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Joel Blecher, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of History, Bayard Dodge Distinguished Visiting Professor
2023–24 at The American University in Cairo

The George Washington University,
Washington, D.C.

Born in 1982 in Oberlin, Oh., USA

Studied Religion and Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University

PROJECT

Profit & Prophecy: Islam and the Spice Trade

My current book project, "Profit & Prophecy: Islam and the Spice Trade," explores the dynamic and competing visions of Islam that transformed the ethics of global maritime trade prior to the rise of modern capitalism. The book takes readers on a journey along the spice routes of the long 15th century – traversing the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean – and brings to life the dilemmas faced by Muslim merchants and scholars who navigated the risks of the spice routes' moral, economic, and geographic hazards. Because the worlds of religious scholars and businessmen were interlinked in this period, their stories offer a rare archive that bridges the histories of religion and commercial life, illuminating how Muslim sensibilities of economic justice and oppression formed, fragmented, and evolved across vast distances. The book argues not only that growing demand for spices in the long 15th century increased patronage for Islamic scholarly knowledge, but also that the spice trade conditioned the lively debates among Muslims over price fixing, tariffs, taxes, market regulation, administrative corruption, worldly desire, and the value of spices themselves. In turn, the religious commitments that emerged from these debates normalized certain commercial practices to the exclusion of others, exerting a homogenizing force on trade that operated beyond the boundaries of any single empire, while also being open to change as Muslims ventured into new parts of the world. In doing so, the book will significantly expand our understanding of late medieval and early modern Islamic economic thought and offer a counter-history of a trading route largely remembered in the Western imagination as the spark for the European "Age of Discovery." In this way, "Profit & Prophecy" will help rewrite our narratives of the history of globalization and shed new light on how and why people have turned to religious traditions to make sense of their commercial worlds.

Recommended Reading

Blecher, Joel. *Said the Prophet of God: Hadith Commentary across a Millennium*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018.

—. "Scholars, Spice Traders, and Sultans: Arguing over the Alms-Tax in the Mamluk Era." *Islamic Law and Society* 27 (2020): 53–82.

Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani. *Merits of the Plague*. Edited and translated by Joel Blecher and Mairaj Syed. London: Penguin Classics, 2023.

Blecher, Joel (Edinburgh,2023)

Hadith commentary : continuity and change

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1853076627>

Edinburgh studies in Islamic scripture and theology

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1853076627>

Blecher, Joel ([London],2023)

Merits of the plague

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1819250199>

Badl al-m^uñ fi fa^ḍl a^ṭ-ṭ^uñ

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1819250199>

Blecher, Joel (Leiden,2020)

Scholars, spice traders, and sultans : arguing over the alms-tax in the Mamluk era

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1853507059>

Blecher, Joel (Oakland, California,2018)

Said the prophet of God : Hadith commentary across a millennium

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=891180303>