

Islamic Gardens

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Paradise of Gardens and its legends

"If, of thy mortal goods, thou art bereft,

And from thy slender store two loaves

alone to thee are left,

Sell one & from the dole,

Buy Hyacinths to feed the soul" —Muslihuddin Sadi - 13th Century Persian Poet



'Untitled' by Hakim Al-Akel. Acrylic on canvas, 80 by 100 cm, 2017.
Courtesy the artist and Hafez Gallery

For a desert-dwelling people, you would assume we would have a hundred words for sand, just as the Inuits have for the snows of the North American Arctic, (or, as I recently learned, the Sami languages of Northern Europe have 180 to 300 snow/ice-related words). Instead, we have at least a half a dozen words for gardens that includes *hadiqah*, *riyad*, *janna*, *raudah*, *bustan* and more.

In the Holy Qur'an, paradise is literally represented as gardens and uses the same word for it, and thus we end up with more than 150 mentions of *janna* (whether representing Paradise with a capital P or gardens in general). To that regard, we are a people that is shaped not by what is in this life, but by what is in the next.

Granted, we are not the first to lay claim to this concept of a garden-filled afterlife. The Babylonians talked about gardens in Paradise through one of our oldest pieces of literature, the epic of Gilgamesh, nearly five thousand years ago. It goes:

“In these immortal gardens stands a tree... this tree is next to a sacred spring.”

It is interesting to review how many ways we describe Al-Jannah (paradise) as a garden:

- *Firdaws* – The Highest Gardens of Paradise

- *Jannatul Aliyah* – Also the Highest Gardens
- *Jannat al-ádn* – Gardens of Everlasting Bliss
- *Jannat al-Khuld* – The Gardens of Eternity
- *Jannat al-Ma'wā* – Garden of Abode or Retreat
- *Jannat al-Na'īm* – The Gardens of Delight or Bliss

And we have some great lore when it comes to gardens in Saudi Arabia. In Surat Ibrahim in the Qur'an, we have a prayer by Ibrahim to God, asking for a garden with fruits to take care of his descendants.

“Our Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley of no vegetation, by Your Sacred House, our Lord, so that they may perform the prayers. So make the hearts of some people in-cline towards them, and provide them with fruits, that they may be thankful.” (Qur'an 14:37).

As the legend goes, the angel Jibreel or Gabriel, responded to this plea by grabbing a plot of rich fertile land from Al-Sham region (Levant area) and settling it right next to Makkah. This beautiful garden plot, filled to the brim with gardens and orchards of all manners of fruits, is the city of Taif. What is more, the legend goes that the fruits of Taif were specifically meant for the people of Makkah. As long as the fruits stayed in that region, it was ripe and fresh and bountiful. Once you tried to take anything out to neighboring areas, the leaves would wilt and the plants would wither.

The history of gardens in Islam naturally extends throughout our timeline and across all the regions we have touched. Many ideas and concepts which became typical of Islamic gardens originated with the Persians, which the Islamic empire incorporated after conquering Persia in the 7th century. For centuries afterwards, you would still find beautiful gardens at homes and in public spaces in all the countries that were once part of the Islamic Empire, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria and Spain.

In the time of the Abbasids (750—1258), Baghdad was built to take advantage of the rivers in the area, a sophisticated canal network was developed, and soon it became a city of gardens and parks and promenades.

Later in the 14th century, we see the leader Timur Khan relying heavily on grand Islamic gardens within his society, such as those found in his city of Samarkand in Uzbekistan. A couple of centuries later, his descendant, Babur, would establish the Mughal Empire that controlled most of South Asia. During that time, the people and especially the emperors, were always invested in Islamic gardens, to the point that the emperor Jahangir was known more as a gardener and botanist than as an emperor. Out of that empire we get the beautiful Shalamar Gardens in Lahore and the Taj Mahal in Agra, both under the auspices of the Shah Jahan (reign 1628-58).

One essential concept in Islamic gardens comes to us as a Persian interpretation of the four gardens of paradise mentioned in the Qur'an: "And for him, who fears to stand before his Lord, are two gardens." (55:46) "And beside them are two other gardens." (55:62)

From this, we get the Chahar Bagh or Charbagh (translated as "four gardens"). So, the garden is always divided into four parts by water channels, culminating at the center with a fountain. In this way, we have not only the four gardens from paradise but also the four rivers of paradise, representing water, laban (milk), wine and honey.

"The likeness of the Garden promised to the righteous: in it are rivers of pure water, and rivers of milk forever fresh, and rivers of wine delightful to the drinkers, and rivers of strained honey. And therein they will have of every fruit, and forgiveness from their Lord." (Qur'an 47:15)

What's intriguing is that this concept of four comes up not just in Islam, but also in Christian and Jewish texts associating four rivers with the Garden of Eden, as well as pre-Islamic concepts surrounding the four sacred elements of water, fire, wind and earth.

You will find this design concept everywhere. The Umayyad Palace at Rusafa in Syria is one of the earliest examples, but it quickly spread from Afghanistan to Spain, culminating with the aforementioned Taj Mahal as an incredibly famous example of Chahar Bagh, albeit as a garden tomb.

With the mention of garden tombs, we reflect upon an instance of a plot of land being moved from one location to another. Granted, this time it is a bit of a longer distance as we are talking about the Rawdah in the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah. Here we have a garden that is not so much green as it is sacred, since it is believed to be a garden from paradise that is on loan to us on Earth until the end of times.

It is not hard to see that our desert Kingdom and Islamic history lies upon a lush and fertile bed of sacred jannas and literal gardens.

Special Contributor:

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