

THE PROPHET

MUḤAMMAD'S ASCENSION

Each year throughout the Muslim world, on the night of the 27th day of the month Rajab, is celebrated the festival called *Lailat al-Mi'rāj*, i.e., the Night of the Prophet's Ascension. The Qur'ānic basis for this is Sūra XVII, 1: "Glory be to Him Who took His servant by night from the sacred temple [at Mecca] to the more remote temple, whose precincts We have blessed, to show him some of Our signs." On this night mosques are lit up and special services of celebration held at which it is customary to read certain little chapbooks which give more or less elaborate accounts of the famous Night Journey. The brief account of the Mi'rāj given here is that found in the well-known compendium of Traditions, al-Baghawī's *Maṣābīḥ as-Sunna* (Khairiyya edition; Cairo, A.H. 1318 = 1900 A.D.), II, 169-172.

[It is related] from Qatāda, quoting from Anas b. Mālik—with whom may Allah be pleased—from Mālik b. Ṣa'ṣa'a, who said that the Prophet of Allah—on whom be Allah's blessing and peace—related to them [the story of] the night on which he was taken on his heavenly journey, saying: While I was in al-Ḥaṭīm¹—or maybe he said, While I was in al-Ḥijr—lying at rest, one came to me,² split all between here and here—i.e., from the hollow of his throat to his pubic hair—and drew out my heart. Then there was brought a golden basin filled with faith in which he washed my heart and my bowels and then they were returned [to their place]. According to another line of transmission [the Prophet] said: Then he washed my stomach with water of Zamzam,³ and filled it with faith and wisdom. Then a white riding beast was brought, somewhat smaller than a mule yet bigger than an ass, whose every bound carried him as far as his eye could reach. Him I mounted and Gabriel set off with me till we came to the lowest heaven, which he asked should be opened. "Who is this?" he was asked. "Gabriel," he replied. "And who is that with you?" "Muhammad," said he. "And has he had revelation sent him?" "Assuredly," said he. "Then welcome to him. How blessed a coming." Thereat [the gate] was opened, and when I had cleared it, lo! there was Adam. [Gabriel] said: "This is your father Adam, greet him." So I gave him greeting, which he returned, saying: "Welcome to you, O righteous son, righteous prophet." Then Gabriel mounted up with me till we came to the second heaven, which he asked should be opened. "Who is this?" he was asked. "Gabriel," he replied. "And who is that with you?" "Muhammad,"

¹The Ḥaṭīm is a semicircular, low, and thick wall to the northwest of the Ka'ba at Mecca. The Ḥijr is the space between this wall and the Ka'ba itself.

²Lit., "a comer came," a common way of expressing the coming of some supernatural visitor. From what follows we may assume that it was the archangel Gabriel.

³This is the sacred well in the precincts of the shrine at Mecca from which the pilgrims drink as an act of piety and thereby partake of its blessedness.

