviewed heard about them from those who were older than them, and others practised them personally or witnessed them (**Table 3**).

These stone landmarks and related rituals relate to the concept of witnessing, including practices of observing testimonies, contracts, and covenants. Part of this relates to the motives and objectives of visiting sanctuaries. Cairns are called stones or mounds of witness because they are erected to serve as witness both to the existence of the holy place as well as a witness to the visitor's visit to the site. They thus serve as a reminder to the soul inhabiting the shrine that the visit has taken place so that the soul does not forget to fulfil its duty to help the visitor by

**Table 2. Samples of cairns on paths leading to sacred sanctuaries or at points where they come into sight for the first time**

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Along the roads leading to Jerusalem, each one about a foot high. Others found near Ramallah, where Jerusalem can be seen (Wilson 1906: 28). The southern hills of Al-Jib, where the shrine of the prophet Samuel was visible (Conder and Kitchener 1883: III, 100).

On the way from Bethlehem to Al-Khalil (Hebron), where the shrine of Al-Khader can be seen. Near Husan on the Roman road leading from the west towards Al-Khader, in honour of some near-by sanctuaries (McCown 1921/1922: 66).

On the road from Beit Ta'mar to Bethlehem, where the Monastery of Mar Elias in southeast Al-Quds (Jerusalem) and the dome of Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Mosque in Beit Ta'mar are seen for the first time (McCown 1921\1922: 66).

On the hills of Ain Yabroud and Dura Al-Qar', where the shrine of Sheikh Abdullah located south-west of Ain Yabroud is visible (McCown 1921/1922: 66).

On the two roads leading to the shrine of Sheikh Omari Al-Jubay'i located in Khirbat Al-Jubayah on a mountain south-west of Beit Anan (Canaan 1998: 90).

Near Khirbat 'Ayn Al-Bayda located east of Tubas (Conder 1889: I, 146). At Jericho, where the tomb of the prophet Musa can be seen (Wilson 1906: 29).

At Umm Al-Qahaqir (Mother of Cairns) located east of the town of Al-Kafrin and 30km southeast of Haifa at the point overlooking the holy cemeteries at Tell Rama (Conder 1889: I, 248).

Halfway between Ein Gedi and Mount Sodom, where Mount Hor (Mount Aaron) and the tomb of the prophet Aaron can be seen (DeHass 1883: 311). When a visitor was unable to climb to the top of Mount Aaron, they erected a heap of *shahada* (stones of witness) where the mountain became visible, and they may have sacrificed an animal at the heap (McCown 1921/1922: 67).

At Al-Shurfa on the road between Beit Jala to Al-Khader (Sahhab 1990: 4/2, 626).

Near the town of Al-Taybeh, where the destroyed churches of St George are visible (McCown 1921/1922: 66).

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interceding for them with God. The terms stones/mounds of witness may also be related to seeing the shrine for the first time on the way to visit it. For this reason, one of these landmarks is also called *mashhad*, meaning a sign of the place of a sighting. The last name also means the place of pronouncing the two testimonies (*shahada*) at the point where the shrine becomes visible (Paton 1919: 62. Canaan 1998: 89).

In a similar way, cairns also serve as the physical manifestation of a testimony or covenant, in Arabic, '*Aqd*'. This means that their placement represents a testimony from the visitor that the place is sacred and worthy of appreciation and attention. These stones also bear witness before God that the person has visited the shrine and pronounced the two testimonies. The Muslims of Ain Karem used to make cairns (stone witnesses: *shawahid*), read Al-fatiha when they visited sacred sanctuaries, and say 'I bear witness to God today for you, and you bear witness

**Table 3. Samples of eyewitness accounts about sacred cairns and heaps at sanctuaries**


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<p>'I myself, in my childhood, built a heap of stones at the sacred oak 'Al-Muhallala', located between Deir Ballut and Kafr Al-Deek' (Ihsan Al-Deek, 62 y.o., Kafr Al-Deek, 22/9/2021).</p> <p>'I saw the women of Al-Ama'ri camp placing cairns at the shrine of Sidi Shaiban in Al-bireh' (Qanou' Eid Jouda, Al-Bireh, 80 y.o., 11/11/2021).</p> <p>'I used to see dozens of cairns and heaps of stones at the shrine of Sheikh Issa in the town of Al-Mazraa Al-Gharbiyya' (Ali Al-Sa'di, Al-Mazraa Al-Gharbiyya, 40 y.o., 23/12/2021).</p> <p>'The people of Kafr Thulth were afraid of Umm Zeben's oak when passing near it because they believed that it was inhabited by the jinn, and in order to avoid its evil, they put cairns or single stones near it' (Abdul Aziz Arar, 64 y.o., Kafr Thulth, 13/8/2021).</p> <p>'I saw cairns under and around a sacred oak that was on the northern edge of the town of Rafat, on the road to Al-Zawiya town' (Jamal Joudeh, 70 y.o., Rafat, 26/9/2021). Traces of some old cairns were noticed around the Al-Nabi Salih carob tree in the town of Qarawat Bani Zaid and at the shrine of Al-Nabi Salih in the town of Ithna (field visits, 15, 16\3\2022).</p> <p>Cairns are still being built at the sanctuary of Sheikh Hamdan in the town of Bidya, and stones arranged horizontally next to each other are also visible at the site (field visit, 12/1/2022).</p> <p>'Between Deir Ballut and Kafr Al-Deek, there was a very ancient and huge sacred oak. Whenever a person passed by, he would place a cairn of stones, pronounce the two testimonies and fix a banner on which the words of the testimonies were written on the cairn. That is why it is called '<i>muhallala</i>' or '<i>muhallaliali</i>' (the place of pronouncing the two testimonies)' (Musa Mustafa, 70 y.o., Deir Ballut. Ihsan Al-Deek, 62 y.o., Kafr Al-Deek, 22\9\2021).</p>	
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to me before God on the Day of Resurrection that I visited the site and performed prayers' (Baldensperer 1893: 204. Baldensperger 1913: 16. Wilson 1906: 29. McCown 1921/1922: 67). Muslims believe that on the Day of Resurrection, animals, plants and stones will be witnesses to their deeds, either for or against them (Canaan 1998: 89).

Among the other purposes for which cairns and heaps of stones were erected either before reaching a sanctuary, on the road leading to it, or upon reaching it, was to indicate and distinguish the presence of a sacred site (Grant 1921: 38. Berger 2011: 25). Because of the large number of cairns and heaps of stones at the same site, it can be difficult to distinguish the features of a sanctuary accurately. For example, in the tomb of Sheikh Mustafa under his oak tree in the town of Shoba, there are a large number of irregularly arranged stones above the presumed location of the tomb (Canaan 1998: 72), as well as at Tell Asur. A resident from Husan mentioned that people erected cairns at the shrine to bear witness that God is greater than everything. Someone would make a vow to the saint

and say to him, 'I will build a cairn for you if you fulfil my demand'. When it was achieved, they would erect a cairn to assure the saint or God that they had fulfilled the vow or as a testimony to its completion or seal of supplication and visitation (McCown 1921/1922: 67).

Peasants erected stone piles to commemorate a saint's memory, to commemorate their visit to the site, and to protect the purity and sanctity of the site. On the road leading from Qastal to Shoba, there is a large pile of stones built in a circle, which is 1.5 metres high and 2 metres in diameter. It was mentioned that the reason for building this landmark was that one of the saints appeared in this spot (Canaan 1998: 91). It was erected by foreign pilgrims to commemorate their visit to the holy site, to thank God for enabling them to perform the duty of their visit, and to request divine protection (DeHass 1883: 312). In some cases, stone cairns were built to ward off the evil inhabitant of a tree, such as a jinn or evil hidden spirits, especially to protect those passing by at night, as was done at the oak of Umm Zabin in Kafr Thulth (Abdulazir Arar, 64 y.o., Kafr Thulth, 13/ 8/2021). This demonstrates the protective power of stones.

#### **IV. Sacred Stones and Rocks in the Religious Heritage of Central Palestine**

In general, the veneration of sacred stones is not at the core of monotheistic religions. Despite this, many important stones and rocks in Palestine have acquired a sacred character. Historical and religious sources refer to examples such sacred stones. Samuel Ben Samson (1210 AD) mentioned that Rabbi Petachia of Patisbon (1170–1187 AD) saw the stones on which the three angels sat during their visit to Abraham at Mamre Oak in Haram Al-Rama near the city of Al-Khalil (Hebron). He also saw a rock in the shape of a tomb on which Abraham was circumcised. It was 28 cubits long and three hands in width (Adler 1930: 90, 91, 104). In the shrine of Nabi Yaqin near Bani Na'im there is a sacred rock on which Abraham's footprints appear (Canaan 1998: 129). It is also said that it belonged to his nephew, the prophet Lot, who stopped at this place after his escape from Sodom (Guerin 1869: III, 102. Conder and Kitchener 1883: III, 373).

Among the stones is also the heap of the covenant and the testimony. When Jacob disagreed with his uncle Laban, they both decided to reconcile while they were on Mount Gilead. Jacob called his uncle to make a covenant between them, so they made a heap of stones and a pillar as witnesses to this agreement (Genesis 31:44–52). It should be noted here that, traditionally, if Arabs wanted to confirm their vows, they would collect seven stones, wipe them with their blood, place them between the contracting parties, and keep them as witnesses to the agreement (Geikie



1888: I, 162). Taking oaths over stones is a practice that is not unique to the Arab world, but rather was also practiced in France (Conder 1891: 146). When Jacob buried Rachel, he placed a stone pillar on her tomb. It is still present and was protected and venerated by Muslims who erected a domed shrine above it (Dixon 1869: 80; Kean 1893: 103. Duncan 1931: II, 55).

According to legend, when Joshua bin Nun arrived in the Jordan Valley, he ordered each of the officers of the 12 tribes to carry a large stone, and they were erected in a circle in a spot east of ancient Jericho to commemorate their safe passage (Joshua 4: 1–9, 19–20). Among the stones mentioned in the Biblical stories during the conflict with the Philistines was the Stone of Help, which Samuel took and set up when he called on the Lord to help them against the Philistines (1 Samuel, Chapter 7: 12). Similarly, the rock of Etamis located in Beit Atab, southwest of the city of Jerusalem, where Samson sought refuge during his struggle with the Philistines (Judges 15: 8, 11. Wilson 1880: I, 138).

Christian heritage is full of sacred stones and rocks associated with Jesus and the saints. Biblically, a stone symbolises strength, solidity, and steadfastness and, if a believer leans on it, it does not let him down (Psalm 40: 2). For this reason, the Bible likened Christ to a living stone and a firm rock that grants safety to those who approach him (1 Peter 2: 4). Therefore, Christ himself was called a stone (Genesis 49: 24. Matthew 21: 42. Psalm 118: 22). He could also breathe life into stones and rocks (1 Corinthians 4: 10). The limestone table at the Mensa Christi Church in Nazareth is a sacred sanctuary for Christians because it is believed that Jesus and his disciples ate their food on it. It is 4m long, 3m wide and 1m high (Sahhab 1990: 4/2, 626). Near the shrine of St. Elizabeth located southwest of a Franciscan monastery, there was a large, venerated rock on which it is said that St. John the Baptist stood when the Lord preached penance to him (Guerin 1869: III, 102). During one of his northward journeys, Jesus sat on a stone at Jacob's Well near Nablus and asked a Samaritan woman for a drink of water. It was considered sacred by the locals and foreign travellers (Mills 1864: 46). East of Jerusalem, not far from the sepulchre of Lazarus in the town of Al-'Azariyya at the foot of the Mount of Olives, is the stone on which Christ sat when he was coming from Jericho. While sitting on it, he mourned and lamented the death of Eliezer (Thevenot 1687: I, 205).

The rocks of Mount Carnation near Jericho are considered sacred by Christians, especially the high rock on which Jesus performed his fast for 40 days and nights (Wurzburg 1890: 56–57). In Jerusalem, the footprints of Christ appear to the west of the pulpit of the Aqsa Mosque. They are called the Imprint of Jesus (Wilson 1880: I, 67. Johnston 1893: 244). Also in Jerusalem, in the Palestinian neighbourhood At-Tur on the Mount of

Olives, is the Chapel of Ascension, a shrine dating back to the fourth century presently located within a larger church and mosque complex containing a stone slab believed to preserve a footprint left behind by Jesus as he ascended into heaven (Cust and Kardus 1929: 33). In the sixth century, Theodosius mentioned a place called Bethphage or Anconaon the top of the Mount of Olives, where Christ leaned his shoulders on a rock, and they sank in it as if it were soft wax. To commemorate this, a church was built in that place (Theodosius 1893: 15). The footprints of Christ appear on a rock in the same mountain (Johnston 1893: 244). On the road leading to Tiberias near Nazareth, Christian stones are located in a high area overlooking the Hittin plain on the northeastern side. They are four or five blocks of black stones on which Jesus leaned while addressing the gathered people. The priests of Nazareth usually stopped there to say prayers (Burckhardt 1882: 336).

Among the eight olive trees in Gethsemane, where Jesus stayed with his three disciples (Peter, James and John), two rocks at the southeast gate are said to bear the footprints of two of these disciples. Pilgrims reverently kiss them and other rocks in the grove (Pfeiffer 1853: 118. Burton 1875: II, 45. Geikie 1887: II, 10). Historical sources from the fourth century mention a stone laid to indicate the place where Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus among the vineyards at the foot of the Mount of Olives east of Jerusalem (The Bordeaux Pilgrim 1887: 24. Breen 1906: 46). Among other sacred rocks is also the chair of the Virgin Mary (*kathisma*, which means 'seat' in Greek). Five miles north of Bethlehem, this stone is where the Virgin Mary rested and was blessed during one of her journeys from Jerusalem to Bethlehem accompanied by St. Joseph. Later, the convent of Elijah was built there (Theodosius 1893: 17). It is variously believed that part of the stone that enclosed the tomb of Jesus is located at this site, or that it was transferred to the church of Caiaphas in Jerusalem (Dalman 1935: 20–21).

Near the monastery of Mar Elias, there was a rock under an olive tree on which the prophet Elijah laid during his escape to Beersheba as he fled from Queen Jezebel. The angels provided him with a miracle there, recorded by the mark of his body on the rock (M'Cheyne and Bonar 1845: 175. Wilson 1880: I, 123). In St. George's Church in the town of Al-Khader between Beit Jala and Solomon's Pools, St. George's rock gained its sanctity from a drop of holy wine that fell on the stone while a Greek monk was praying there (Canaan 1998: 92). A Russian tsar tried to transfer it from Palestine to Russia, but he was unable to do so (Sahhab 1990: 4/2, 626).

Regarding the Muslim sites, as the name implies, there is a large rock located within the Dome of the Rock in the Haram ash-Sharif complex in Jerusalem. It is 17.7 m long and 13.5 m wide, and it is considered one of the most sacred sites in Islam. Muslims believe that it is the site where

Abraham wanted to sacrifice his son Ismail, and that it is also the spot where the prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven on the night journey of Al-Isra and Al-Miraj. Some also believe it to be the *axis mundi* or centre of the world (Sahhab 1990: 4/2, 626), though the Ka'aba in Mecca is also said to be the central location at which heaven and earth align. Muslims also believe that the rock is suspended in the air or supported by a palm tree carried by the mothers of the prophets Muhammad and Ibrahim (Burton 1875: II, 89) and that this palm grows at one of the rivers of Paradise (Canaan 2005: 63). Due to this importance, Muslims believe that prayer and supplication at the rock are more effective than at other sites (Mazen Ahram, 70 y.o., Jerusalem, 27/12/2021). It is also believed that between two pillars in the Dome of the Rock there is also a black stone or slab on which the Prophet prayed, and this stone is located above one of the gates of Paradise. Muslims are keen to perform prayers and supplications on it (Elad 1999: 79). The Al-Khader slab is another venerated slab at this site. It is located on the north-western side of the courtyard of the Dome of the Rock, and it takes the shape of a *mihrab*. Its colour is different from the rest of the slabs. Muslims believe that Al-Khader appears there on the last Friday of Ramadan, and people visit it constantly to pray for blessings and to seek their needs. After their demands are fulfilled, they return to the slab to distribute sweets, food, and drink (Mazen Ahram, 70 y.o., Jerusalem, 27/12/2021).

Near the town of Annaba on the road to Gemzo, there is a pile of stones. Beneath it, there is a rock known as: 'Prophet's Horseshoe'. It was traditionally visited by Palestinian Muslim peasants, and the surrounding area is named after it (Clermont-Ganneau 1896: II, 481). Under the oak of Sheikh Khater Al-Farisin the town of Deir Istiya, there is a rock with a cavity, which people call Khad Bint Al-Nabi (Cheek of the Prophet's Daughter), referring to Fatima (Nadir Al-Faris, 68 y.o., Deir Istiya, 23/9/2021). A few miles to the east of Emmaus, the rock on which the camel of the prophet Salih was said to have sat was considered sacred by Muslims, so a cave was dug in it, and the spot was named *Mabrakh Naqat Salih* (the place where the camel of the Salih sat) (Clermont-Ganneau 1896: II, 481).

At the sanctuary of Rejal Abu Tuxh (Men of Abu Tuxh) in Beit Laqiya, there is a round stone pierced in the middle with a sacred oak tree. People passing by read Al-Fatiha, kiss the stone and pray to God to fulfil their wishes (Musa Siam, 84 y.o., Beit Laqiya, 17/10/2021). Among the sacred rocks is the Debkin Stone located east of the town of Za'tara. It is about 50 feet long and 14 feet high, and it has niches for placing candles and vows. The reason for its holiness is the legend of Al-Dawa'ari, the ancestor of the Abu Nusair tribe. He was going to Jerusalem and, when he reached this rock, his camel died. So, he climbed on the rock, flew to Jerusalem, and

returned to its place, making it sacred. To draw from the sanctity of this site, local people began burying their dead there (Conder and Kitchener 1883: III, 388). There is a rock in the town of Haris on which people believe that Omar Ibn Al-Khattab prayed, so it became sacred, and a mosque was built over it (Omar Samara, 63 y.o., Haris, 23/9/2021). Some sacred rock shave been attributed to non-Arab saints, such as Iraq Al-Ajami in Beit Ijza, at which the residents make offerings. The same applies to the rocks of Naqar Al-Ajam, between two hills near Deir Ghasana. When people pass by, they recite Al-Fatiha for the souls of Muslim saints. A large piece of rock to the south of Salfit gained its sanctity because Sheikh Al-Arouri rested beside it, and so it was called the Arouri Stone (Canaan 1998: 91–92).

McCown (1921/1922: 68) also mentioned that there were some heaps of stones that lacked any explanation. On the way to Jerusalem, he saw a large stone standing in a field for planting grain just outside Sur Baher. His guide, a young boy, told him that this stone was consecrated and venerated to obtain fruitful agricultural yields. He added that there is a great variety of places that Palestinians have turned into shrines where they can worship occult forces, ask for intercession, and perform rituals. These practices persisted until the contemporary period and are still recollected in living memory.

## **V. Sacred Stones and Rocks that Heal the Sick**

Many cultures have invested great hope in the power of sacred stones to prevent diseases and help recover from illness. In some parts of the world, dolmens have been associated with superstitious practices and rituals with the aim of getting rid of diseases (Conder 1891: 151). In Palestine, it is believed that all the pieces of stone and rocky flats on which prophets and saints have sat or used in their rituals or daily lives are inhabited by a holy essence that can heal the sick (Baldensperger 1893: 210). People used to take dust from the stone on which Abraham was circumcised near the Mamre oak to use it to heal children after circumcision (Berger 2011: 21). In the town of Bani Nai'm, people resorted to the shrine of the prophet Yaqin for healing. For this purpose, they tied pieces of cloth to the door handle of the shrine and the frieze surrounding the sacred rock containing the imprint of Abraham or Lot's feet. The patient had to put on a new rag in place of the one they had taken (Canaan 1998: 129).

This tradition was known in Christian religious heritage as well. The Gospels record that 'God did extraordinary miracles through Paul so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them' (Acts 19: 11–12). The stones in the cave of the Milk Grotto in Bethlehem

acquired their white colour and sanctity among Christians and Muslims because drops of the Virgin Mary's milk fell on the land while she was breastfeeding the infant Christ. For this reason, these stones are believed to help increase mothers' milk supply. They are soaked with water, which is then drunk by the pregnant or breastfeeding woman. These stones were also used as amulets to treat various ailments (Canaan 1998: 91, 133). Until today, locals and pilgrims alike visit this site to pray for help conceiving and nursing children. Similarly, Christians believe that the stone of St. George's Church in the town of Al-Khader has the miraculous ability to heal the sick (Canaan 1998: 92).

