

Journal of Religion & Society (JR&S)

Available Online:

<https://islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/index>

Print ISSN: 3006-1296 Online ISSN: 3006-130X

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)

A Critical Review of Don Gibson's Theory Regarding the Geographical Location of Well of Zamzam

Nisar Ahmad

PhD Research Scholar, Department of Islamic & Arabic Studies

University of Swat

Email: nisarkabal123@gmail.com

Dr. Javed Khan

Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic & Arabic Studies

University of Swat

Email: javed48442@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper critically examines Dan Gibson's controversial hypothesis that challenges the traditional Islamic belief that Mecca is the original sacred city, proposing instead that Petra in Jordan holds this distinction. Gibson's theory involves relocating key Islamic religious sites, including the Well of Zamzam, from Mecca to Petra, based on his analysis of early Islamic texts and geographical inconsistencies. The study outlines the historical and religious significance of the Well of Zamzam within Islamic tradition and contrasts it with Gibson's arguments, which link the Zamzam well to a spring near Petra, drawing on biblical references to the Zamzummim people and Petra's reputation as the "City of Cisterns." A critical evaluation reveals significant weaknesses and contradictions in Gibson's claims, particularly regarding the geographical disconnect between the Zamzummim territory and Petra, and the flawed reasoning that associates Petra's cisterns with the Zamzam well. The paper concludes that Gibson's arguments lack substantial evidence and do not convincingly challenge the established understanding of Mecca as the holiest city in Islam.

Keywords: *The Well of Zamzam, Mecca, Quranic Geography, Dan Gibson, Orientalism*

1- Introduction

Dan Gibson, a Canadian orientalist and researcher, posits a controversial hypothesis that challenges the traditional understanding of Islam's sacred geography. Contrary to the widely accepted view that Mecca is the holiest city in Islam, Gibson argues that the original sacred city was actually Petra, located in present-day Jordan. This claim is based on his critical examination of historical texts, early Islamic sources, and geographical

descriptions found in classical Islamic historiography and the *Seerah*—the traditional biographies of the Prophet Muhammad.

Gibson contends that many references to Mecca and its surrounding landmarks in these early texts do not correspond with the known geography of the modern city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Instead, he suggests that these descriptions more accurately align with the landscape and archaeological features of Petra. As part of his broader thesis, Gibson attempts to relocate significant religious sites traditionally associated with Mecca—such as the Cave of *Hira*, the Well of Zamzam, and other key locations mentioned in Islamic tradition—to Petra. His argument extends to the notion that these sacred sites, central to the early Islamic narrative and pilgrimage practices, were originally situated in or near Petra rather than in the Hejaz region.

1.1 The Well of Zamzam

The Well of Zamzam is located within the Masjid al-Haram (Grand Mosque) in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, approximately 20 meters east of the *Kaaba*, the holiest site in Islam. It lies beneath the surface of the mosque, and although the actual well is no longer visible due to modern developments, its water is pumped and distributed through dispensers throughout the mosque for pilgrims to drink. The well is about 30 meters (98 feet) deep, with a diameter ranging between 1.08 to 2.66 meters. It is situated at approximately 21.4225° N, 39.8262° E. The Zamzam well holds great spiritual significance in Islam, believed to be miraculously provided by Allah in response to Hajar's search for water for her son Isma'il, and continues to serve millions of pilgrims with pure, blessed water to this day.

1.2 The Historical Background of the Well of Zamzam

About four thousand years ago, Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him) came to Mecca with his beloved son Ismail and his wife, Hagar. At that time, Ismail (peace be upon him) was still an infant. Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him) settled them under a tree slightly above the site of Zamzam. There was no cultivation or water in Mecca at that time. He left them with a bag of dates and a water skin, then turned to leave.

The wife of Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him), Hagar ran after him and called out: "Where are you going, leaving us in this barren valley?" She repeated this several times, but Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him) did not respond. Finally, she asked: "Did Allah command you to do this?" He replied: "Yes." She said: "Then Allah will not forsake us." Saying this, she returned to the shade of the tree.

Lady Hagar continued to nurse her child peacefully and drank from the water until it ran out. The child began to cry from thirst, and she could no longer bear to see him suffering. In her desperation, she got up and rushed to the nearby hill of *Safa*. She climbed it and looked around, hoping to spot someone, but found no one. She came down and, gathering the edge of her dress, ran across the valley like a distressed person toward *Marwah*. She

climbed it and looked around again, but found no one. She did this seven times.

When she climbed *Marwah* for the last time, she heard a voice. She said to herself: "Be quiet," and listened carefully. She heard the voice again. She said: "I have heard you; if you can help, then do so." Suddenly, she saw an angel standing at the location of present day Zamzam. The angel struck the ground with his heel or wing, and water gushed forth. She rushed to the spot and began to gather the water with her hands, forming a small basin around it, and filled her water skin. She drank the water and fed her child. Thus, Lady Hagar and her son spent their days and nights there. One day, a caravan from the tribe of *Jurhum* passed by. When they saw the spring, they asked Lady Hagar for permission to settle there. She granted them permission, and they made Mecca their home.

Later, by Allah's command, Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him) and his son Ismail (peace be upon him) built the *Kaaba* there. People began to come for pilgrimage, and the *Jurhum* tribe served these pilgrims. However, when the *Jurhum* began oppressing the pilgrims and their excesses became unbearable, Allah caused them to be expelled from Mecca.

Before fleeing to Yemen, the last chief of *Jurhum*, Amr ibn Harith, threw the *Kaaba*'s valuable gifts and offerings into the Zamzam well, then filled it with earth and rubble to hide it. Over time, floods and natural disasters erased all traces of it. For many years, the well remained lost and its location forgotten.

But when Allah willed to once again benefit His creation from this blessed spring, He guided the noble leader of *Quraysh* and the grandfather of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Abdul Muttalib, to rediscover and dig up the well of Zamzam.¹

Abdul Muttalib saw a dream in which he was commanded to dig the well of Zamzam, and in the dream, he was also shown its exact location. Upon waking, he began the excavation with his son Harith. Gradually, they unearthed the items that the tribe of *Jurhum* had buried in the well before leaving Mecca—namely, swords, armor, and two golden deer.

Abdul Muttalib used the swords to forge the door of the *Kaaba*. The two golden deer were also embedded into the door, and he began organizing the distribution of Zamzam water to the pilgrims. Since that time, the water of Zamzam has continued to flow without any decrease whatsoever.²

¹ : *Muhammad bin Abdullah Al-Azraqi, Akhbar-i-Makkah*, Dar-ul-Undlus, Beirut Lebanon, (2nd Edition: 1403AH-1983AD) Vol: 2, P: 39-41

² : *Ibn-i-Hisham, Al-Sirta-un-Nabawia*, Vol: 1, P: 163-169

2- Don Gibson's Theory about the Geographical Location of the Well of Zamzam

According to Don Gibson, Petra—not Mecca—is the holy city of Islam. He believes that the origins of Islam trace back to Petra. We have already clarified that within Mecca and its surrounding areas, there are numerous significant sites deeply connected to the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and any account of his biography would be incomplete without mentioning them.

So when Don Gibson attempted to relocate Mecca from Saudi Arabia to the Jordanian city of Petra, he was consequently forced to also relocate all those sites mentioned in the Prophet's biography that were situated in or around Mecca. Thus, Gibson now attempts to transfer every such site with a connection to Mecca to Petra.

