

FICTION

Hard Places

THE ROCK**A Seventh-Century Tale of Jerusalem**

By Kanan Makiya
Pantheon, 347 pp. \$26

Reviewed by JAMES RESTON JR.

More than a year ago, for short-term political advantage and protected by a phalanx of Israeli policemen, Ariel Sharon pushed past the Western Wall in Jerusalem and strode brazenly onto the famous plaza, sacred to Islam and known to Muslims as Haram esh-Sharif or the Noble Sanctuary. Within hours the former general touched off the Second Intifada. Now, after hundreds of deaths on the Jewish and Arab sides, with assassination practiced openly as an Israeli state policy and Palestinian suicide bombers terrorizing the streets of Jerusalem, and no end in sight, the price of Sharon's deliberate provocation is hard to overestimate. It scuttled the fruits of tortuous, delicate negotiations that had proceeded in baby steps over the previous years.

After Sept. 11, the conflict between the United States and the Taliban is cast by Islamic militants, most dramatically by the mass murderer Osama bin Laden himself, as a struggle between the West and the East, between secularism and religious devotion, between Islam and Western Crusaders. In the terms of the debate itself, the clock seems to have been turned back years, if not eight centuries to the days of Saladin and Richard the Lionheart. Perhaps the only good thing to have arisen from the ashes of the Trade Towers and the stones of the Intifada is a mad rush in the West to un-

derstand Islam: its roots, its sensibility, its sacred tenets and sites, its anger. Suddenly, we are desperate to know what a true jihad could mean, why the word "crusade" is so dirty in the Middle East, why "they" hate us so.

The appearance of Kanan Makiya's important and imaginative *The Rock: A Seventh-Century Tale of Jerusalem* is both timely and useful for this understanding. Among its many virtues, unintended though this may be, is its insight into why Sharon's action a year ago was so incendiary. The Rock here refers to the holy, precious stone beneath the most prominent landmark of Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock. Makiya, an Iraqi by birth, an architect by training and a Brandeis University professor of Middle East Studies by practice, has set out to make sense of this mystical place, about which the same legends are often told differently by Muslims, Jews and Christians.

Through the creative device of a fictionalized narrator, the author's purpose is to emphasize the shared destiny of the three great religions when Jerusalem could still be called the City of Peace. In Islam, the Rock is the last and only vestige of God's work on the first day of creation, and the fixed point from which God laid out the rest of creation. This "navel of the universe," this "capstone of creation," is also the place where Adam fell after his temptation and is buried. Thus, the Rock is the tangible symbol of mankind's course from creation to death. It is the stone upon which Abraham, as proof of his faith, prepared to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, and the point from which Muhammad ascended on a ladder of light to heaven on his No-

turnal Journey into the presence of Allah in Paradise. From this Journey, so Muslims believe, the Messenger returned to correct the errors into which the other faiths had fallen over the centuries.

Makiya sets his story at the end of the 7th century, 72 years after the Prophet's flight to Medina in the year 622 A.D., which begins the Mohammedan era. His narrator is Ishaq, a talkative bookbinder and the son of Ka'b el Akhbar, an apostate Jew who was, in actual history, an important counselor to the Caliph, Omar Ibn el Khattab, during the latter's conquest of Jerusalem in the year 638 A.D. This Muslim conquest of Jerusalem began a 450-year period of Arab rule in Palestine that ended only with the invasion of the First Crusade in 1099 A.D.

In Makiya's story, Ishaq follows in his father's footsteps by becoming the counselor to the Caliph Abd el Malik during the construction of the Dome of the Rock at the end of the 7th century. In so conceiving his narrator in time and place and pedigree, Makiya can give the impression of a first-hand knowledge of the events, the major players, the politics and the debates during this rich turning point in history, when three religions and three Rocks (the Rock of Calvary, the Black Stone of Mecca and the Rock on the Temple Mount) were in such intense competition with one another. We are privy to the stories of his father, the Jew who has converted to Islam, of Muhammad's trials and triumphs, of Caliph Omar's wars and his relations with the famous Christian patriarch Sophronius. We get a lively rendering of the dispute over the mysterious, oversized footprint on the Rock: Did it belong to the

prophet Jacob, to Jesus, to the Angel Gabriel or to God himself? In making Ishaq an artistic adviser in the building of the Dome of Rock, the author gives us an insider's view (and an architect's eye) of how this beautiful, onion-shaped structure was constructed as if to float in the middle of the holy city.

Scholarly disputes over the period between 630 and 692 A.D. can still be spirited, since there are so many holes in the primary sources. In a forthright afterword to his book, Makiya argues that no amount of scholarship can settle these disputes, nor can the period be done justice, since the source material is scanty and sometimes contradictory. Thus, he argues, fiction must enter the breach and fill the gaps.

In general, this is a dangerous argument. But Makiya provides voluminous notes at the back of his book to support the leaps he makes into scene and conversation. His vivid renderings are so well grounded in the sources that he succeeds in overcoming the normal complaints about historical fiction. And by freeing himself to imagine, he allows himself the latitude to ask such fundamental and transcendent questions as "Why does God, who is the One, have two holy Rocks? And why did He change the sacred axis of prayer from one to the other, so that Jews face one Rock while we Muslims face the other? What happened to break the covenant between Mecca and Jerusalem?" The result is a solid, interesting, accessible and highly illuminating tome for our time. ■

James Reston Jr. is the author, most recently, of "Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade."