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TEMPLES ALL THE WAY DOWN: SOME NOTES ON THE *Mi'raj* OF MUHAMMAD

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *In this article, Daniel C. Peterson describes the famous “night” journey that Muhammad allegedly made from Arabia to Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem through the heavens and into the presence of God. His ascension through various gates of heaven, passing by the gatekeepers, is compared with biblical and Latter-day Saint teachings. Elements of the dream strongly resemble the biblical description of the Garden of Eden with its two special trees.*

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See Daniel C. Peterson, “Temples All the Way Down: Some Notes on the *Mi'raj* of Muhammad,” in *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of The Expound Symposium 14 May 2011*, ed. Matthew B. Brown, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Stephen D. Ricks, and John S. Thompson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 195–216. Further information at <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/ancient-temple-worship/>.]

The *mi'raj* of Muhammad is the famous “night journey” that the Prophet of Islam allegedly made from Arabia to Jerusalem (a part of the journey that is sometimes distinguished under its own title, as the *isra'*), and from Jerusalem through the heavens and into the presence of God.

The narrative of the *mi'raj* has long attracted the attention of Islamic miniaturists and illustrators (in, for example, the famous Turkish *Miraj Nameh* ["Book of the Mi'raj"] preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France). Moreover, it has served, in more or less allegorical form, as a model for many Sufi accounts of the mystical ascent to union with the divine and perhaps even for certain Neoplatonic cosmologies (e.g., those of al-Farabi, al-Kirmani, and Ibn Sina or Avicenna) in the Islamic tradition.

Allusions to the *mi'raj* in the Qur'an are, at best, sparse and rather obscure. There are, for example, two verses in the 17th chapter — known in Arabic as *Surat al-Isra'* ("the chapter of the *isra'*") because of them — that seem to refer to the story. Here is one such passage:

Exalted be He who took His servant [*asra bi-'abdih*] by night
from the Masjid al-Haram to the Masjid al-Aqsa, whose
surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs.
Truly, He is the Hearer, the Knower.¹

This verse is typically taken to refer to a journey from Mecca to Jerusalem. The term *masjid* is the common Arabic equivalent of the English *mosque*, which ultimately derives from its pronunciation in the Egyptian dialect of Arabic (*masgid*). The Arabic *sajada* corresponds to the English verb *to bow* or *to prostrate oneself*, and a *masjid* (from the same three-consonant root, *s-j-d*) is a place where such prostration occurs. Thus, more broadly, it indicates a place of prayer and worship, or a shrine.

It is striking for my present purposes that Muhammad's journey is, thus, portrayed as having occurred between at least two shrines, sanctuaries, or places of worship.

Al-Masjid al-Haram (roughly, "the sacred mosque") is the term still used to refer to the Grand Mosque at Mecca, centered on the famous Ka'ba. Although this shrine was, of course, much less spectacular than is today's enormous architectural complex, it pre-dates Muhammad. By contrast, the phrase *Masjid al-Aqsa* cannot refer to the building on Jerusalem's Temple Mount called the Al-Aqsa Mosque (and sometimes known — presumably by reason of its location, since it is, otherwise, a mosque essentially like any other — as *al-bayt al-muqaddas* or "the Holy House"), because that structure was built in AD 705 by the Umayyad caliph al-Walid, more than 70 years after Muhammad's death.² Nonetheless, the phrase almost certainly pertains to Jerusalem or to some place within Jerusalem — and very likely to the Temple Mount.³

Only one other Qur'anic passage, a set of six verses in the 53rd chapter that I will discuss below, seems to relate in any very clear way to the story of the *mi'raj*. So the bulk of the tradition about Muhammad's "night journey" comes from extra-Qur'anic sources, from the so-called *hadith* or "traditions" literature. (*Hadith* — the word is actually singular in Arabic, but, when used in English, often functions as a collective or a plural — are reports of the sayings or actions of the Prophet or his "Companions" that are used to flesh out, elucidate, and supplement the Qur'an as a source of Islamic history, doctrine, practice, and legal precedent.)

I will be drawing upon three major versions of the story. (There are others; this essay represents merely a preliminary summary of a solid but non-exhaustive sample of the relevant sources.) The first is that found in the standard biography of Muhammad compiled in the eighth century by Ibn Ishaq and edited by Ibn Hisham (d. AD 828 or 833).⁴ The second and third occur, quite separately, in the quasi-canonical collection of *hadith* reports assembled by al-Bukhari in the ninth century.⁵

There are variations in the story of the *mi'raj* as it occurs in the several sources. I will call attention to one or two of these. I will not, however, be paying any notice to the different tradents to whom we owe what we have of the account. That is not the focus of this article, though it is a worthy subject. Instead, I will be looking at the basic narrative, in something of a harmonized version.

I am also not concerned in this essay with the question of whether or not Muhammad really ascended through the seven heavens, nor even with whether he actually claimed to have done so. It is beyond dispute that, in either case, such an ascent — comparable to other ascension stories from around the world — was being ascribed to him by no later than the eighth century — which is to say by, at the very most, a century or a century and a half after his death. (And those ascriptions claim to rest on the testimonies of Muhammad's contemporaries and associates.) Whether true or not, the story becomes an indisputable window into concepts existing in Arabia and the newly established Islamic empire at a very early time.

The episode of the *mi'raj* typically commences in Muhammad's home town of Mecca, or near it, and is usually dated to a time prior to his *hijra* or "emigration" from Mecca to Medina — the seminal event that serves as the beginning point of the Islamic religious calendar.⁶

"While I was at Mecca," the Prophet is represented as saying,

the roof of my house was opened and Gabriel descended, opened my chest, and washed it with Zam-zam water. Then he brought a golden tray [*tist*; perhaps better, a “basin”] full of wisdom and faith and, having poured [*afragha*] its contents into my chest, he closed it. Then he took my hand and ascended with me [*‘araja bi*] to the nearest heaven.⁷

Another account says simply that the Prophet was “at the House [*‘inda al-bayt*] in a state between sleep and wakefulness.”⁸ The use of the definite article *the* or *al-* suggests that the “house” in question wasn’t Muhammad’s private dwelling but, rather, the immediate environs of *the* house, al-Masjid al-Haram. (The translator’s capitalization of the word *house* signals his judgment, too, that this is so.)

The motif of a washing followed by the application of something that is, at least metaphorically, liquid is striking here. It seems to represent something of an initiatory or preparatory ritual. It is also noteworthy that the water used for the washing comes from Zam-zam or Zamzam, a well that is located within the sacred precincts of al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca.

The “nearest heaven,” to which the Prophet is first taken, is *al-sama’ al-dunya*. The word *dunya* is a feminine comparative adjective that means “nearer/closer” or “nearest/closest” but that also commonly functions in Arabic as a noun referring to this world, the ordinarily and literally mundane world, as opposed to the next world or afterlife (*al-akhira*, “the last”).⁹ So this nearest heaven represents the boundary or border that marks our world (*al-dunya*) off from the heavenly world.

But Muhammad seems not to have gone directly from the vicinity of Mecca into the heavens. (Certainly, that is so in other accounts.) First, he went to Jerusalem. “Then the apostle was carried by night from the mosque at Mecca to the Masjid al-Aqsa, which is the temple [*al-bayt al-maqdis* or *al-bayt al-muqaddas*] of Aelia.”¹⁰ (But, as I’ve indicated, this cannot refer to the mosque of that name, which had not yet been built.)

The terms translated by A. Guillaume here as “the mosque at Mecca” and “the Masjid al-Aqsa” are, just as they are in the Qur’anic passage cited above, precisely parallel in the Arabic: respectively, *al-masjid al-haram* (“the sacred mosque”) and *al-masjid al-aqsa* (“the furthest mosque”). The places share in common the nature of what Rudi Paret calls a “Gebetsstätte” or “place of prayer.”¹¹

Aelia or, more fully, *Aelia Capitolina* was the Roman city built by the Emperor Hadrian in the early second century on the site of Jerusalem, which had been in ruins since AD 70, following the First Jewish Revolt.

The name came from Hadrian's *nomen gentilicum* or family name, *Aelius*, coupled with an indicator that the new city was dedicated to Jupiter Capitolinus — to whom Hadrian erected a temple on the platform where the Jewish temple had previously stood. The construction of this temple and city contributed significantly to the Second Jewish Revolt (AD 132–136), led by Simeon Bar Kokhba.

The name *Aelia* persisted in medieval Arabic, which preferred it to any form of the word *Jerusalem* — just as, today, Arabs prefer *al-Quds* (literally, something like “the Holiness”) or even, much less commonly, *Bayt al-Maqdis* (“the Holy House”) over *Urushalima*, which is the standard term in modern Arabic Bibles but which is attested at least as far back as the early second millennium before Christ.