Infertility or delayed childbearing has long been one of the most common health problems that Palestinian peasant farmers (*fellah*) suffer from due to the lack of health care. Infertility is traditionally regarded as a punishment from God. This problem has taken on a social dimension because of the prevailing idea that marriage without male children is like a tree without fruit and that a house without male children is a ruined house. If a long time passes without children, traditionally the husband and wife would go to the holy shrines to practise some rituals and take something from them, such as an incantation and a veil that can be hung around the woman's neck until pregnancy occurs (Sahhab 1990: 4/2, 583–584). Some young couples used to wash their clothes on the rock of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, believing that this could contribute to the speed of childbearing (Bauer 1903: 191). To the north of the town of Keferit, 10 km. west of Jenin, there are some pieces of rock at the site of the Banat Al-I'd trees. Girls used to go to them for marriage, and married women went to them to treat infertility. Anointing these rocks with henna was one of the rituals practised during the visit (Abdulhamid Abu Rami, 65 y.o., Keferit, 2/1/2022). In addition to fertility issues, stones can also heal back pain. Muslims rub their backs on the rock of the Dome of the Rock Mosque to heal diseases (McCown 1921/1922: 63). To the south of St. Stephen's gate in the Bab Al-Rahma cemetery located parallel to the Jerusalem wall, there is a broken pillar next to the tomb of Sheikh Shaddad. It is said that if a person rubs their back on it, they will be cured of back pain (Canaan 1998: 92). Located to the left of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, the Abu Al-Zuhur rock was distinguished by its ability to treat back pain. After a patient rubbed their back against the rock, they would place a stone on it. Stones are piled heavily on it due to the large number of visitors (Canaan 1998: 92).

In the village of Rantis, there is a stone called Hajar Al-Sukhunah (Fever Stone). It is at the edge of the village, on the southern side, on a flat piece of land devoid of any features. It is pointed at the top, its length is approximately 120 cm, and its width is 80 cm. If a woman had a child with a fever, she would pick up some small stones around it, put

them in a bundle and hang it with a thread on the child's neck. The belief was that it would take the fever away (Abdulkarim Salim, 84 y.o., Rantis, 21/10/2021). To treat fever, seven stones were taken from the shrines of Sheikh Gharib and Sheikh Abu Yameen (Canaan 1998: 133). In some cases, the relatives of a patient with a fever would place two chains of stones on a particular tree with the aim of healing (Canaan 1998: 128).

Palestinian folklore attests to the ability of evil spirits to cause diseases and harm people, especially children. The favourite place for these spirits to reside, it is said, is the thresholds of homes. Upon entering, one must be careful not to step on the threshold, and it is forbidden to hit children at that spot so that an evil spirit does not stick to where the child was hit and make the child ill (Sahhab 1990: 4/2, 602, 612–613). Visitors to the shrine of Sheikh Salman in Deir Al-Hawa used to touch the doorposts with their hands and avoid stepping on the threshold (Clermont–Ganneau 1896: II, 219). The women in the town of Media used to pray for healing, especially for sick children, at one of the caves believed to be inhabited by a righteous saintly woman. They would vow that if the request was fulfilled, they would paint the stone threshold of the cave with henna. This practice is reminiscent of anointing sacred stones.

### **Conclusions**

Sacred stone and rock veneration is a worldwide phenomenon. Various ancient peoples held mythological beliefs about them. Stone circles, in particular, served as early forms of sanctuary, dividing sacred and profane space. In Palestine, this phenomenon was a crucial part of the popular religious practices of Muslims and Christians, deriving from ancient Canaanite religious and cultural heritage.

The glorification of pillars, cairns and heaps of stones stemmed from the concept of the cosmic mountain. The stone element was chosen as an object for the divine spirit dwelling due to its mightiness, toughness, and endurance.

There are numerous sanctuaries in central Palestine where the stones and rocks are believed to be accompanied by the memories of prophets and saints. Stones were not worshipped for their own sake, but for the divine spirit embedded within them.

Sacred stone enclosures, such as stone circles, reflect the concept of the sacred sanctuary that was transmitted to the countries of the Near East from the Persians. This idea was suggested by the Canaanites who employed it to worship the god Baal and to distinguish the sacred geographical space. Dozens of sacred stone enclosures were constructed in Palestine.

In the Canaanite era, pillars were erected as altars on heights near sacred trees and close to the Mother Goddess. The intention of establishing pillars in Palestine was to invoke the special presence of God in the holy place and ease mediation with him through sacrifices and offerings of thanks.

Muslim and Christian peasants built cairns and 'heaps of witness' at spots where sanctuaries came into sight for the first time. They also erected them to indicate the existence of a nearby holy place or to be memorial marks to inform that a visit had taken place.

Palestinians use sacred stones to recover from diseases by rubbing their bodies with them, picking up small stones from a sacred place and creating amulets with them to hang around a patient's neck, circling around the stones, and wiping them with their hands or tying a part of the patient's clothing to it. All these create physical contact to build spiritual interaction with the body to receive blessings and healing.

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