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said he. "And has he had revelation sent him?" "Assuredly," said he. "Then welcome to him. How blessed a coming." Thereat [the gate] was opened, and when I had cleared it, lo! there were John [the Baptist] and Jesus, who were cousins on their mothers' side. Said [Gabriel]: "These are John and Jesus, give them greeting." So I greeted them and they returned it, saying: "Welcome to the righteous brother, the righteous prophet." Then he ascended with me to the third heaven, which he asked should be opened. "Who is this?" he was asked. "Gabriel," he replied. "And who is that with you?" "Muhammad," said he. "And has he had revelation sent him?" "Assuredly," said he. "Then welcome to him. How blessed a coming." Thereat [the gate] was opened, and when I had cleared it, lo! there was Joseph. [Gabriel] said: "This is Joseph, greet him." So I gave him greeting, which he returned, saying: "Welcome to the righteous brother, the righteous prophet." Then he ascended with me till we came to the fourth heaven, which he asked should be opened. "Who is this?" he was asked. "Gabriel," he replied. "And who is that with you?" "Muhammad," said he. "And has he had revelation sent him?" "Assuredly," said he. "Then welcome to him. How blessed a coming." Thereat [the gate] was opened, and when I had cleared it, lo! there was Idris (Enoch). Said [Gabriel]: "This is Idris, give him greeting." [37] So I greeted him, and he returned it, saying: "Welcome to the righteous brother, the righteous prophet." Then he ascended with me to the fifth heaven, which he asked should be opened. "Who is this?" he was asked. "Gabriel," he replied. "And who is that with you?" "Muhammad," said he. "And has he had revelation sent him?" "Assuredly," said he. "Then welcome to him. How blessed a coming." When I had cleared [the gate], lo! there was Aaron. Said [Gabriel]: "This is Aaron, give him greeting." So I greeted him, and he returned it, saying: "Welcome to the righteous brother, the righteous prophet." Then he ascended with me to the sixth heaven, which he asked should be opened. "Who is this?" he was asked. "Gabriel," he replied. "And who is that with you?" "Muhammad," said he. "And has he had revelation sent him?" "Assuredly," said he. "Then welcome to him. How blessed a coming." When I had cleared [the gate], lo! there was Moses. Said [Gabriel]: "This is Moses, give him greeting." So I greeted him, and he returned it, saying: "Welcome to the righteous brother, the righteous prophet." When I passed on he wept, and one asked him why he wept. "I weep," said he, "because of a youth who has been sent [as an Apostle] after me, more of whose community will enter Paradise than of my community." Then [Gabriel] ascended with me till we reached the seventh heaven, which he asked should be opened. "Who is this?" he was asked. "Gabriel," he replied. "And who is that with you?" "Muhammad," said he. "And has he had revelation sent him?" "Assuredly," said he. "Then welcome to him. How blessed a coming." When I had cleared [the gate], lo! there was Abraham. Said [Gabriel]: "This is your father Abraham, so greet him." I gave him greeting, which he returned, saying:

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“Welcome to the righteous son, the righteous prophet.”

Then I ascended to the Sidrat al-Muntahā, whose fruits were the size of Hajar⁴ water-pots and its leaves like elephants’ [38] ears. Said [Gabriel]: “This is the Sidrat al-Muntahā.” There I beheld four streams, two within and two without, so I asked: “What are these, O Gabriel?” “The two within,” he answered, “are the two rivers of Paradise, but the two without are the Nile and the Euphrates.” Then I was taken up to the Frequented Fane,⁵ where a vessel of wine, a vessel of milk, and a vessel of honey were brought to me. I took the milk, whereat he said: “This is the *fiṭra*⁶ of you and your community.” Then there was laid on me the religious duty of performing fifty prayer services daily, and I departed. As I passed by Moses he asked: “With what have you been commanded?” “With fifty prayer services each day,” I replied. “But your community,” said he, “will never be able to perform fifty prayer services a day. By Allah, I have had experience with people before you, and I had to strive hard with the Children of Israel. Return to your Lord and ask Him to lighten it for your community.” So I went back and He remitted ten. Then I returned to Moses, but he said the like [of what he had said before], so I went back and He remitted ten more. When, however, I got back to Moses he said the like again, so I returned and He remitted another ten. When I returned to Moses he again said the like, so I went back and was commanded ten prayer services each day and night. When I got back to Moses he said as he had said before, so I went back and was bidden perform five prayer services daily. When I got back to Moses, he said: “And with what are you commanded now?” “I am bidden,” I replied, “perform five prayer services day and night.” “Your community,” said he, “will never be able to perform five prayer services daily. I have had experience with people before you, and have had to strive hard with the Children of Israel. Go back to your Lord and ask [39] Him to lighten it for your community.” “I have been asking of my Lord,” I replied, “till I am ashamed. I am content and I submit.” Then as I passed on a Crier cried: “I have settled My ordinance, and have made things easy for My servants.”

Thābit has related on the authority of Anas—with whom may Allah be pleased—quoting the Prophet—on whom be Allah’s blessing and peace—who said: Burāq was brought to me. He was a riding beast, white and standing higher than an ass but not so

⁴Hajar is the district of Arabia which includes Bahrain over on the Persian Gulf. The *Sidrat al-Muntahā*, i.e., “lote tree of the boundary,” is said to be a celestial tree which marks the boundary beyond which creatures may not ascend. It is mentioned in Sūra LIII, 14.

⁵This is the celestial Ka‘ba, the navel of the celestial world, situated directly above the earthly Ka‘ba.

⁶A *fiṭra* is a natural, inborn disposition. The meaning here is that the Muslim community will be a “midler” community, like milk, which has neither the intoxicating qualities of wine nor the cloying sweetness of honey.

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high as a mule, who at each bound placed his hoof at a point as far as his eye could see. On him I rode till I came to the Bait al-Maqdis,⁷ where I tied him to the ring at which the Prophets used to tie him. Then I entered the shrine and prayed a prayer of two *rak'as*. As I went out Gabriel came to me with a vessel of wine and a vessel of milk. I took the milk, whereat Gabriel said: "You have chosen the *fiṭra*." Then we ascended up to the heavens. In the third heaven I saw Joseph, to whom had been given one half of all beauty, and he welcomed me and wished me every good thing. In the seventh heaven I saw Abraham with his back propped against the Frequented Fane which every day is entered by seventy thousand angels who never return to it. Then I was taken to the Sidrat al-Muntahā, whose leaves are like elephants' ears and its fruits like waterpots, and which is changed when by Allah's command there covers it what covers it,⁸ and whose beauty none of Allah's creatures is capable of describing. There Allah revealed to me what He revealed,⁹ laying on me the religious duty of performing fifty prayer services each day and night. Then I went down to Moses. Said he (i.e., Muḥammad): I ceased not going to and fro between Moses and my Lord, till finally He said: "O Muhammad, it shall be five prayers each day and night, but each prayer service I will count as ten, so that will make it fifty prayer services. The fact [40] is that when a man intends a good deed but does not perform it I write it to his account as a good deed, but if he performs it I write it as ten good deeds. Also when a man intends an evil deed but does not perform it I write to his account nothing, but if he performs it I write it as one evil deed in his account."

[It is related] from Ibn Shihāb, relating from Anas—with whom may Allah be pleased—who records that Abū Dharr used to relate that the Apostle of Allah—upon whom be Allah's blessing and peace—said: When I was in Mecca [one night] the roof was split asunder above me and Gabriel descended. He slit open my breast which he washed out with Zamzam water. Then he brought a golden basin filled with wisdom and faith which he emptied into my breast and then closed it up. Then, taking me by the hand, he mounted up with me to the heavens. When we came to the lowest heaven Gabriel said to the chamberlain of that heaven: "Open!" When he had opened we went up into the lowest heaven and there was a man sitting with a lot of black specks to his right and a similar lot of black specks to his left. Whenever he looked to his right he laughed, but whenever he looked to his left he wept. He said [to me]: "Welcome to the righteous son, the righteous prophet." I asked Gabriel who this was, and he answered, "This is Adam,

⁷The common name for the Temple at Jerusalem.

⁸This is a reference to Sūra LIII, 16: "when there covered the Sidra tree what covered it," a verse of uncertain meaning.

⁹This is from the same Sūra LIII where v. 10 reads: "and He revealed to His servant what He revealed."

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and those black specks to his right and his left are the souls ¹⁰ of his progeny. Those to the right of him will go to Paradise and those on his left to Hell. So when he looks to his right he laughs and when he looks to his left he weeps.”

Said Ibn Shihāb—with whom may Allah be pleased: Ibn Ḥazm has informed me that Ibn ‘Abbas and Abū Ḥayya the Anṣārī used to tell how the Apostle of Allah—on whom be Allah’s blessing and peace—said: “Then he ascended with me till I came forth at a level place where I could hear the [41] scratching of the pens.” ¹¹ Ibn Ḥazm and Anas have reported that the Prophet—upon whom be Allah’s blessing and peace—said: Then Allah laid as a religious duty on my community the performance of fifty prayer services. I made my way back till I passed Moses, who kept me going to and fro to get them reduced till finally I went back to Him and He said: “They are five, but they are fifty, for with Me no sentence changes.” ¹² I returned to Moses, who said: “Go back to your Lord,” but I replied: “I am ashamed before my Lord.” Then I was taken off to the Sidrat al-Muntahā, which was covered with such colors as I know not [how to describe], and I was let in to Paradise where there were pomegranate blossoms of pearl and whose soil was of musk.

[It is related] that ‘Abdallah [b. Mas‘ūd] said that when the Apostle of Allah—upon whom be Allah’s blessing and peace—was taken by night he was brought finally to the Sidrat al-Muntahā, which is in the seventh heaven, and is the farthest limit to be reached by anything that ascends from earth, for it catches such, and also the limit reached by anything that falls from above, for that also it catches.¹³ He said that the verse “when there covered the sidra tree what covered it” (LIII, 16) means golden moths. He also said that it was there that the Apostle of Allah—upon whom be Allah’s blessing and peace—was given three things, viz., the five daily prayers, the concluding verses of Sūra II, and pardon for anyone of his community who refrains from giving Allah a partner.

Abū Huraira has related that the Prophet—upon whom be Allah’s blessing and peace—said: You saw me in al-Ḥijr where the Quraish were asking me about my night journey, questioning me about things at the Jerusalem temple which I could not tell for certain, so that I was distressed as I had [42] never been before, when Allah—exalted be He—raised it up [before my eyes] so that I could look at it, and they could no longer ask me anything but I could inform them about it. Also you saw me in a group of Prophets,

¹⁰*Nasam*, the plural of *nasama*, “a breath,” which is the Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew *neshāmah* used in Gen. 2:7 for God breathing into man the “breath” of life.

¹¹I.e., the pens of the celestial scribes.

¹²This is quoting Sūra L, 29/28.

¹³The verb *intahā* means “to come to an end,” and so *al-muntahā* is taken to mean the limit beyond which things may not go.

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and there was Moses standing praying. There also was a man, thin and curly-haired as though he were one of the men of Shanū‘a.¹⁴ This was Jesus who was standing praying, and the one who most resembles him is ‘Urwa b. Mas‘ūd ath-Thaqafī. There also was Abraham standing praying, and the one who resembles him most is your companion—meaning himself. Then the time for prayers came and I acted as Imām for them. When we had finished prayers a voice said to me: “O Muhammad, this is Mālik, the Chamberlain of Hell, so greet him.” I turned to him and he offered me greeting.

MUḤAMMAD’S MEETING WITH HIS LORD

A favorite episode in the account of Muhammad’s Ascension is that which tells of the Prophet being taken into the presence of Allah. As Enoch walked with God, as Abraham was the friend of God, as Moses spoke with God face to face on Mt. Sinai, as Jesus had a son’s relationship with his Father, so this story is intended to show how Muḥammad had an equally intimate acquaintance with his Lord. There are many versions of the story. That given here is from as-Suyūṭī’s *al-La’ālī al-maṣnū‘a* (Cairo, 1317 A.H. = 1899 A.D.), I, 39.

Now when I was brought on my Night Journey to the [place of the] Throne and drew near to it, a green *raḥraf*¹⁵ was let down to me, a thing too beautiful for me to describe to you, whereat Gabriel advanced and seated me on it. Then [43] he had to withdraw from me, placing his hands over his eyes, fearing lest his sight be destroyed by the scintillating light of the Throne, and he began to weep aloud, uttering *tasbīḥ*, *taḥmīd* and *tathniya*¹⁶ to Allah. By Allah’s leave, as a sign of His mercy toward me and the perfection of His favor to me, that *raḥraf* floated me into the [presence of the] Lord of the Throne, a thing too stupendous for the tongue to tell of or the imagination to picture. My sight was so dazzled by it that I feared blindness. Therefore I shut my eyes, which was by Allah’s good favor. When I thus veiled my sight Allah shifted my sight [from my eyes] to my heart, so with my heart I began to look at what I had been looking at with my eyes. It was a light so bright in its scintillation that I despair of ever describing to you what I saw of His majesty. Then I besought my Lord to complete His favor to me by granting me the

¹⁴The Shanū‘a were a South Arabian tribal group.

¹⁵The lexicons give as one meaning of *raḥraf* “a narrow piece of silk brocade.” It was an ancient idea that a human must be accompanied during ascent to celestial places. Gabriel had accompanied Muḥammad so far, but now he can go no further, so a kind of magic carpet is sent down to bring the Prophet the rest of the way into the Divine Presence.

¹⁶For these technical terms see Glossary.

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boon of having a steadfast vision of Him with my heart. This my Lord did, giving me that favor, so I gazed at Him with my heart till it was steady and I had a steady vision of Him.

There He was, when the veil, had been lifted from Him, seated on His Throne, in His dignity, His might, His glory, His exaltedness, but beyond that it is not permitted me to describe Him to you. Glory be to Him! How majestic is He! How bountiful are His works! How exalted is His position! How brilliant is His light! Then He lowered somewhat for me His dignity and drew me near to Him, which is as He has said in His book, informing you of how He would deal with me and honor me: “One possessed of strength. He stood erect when He was at the highest point of the horizon. Then He drew near and descended, so that He was two bows’ lengths off, or even nearer” (LIII, 6-9). This means that when He inclined to me He drew me as near to Him as the distance between the two ends of a bow, nay, rather, nearer than the distance between the crotch of the bow and its curved ends. “Then He revealed to His servant what he revealed” (v. 10), i.e., what matters He had decided to enjoin upon me. “His [44] heart did not falsify what it saw” (v. 11), i.e., my vision of Him with my heart. “Indeed he was seeing one of the greatest signs of his Lord” (v. 18).