Don Gibson claims that the Well of Zamzam does not refer to the spring located just a few meters from the *Kaaba* in Mecca. Rather, he argues that it refers to a spring in the city of Petra.³ He presents two arguments to support this claim:

2.1 First argument

Don Gibson says that the Holy Bible mentions a people called the Zamzummims, who lived in the region of Ammon, near Petra. It is possible, he argues, that a spring near Petra became known as Zamzam due to its association with the Zamzummim people.⁴

2.2 Second Argument

Dan Gibson says that the Petra is known as the "City of Cisterns," and so, according to him, it is highly probable that the Well of Zamzam was located in that city.⁵

3- A Critical Evaluation of Dan Gibson's Arguments

The arguments presented by Dan Gibson in support of relocating the Zamzam well from Mecca to Petra are so tenuous that labeling them as "evidence" seems a disservice to the very concept of rational argumentation. Nevertheless, in the spirit of intellectual generosity, we shall treat them as arguments and offer a critical evaluation.

3.1 Response to the First Argument

The people referred to in The Holy Bible as Zamzummim resided in the region of Ammon. According to The Holy Bible, due to their transgressions, God destroyed the Zamzummim and granted their land to

³ : Dan Gibson, *Quranic Geography*, Independent Scholar Press, Canada (2011) P: 278-279

⁴ : Ibid

⁵ : Ibid

the Children of Ammon. This territory subsequently became known as Ammon, and is referred to as such in the biblical texts.⁶

Biblical geographers and scholars identify the historical region of Ammon with the area surrounding modern-day Amman, the capital of Jordan. Notably, Amman lies over 200 kilometers north of Petra.⁷

Gibson's claim that the Zamzam well might have been named after a spring belonging to the Zamzummim is a highly speculative and weak assertion. Even if, for the sake of argument, this claim were to be accepted, it still fails to substantiate his broader thesis. Historical sources consistently place the Zamzam well within the boundaries of Mecca, just a few meters from the *Kaaba* and situated between the hills of *Safa* and *Marwah*.

Dan Gibson himself asserts that Zamzam, *Safa*, and *Marwah* were all located within Petra, which he proposes as the original sacred city of Islam. However, as previously noted, the Zamzummim resided in Ammon, approximately 200 kilometers north of Petra. This leads to an obvious contradiction: If Petra is indeed the original sacred city of Islam, how can the Zamzam well be associated with a region two hundred kilometers away?

This raises a critical question for Gibson: Is the original sacred city of Islam, according to your theory, the region of the Zamzummim—i.e., Ammon (modern-day Amman)—or is it Petra?

3.2 Response to the Second Argument

Even if a city is popularly known as the "City of Cisterns," it does not logically follow that all significant water sources—including the Zamzam well—must be located there. Such a designation is not exclusive nor definitive in determining religious or historical geography.

Moreover, accepting Gibson's reasoning for the sake of argument still does not validate his conclusion. Globally, the term "City of Cisterns" is most famously associated with Istanbul, Turkey. By Gibson's logic, then, should the Zamzam well be relocated to Istanbul? Does that make Istanbul the original holy city of Islam?

Furthermore, several other cities across the world are similarly referred to as "Cities of Cisterns" on a regional basis. For example, the city of Qazvin in Iran is also recognized by this title.

4- Conclusion

Dan Gibson's theory proposing Petra as the original sacred city of Islam and relocating key religious sites, including the Well of Zamzam, from Mecca to Petra presents a radical departure from traditional Islamic historiography. However, upon critical examination, his arguments lack substantial evidence and are undermined by significant geographical and

⁶ : Deuteronomy 2: 19-21

⁷ : Zaine Ridling, Bible Atlas, P: 4

historical inconsistencies. The association of the Zamzam well with the biblical Zamzummim people near Ammon, which lies far from Petra, contradicts his central claim, while the reliance on Petra's title as the "City of Cisterns" offers no convincing proof that the Zamzam well was ever located there. Moreover, established Islamic sources, historical narratives, and archaeological data consistently affirm the presence of the Zamzam well within the precincts of Mecca, near the *Kaaba* and the hills of *Safa* and *Marwah*. Therefore, Gibson's hypothesis fails to withstand rigorous scrutiny and does not provide a credible challenge to the traditional understanding of Mecca as Islam's holiest city and the true location of the Well of Zamzam.