But how did Muhammad travel from Arabia to Palestine?

Buraq, the animal whose every stride carried it as far as the eye could reach, on which the prophets before him used to ride, was brought to the apostle and he was mounted on it. His companion (Gabriel) went with him to see the wonders between heaven and earth, until he came to Jerusalem's temple [*bayt al-maqdis* or *bayt al-muqaddas*]. There he found Abraham the friend of God, Moses, and Jesus assembled with a company of the prophets, and he prayed with them.¹²

“He prayed with them” [*salla bihim*] could be more precisely rendered, because of its causative *bi-*, as “he led them in prayer.” However, the Prophet's role is brought out even more clearly in another, distinct, account that appears a few lines further in the text:

The apostle and Gabriel went their way until they arrived at the temple of Jerusalem. There he found Abraham, Moses, and Jesus among a company of the prophets. The apostle acted as their imam in prayer [*fa-ammahum rasul Allah ... fa-salla bihim*; literally, “The messenger of God acted as their imam ... and led them in prayer”].¹³

The term *imam* is cognate with the Arabic preposition *amama* (“in front of”). During liturgical prayer (*salat*) in a mosque, the imam positions himself before the congregation, which is lined up in rows and segregated by gender, and carries out the various ritual actions required for worship. Members of the congregation follow him, so that all perform the actions (prostrations and other movements) more or less in unison.¹⁴

This is the role that Muhammad is said to have carried out, leading all of his prophet predecessors in the motions of prayer and worship in the temple precincts of Jerusalem.

Here is a separate account of the beginning of the *mi'raj*:

While I was sleeping in the Hijr Gabriel came and stirred me with his foot. I sat up but saw nothing and lay down again. He came a second time and stirred me with his foot. I sat up but saw nothing and lay down again. He came to me the third time and stirred me with his foot. I sat up and he took hold of my arm and I stood beside him and he brought me out to the door of the mosque and there was a white animal, half mule, half donkey, with wings on its sides with which it propelled its feet, putting down each forefoot at the limit of its sight, and he mounted me on it. Then he went out with me, keeping close to me.¹⁵

The threefold repetition in this story is noteworthy. It is directly comparable with the traditional story of Muhammad's prophetic call and with Joseph Smith's account of the visit of Moroni, both of which prominently involve threefold repetition.¹⁶

Umm Hani', the daughter of Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib whose given name was Hind, is reported as saying that:

The apostle went on no night journey except while he was in my house. He slept that night in my house. He prayed the final night prayer, then he slept and we slept. A little before dawn the apostle woke us, and when we had prayed the dawn prayer he said, "O Umm Hani', I prayed with you the last evening prayer in this valley, as you saw. Then I went to Jerusalem and prayed there. Then I have just prayed the morning prayer with you as you see."¹⁷

She advised him to say nothing publicly about this claim, because, she feared, the Meccans would regard him as a liar. He ignored her advice and, of course, they asked him for proof. He told them specific details about caravans over which he had passed during his journeys between Jerusalem and Arabia, and those details were soon confirmed.¹⁸ (He is also said to have provided descriptions of the three named prophets.)¹⁹

The Meccans are reported, plausibly enough, to have mocked Muhammad's claim that he had been to Jerusalem and back overnight, and even some of the Muslims themselves are said to have lost their faith.

But Abu Bakr, who had been to Jerusalem during his career as a caravan trader, confirmed the details of Muhammad's description of the city.²⁰

But it isn't absolutely clear, even if we assume that Muhammad really claimed to have experienced the *mi'raj*, that his journey was intended to be taken as a literal, physical one. At a minimum, the preserved accounts indicate that some Muslims sought to minimize the apparent outlandishness of the story by insisting that, physically speaking, he hadn't traveled at all. For instance, his youngest wife, 'A'isha, a major source of *hadith* reports altogether (some of which, at least, show a clear tendency toward anti-literalism), allegedly said that "The apostle's body remained where it was but God removed his spirit by night."²¹

The matter is reminiscent of the apostle Paul's ambivalence about the nature of what may have been his own ascent into the heavens several centuries earlier:

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.

And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.²²

"After the completion of my business in Jerusalem," Muhammad is reported to have recalled, "a ladder [*mi'raj*] was brought to me finer than any I have ever seen. It was that to which the dying man looks when death approaches."²³

It is impossible here not to be reminded of the story of "Jacob's ladder" (*sulam yaakov*) in Genesis 28:

And Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep.

And he dreamed, and behold a ladder [*sulam*] set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.

And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; and

thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.

And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not.

And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God [*bayt Elohim*], and this is the gate of heaven [*shaar ha-shamayim*; literally, “gate of the heavens”].

And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel [*bayt El*; “house of God”]: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first.²⁴

The *sulam* or “ladder” of Jacob could just as easily be rendered in English as “staircase.” (In Arabic, a Semitic language cognate with Hebrew, *sullam* is the most common word for “stairs.”) A similar semantic range exists for the “ladder” or *mi’raj* that is brought to Muhammad. Although it has come over the centuries to refer to the story of his night journey from earth into the heavens, the basic, primary, sense of the Arabic term *mi’raj* is “means of ascent.” It can refer either to a ladder or to a staircase.²⁵

Jacob’s dream ... revealed Bethel as a temple in embryo: the concepts of the day visualized a *stairway* (the rendering *ladder* seems less appropriate) linking a heavenly temple with the earthly temple where God (or gods, in pagan religion) deigned to meet His worshippers and receive their offerings. The *angels* go to and fro at His bidding in their tasks and ministrations (cf. John 1:51).²⁶

“The word ‘place’ (*maqom*),” says a Catholic commentary, “occurring five times in the passage, has a cultic significance here; Jacob came to a Canaanite sanctuary.”²⁷ Says another, “The place’ (three times with the article),” observes another, suggests “a holy place.”²⁸ (Perhaps not coincidentally, at the front door of the Ka’ba, within the sanctuary of

Mecca's al-Masjid al-Haram, is the *Maqam Ibrahim*, the "station" or "place" of Abraham.) But this scarcely exhausts Bethel's temple connections in Jacob's story. The ladder or staircase was "possibly occasioned by the staged towers of Babylonia (ziggurats), the summits of which represented the gods' true dwelling place."²⁹ Thus, Bethel becomes "the meeting place of heaven and earth, between God and man."³⁰

In the subsequent history of the Hebrews, Bethel became an important center of the cult for the northern Kingdom of Israel following the break-up of the united kingdom of David and his son Solomon. Jeroboam, the first of the northern kings, put golden calves both at Dan, on the northern border of his kingdom, and at Bethel, on its southern boundary. (He appointed non-Levitical priests to serve them, a harbinger of the kingdom's heretical ways to come.)³¹

"My companion mounted it with me," says the Prophet Muhammad of the *mi'raj*,

until we came to one of the gates of heaven called the Gate of the Watchers [*bab al-hafaza*]. An angel called Isma'il was in charge of it, and under his command were twelve thousand angels, each of them having twelve thousand angels under his command.³²

There is, in the narratives of the *mi'raj*, a caretaker or watchman assigned to each of the gates of heaven. (The term *bab al-hafaza* might better be rendered "gate of the guardians.") Permission must be sought in order to enter, and at least some sort of formulaic question-and-answer procedure, accompanied by a blessing of health or life, is required. According to the accounts preserved by al-Bukhari, the same questions, answers, and greeting occur at each of the seven heavens.³³

When Gabriel took him up to each of the heavens and asked permission to enter he had to say whom he had brought and whether he had received a mission and they would say "God grant him life, brother and friend!" until they reached the seventh heaven.³⁴

The verb translated "received a mission" is either *qad ba'atha* or, in a textual variant, *bu'itha ilayhi*.³⁵ The root *b-ʿ-th* is connected with being sent out or dispatched, and, here, presumably refers to Muhammad's having been called as a prophet.

The notion that there are watchmen at the gates of the heavens whose permission must be obtained before Muhammad can pass, and

that Muhammad's ascension is linked with the transition from earth to heaven that, at least potentially, will be undergone by all mortal humans, suggests that every human may eventually need to ascend via *mi'raj*. It's not a great leap from that idea to the thought that perhaps all will even need to undergo the same sort of testing that occurs when Muhammad and Gabriel seek admission to the various heavens during their ascent toward the presence of the Lord.

It is difficult, in this context, not to think of Brigham Young's definition of the endowment given in the Latter-day Saint temple. "Your endowment," he said,

is to receive all those ordinances in the House of the Lord, which are necessary for you, after you have departed this life, to enable you to walk back to the presence of the Father, passing the angels who stand as sentinels, being enabled to give them the key words, the signs and tokens, pertaining to the Holy Priesthood, and gain your eternal exaltation in spite of earth and hell.³⁶

President Young taught this concept on numerous occasions. I offer a sampling of his other comments on the topic. "Will you abide our counsel?" he asked:

I say again, my soul for any man's, if they will abide our counsel, that they will go right into heaven. We have the signs and token to give to the porter at the door, and he will let us in.³⁷

President Young's use of the term *porter* is of interest here. We commonly think of a porter as someone who carries things. (Think of related words such as *portable*, *transport*, and *teleportation*.) This is an entirely legitimate meaning of the word, which derives from the Anglo-Norman *portour* and the Old French *portior*. Both stem from the Latin *portare* ("to carry"). But the Anglo-Norman word apparently represents a coalescence of two distinct Old French terms — not only *portior* but the very similar *portier*. And *portier* comes from the Late Latin *portarius* ("gatekeeper"), which is a derivative from *porta* ("gate"). Thus, most of the colleges at such medieval establishments as the universities of Oxford and Cambridge have "porters," whose role is to control entrance to those colleges and to provide them with security. So too, in the Roman Catholic Church, a "porter" is a member of the lowest of the four minor priesthood orders. His responsibility was to guard the church, open and close its doors and those of its sacristy and baptistery, and, at some periods, to

ensure that no unbaptized persons entered the church during Eucharistic services.

These other meanings for the term *porter* provide appropriate background for Brigham Young's use of the word:

I and my brethren have received our endowments, keys, blessings — all the tokens, signs, and every preparatory ordinance, that can be given to man, for his entrance into the celestial gate.³⁸

When we talk of the celestial law which is revealed from heaven, that is, the Priesthood, we are talking about the principle of salvation, a perfect system of government, of laws and ordinances, by which we can be prepared to pass from one gate to another, and from one sentinel to another, until we go into the presence of our Father and God.³⁹

He has taught you how to purify yourselves, and become holy, and be prepared to enter into His kingdom, how you can advance from one degree to another, and grow in grace and in the knowledge of the truth, until you are prepared to enter the celestial kingdom; how to pass every sentinel, watchman, and gate keeper.⁴⁰

All the riches, wealth, glory and happiness that we shall ever possess in heaven will be possessed on and around this earth when it is brought up into the presence of God in a sanctified and glorified state; and the sanctified ones who enter through the gate and pass the sentinel into the New Jerusalem, and into the presence of the Father and the Son, are the ones who will inherit the new heavens and the new earth in the presence of God, for here is the eternity, the glory and the power.⁴¹

Those who are counted worthy to dwell with the Father and the Son have previously received an education fitting them for that society; they have been made fully acquainted with every password, token and sign which have enabled them to pass by the porters through the doors into the celestial kingdom.⁴²

It is absolutely necessary that the Saints should receive further ordinances of the house of God before this short existence shall come to a close, that they may be prepared and fully able to

pass all the sentinels leading into the celestial kingdom and into the presence of God.⁴³

And Brigham Young wasn't alone in teaching this concept of the passage into the heavens. "Joseph always told us," said his first counselor in the First Presidency, Heber C. Kimball,

that we would have to pass by sentinels that are placed between us and our Father and God. Then, of course, we are conducted along from this probation to other probations, or from one dispensation to another, by those who conducted those dispensations.⁴⁴

When President Kimball refers to "those who conducted those dispensations," one is reminded of the various prior prophets who occupy the several heavens of Muhammad's *mi'raj*.