Now when He—glory be to Him—lowered His dignity for me He placed one of His hands between my shoulders and I felt the coldness of His finger tips for a while on my heart, whereat I experienced such a sweetness, so pleasant a perfume, so delightful a coolness, such a sense of honor in [being granted this] vision of Him, that all my terrors melted away and my fears departed from me, so my heart became tranquil. Then was I filled with joy, my eyes were refreshed, and such delight and happiness took hold of me that I began to bend and sway to right and left like one overtaken by slumber. Indeed, it seemed to me as though everyone in heaven and earth had died, for I heard no voices of angels, nor during the vision of my Lord did I see any dark bodies. My Lord left me there such time as He willed, then brought me back to my senses, and it was as though I had been asleep and had awakened. My mind returned to me and I was tranquil, realizing where I was and how I was enjoying surpassing favor and being shown manifest preference.

Then my Lord, glorified and praised be He, spoke to me, saying: “O Muhammad, do you know about what the Highest Council is disputing?” I answered: “O Lord, Thou knowest best about that, as about all things, for Thou art the One who knows the unseen” (cf. V, 109/108). “They are disputing,” He said, “about the degrees (*darajāt*) and the excellences (*ḥasanāt*). Do you know, O Muhammad, what the degrees and the excellences are?” “Thou, O Lord,” I answered, “knowest better and art more wise.” Then He said: “The degrees are concerned with performing one's ablutions at times when that is disagreeable, walking on foot to religious assemblies, watching expectantly for the next

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hour of prayer when one time of prayer is over. As for the excellences, they consist of feeding the hungry, spreading peace, and performing the *Tahajjud* prayer at night when other folk are sleeping.” Never have I [45] heard anything sweeter or more pleasant than the melodious sound of His voice.

Such was the sweetness of His melodious voice that it gave me confidence, and so I spoke to Him of my need. I said: “O Lord, Thou didst take Abraham as a friend, Thou didst speak with Moses face to face, Thou didst raise Enoch to a high place, Thou didst give Solomon a kingdom such as none after him might attain, and didst give to David the Psalter. What then is there for me, O Lord?” He replied: “O Muḥammad, I take you as a friend just as I took Abraham as a friend. I am speaking to you just as I spoke face to face with Moses. I am giving you the *Fātiḥa* (Sūra I) and the closing verses of *al-Baqara* (II, 284-286), both of which are from the treasuries of My Throne and which I have given to no prophet before you. I am sending you as a prophet to the white folk of the earth and the black folk and the red folk, to jinn and to men thereon, though never before you have I sent a prophet to the whole of them. I am appointing the earth, its dry land and its sea, for you and for your community as a place for purification and for worship. I am giving your community the right to booty which I have given as provision to no community before them. I shall aid you with such terrors as will make your enemies flee before you while you are still a month's journey away. I shall send down to you the Master of all Books and the guardian of them, a Qur'ān which We Ourselves have parceled out (XVII, 106/107). I shall exalt your name for you (XCIV, 4), even to the extent of conjoining it with My name, so that none of the regulations of My religion will ever be mentioned without you being mentioned along with Me.”

Then after this He communicated to me matters which I am not permitted to tell you, and when He had made His covenant with me and had left me there such time as He willed, He took His seat again upon His Throne. Glory be to Him in His majesty, His dignity, His might. Then I looked, and behold, something passed between us and a veil of light [46] was drawn in front of Him, blazing ardently to a distance that none knows save Allah, and so intense that were it to be rent at any point it would burn up all Allah's creation. Then the green *rafrāf* on which I was descended with me, gently rising and falling with me in 'Illiyūn ¹⁷ . . . till it brought me back to Gabriel, who took me from it. Then the *rafrāf* mounted up till it disappeared from my sight.

¹⁷'Illiyūn is said to be the highest of all celestial regions. It is mentioned in Sūra LXXXIII, 18-21,