Orson Pratt, a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles, taught that:

We shall enjoy all that has been put upon our heads, and, through the Priesthood, and signs and tokens that have been revealed, come forth in the first resurrection, and pass by the sentinels and the Gods that stand to keep the way of eternal lives.⁴⁵

His fellow apostle Orson Hyde took a strikingly specific view of the matter, including the departed Prophet Joseph Smith himself among the guardians of the worlds to come:

I tell you, Joseph holds the keys, and none of us can get into the celestial kingdom without passing by him. We have not got rid of him, but he stands there as the sentinel, holding the keys of the kingdom of God; and there are many of them beside him. I tell you, if we get past those who have mingled with us, and know us best, and have a right to know us best, probably we can pass all other sentinels as far as it is necessary, or as far as we may desire. But I tell you, the pinch will be with those that have mingled with us, stood next to us, weighed our spirits, tried us, and proven us: there will be a pinch, in my view, to get past them. The others, perhaps, will say, If brother Joseph is satisfied with you, you may pass. If it is all right with him, it is all right with me.⁴⁶

According to the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord indicated to Joseph Smith that those who enter into eternal or temple marriage, if they live up to the covenants they have taken upon themselves,

shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things, as hath been sealed upon their heads, which glory shall be a fullness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever.⁴⁷

The divergences between the Mormon and Islamic worldviews are significant, of course, but so, it seems to me, are the parallels in these accounts of how one enters the presence of the Lord.

“When I reached the nearest heaven,” Muhammad is quoted as relating to his followers,

“Gabriel said to the gatekeeper of the heaven [*khazin al-samaʿ*], ‘Open (the gate).’ The gatekeeper asked, ‘Who is it?’ Gabriel answered: ‘Gabriel.’ He asked, ‘Is there anyone with you?’ Gabriel replied, ‘Yes, Muhammad is with me.’ He asked, ‘Has he been called [*ursila ilayhi*]?’ Gabriel said, ‘Yes.’ So the gate was opened and we went over into the nearest heaven.”⁴⁸

Another account, very slightly different, describes Gabriel and Muhammad’s approach to the first heaven this way:

When I reached the nearest heaven, Gabriel said to the heavenly gate-keeper [*khazin al-samaʿ*; literally, “treasure-keeper of the heaven”], “Open the gate.” The gate-keeper asked, “Who is it?” He said, “Gabriel.” The gate-keeper, “Who is accompanying you?” Gabriel said, “Muhammad.” The gate-keeper said, “Has he been called [*qad ursila ilayhi*]?” Gabriel said, “Yes.” Then it was said, “He is welcomed. What a wonderful visit his is!”⁴⁹

The term *khazin al-samaʿ* (translated here as “the gatekeeper of the heaven”) could perhaps more accurately be rendered “the treasure-guardian of the heaven.” A *khazna*, *khazana*, *khazina*, or *makhzan* is a “treasure house” or “vault” or “storehouse.”⁵⁰

“When Gabriel brought me in,” the Prophet relates, “Ismaʿil asked who I was, and when he was told that I was Muhammad he asked if I had been given a mission, and on being assured of this he wished me well.”⁵¹

In the course of the *miʿraj*, responding to a request from Muhammad, Gabriel orders an angel named “Malik, the Keeper of Hell,” to show that place to Muhammad. “Thereupon he removed its covering and the flames

blazed high into the air until I thought they would consume everything. So I asked Gabriel to order him to send them back to their place which he did.”⁵² At that or another point, Muhammad sees several graphic punishments, rather like those in Dante’s *Inferno*, for usurers, adulterers, those who devoured the wealth of orphans, and unfaithful wives.⁵³

In the lowest heaven, Muhammad sees a man whom Gabriel identifies as “your father Adam” where he sits “reviewing the spirits of his offspring” as they arrive from their sojourns in mortality.⁵⁴ “Then he ascended with me (*‘araja bi*) till he reached the second heaven and he (Gabriel) said to its gatekeeper [*khazinihi*], ‘Open (the gate).’ The gatekeeper said to him the same as the gatekeeper of the first heaven had said and he opened the gate.”⁵⁵ Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist are in the second heaven. Joseph of Egypt, the son of Jacob, is in the third heaven. “Then to the fourth heaven and there was a man called Idris. ‘And we have exalted him to a lofty place.’” Aaron is in the fifth heaven, and Moses is in the sixth.⁵⁶

The quotation about Idris, who is generally identified as Enoch, being “exalted ... to a lofty place” is from Qur’an 19:57, in which God, speaking in the first person plural, apparently refers to the translation of that biblical patriarch.⁵⁷

Muhammad has, by this point, reached the highest of the heavens. It’s noteworthy that his ascent has always been toward the presence of God, which seems pretty clearly to imply spatial location for the deity. (In Jacob’s vision of the ladder or staircase, “the Lord stood above it.”) It’s a very specific place. And, there, Muhammad sees a kind of celestial palace or, perhaps better, a celestial shrine or place of prayer — the heavenly prototype, presumably, of all earthly sanctuaries:

Then I was shown al-Bait al-Ma’mur (i.e., Allah’s House) [*al-bayt al-ma’mur*; literally, “The Inhabited House”]. I asked Gabriel about it and he said, “This is Al Bait ul-Ma’mur [*al-bayt al-ma’mur*] where 70,000 angels perform prayers daily, and when they leave they never return to it (but always a fresh batch comes into it daily).”⁵⁸

“Then,” another account has it:

to the seventh heaven and there was a man sitting on a throne at the gate of the immortal mansion [*al-bayt al-ma’mur*; literally, “the inhabited house”]. Every day seventy thousand angels went in not to come back until the resurrection day This was my father Abraham.⁵⁹

Note, here, yet another “house” or *bayt*. Recall too, again, the ancient conceptual background to Jacob’s ladder:

Jacob’s dream ... revealed Bethel as a temple in embryo: the concepts of the day visualized a *stairway* (the rendering *ladder* seems less appropriate) linking a heavenly temple with the earthly temple where God (or gods, in pagan religion) deigned to meet His worshippers and receive their offerings. The *angels* go to and fro at His bidding in their tasks and ministrations (cf. John 1:51).⁶⁰

There follows a curious incident indicating the existence of something at least resembling marital relationships in the postmortal life:

Then he took me into Paradise [*al-janna*; literally, “the garden”] and there I saw a damsel with dark red lips [*la’sa*] and I asked her to whom she belonged, for she pleased me much when I saw her, and she told me “Zayd b. Haritha.” The apostle [i.e., Muhammad, upon his return] gave Zayd the good news about her.⁶¹

In the *hadith* collection of al-Bukhari, one of the accounts of the *mi’raj* of Muhammad that I’ve been using comes in a chapter entitled “The Book of Prayer.” We now come to the reason for that placement.

While Muhammad is in the highest heaven, “there the duty of fifty prayers a day was laid upon him.”⁶² But Muslims perform liturgical prayers only five times daily. What is the origin of that much lower number?

On his way back down from the highest heaven (and, plainly, away from the literal place where God is), Muhammad encounters Moses:

He asked me how many prayers had been laid upon me and when I told him fifty [each day] he said, “Prayer is a weighty matter and your people are weak, so go back to your Lord and ask him to reduce the number for you and your community”. I did so and He took off ten. Again I passed by Moses and he said the same again; and so it went on until only five prayers for the whole day and night were left. Moses again gave me the same advice. I replied that I had been back to my Lord and asked him to reduce the number until I was ashamed, and I would not do it again.⁶³

A variant account tells the story somewhat differently. But notice that, in both accounts, God is implicitly regarded as having specific spatial

location, such that Muhammad is able to enter the divine presence, leave it, and return to it several times:

Then Allah enjoined fifty prayers on my followers. When I returned with this order of Allah, I passed by Moses who asked me, "What has Allah enjoined on your followers?" I replied, "He has enjoined fifty prayers on them." Moses said, "Go back to your Lord (and appeal for reduction) for your followers will not be able to bear it." (So I went back to Allah and requested for reduction) and He reduced it to half. When I passed by Moses again and informed him about it, he said, "Go back to your Lord as your followers will not be able to bear it." So I returned to Allah and requested for further reduction and half of it was reduced. I again passed by Moses and he said to me: "Return to your Lord, for your followers will not be able to bear it." So I returned to Allah and He said, "These are five prayers and they are all (equal to) fifty (in reward) for My Word does not change." I returned to Moses and he told me to go back once again. I replied, "Now I feel shy of asking my Lord again."⁶⁴

I conclude with an account of one of the most remarkable (and enigmatic) elements of the *mi'raj* story: "Then Gabriel took me till we reached [*intaha*] Sidrat al-Muntaha (lote tree of the utmost boundary) which was shrouded in colours, indescribable."⁶⁵ It seems, as we shall see, that this occurs in Paradise: "Then I was admitted into Paradise [*al-janna*; literally, "the garden"] where I found small (tents or) walls (made) of pearls [*haba'il al-lu'lu'*] and its earth [*turabuhu*; "its soil/dust"] was of musk."⁶⁶

It needs to be remembered that the word *paradise* derives, ultimately, from the Avestan or Old Eastern Iranian root *pairi.daeza*, which referred to a "walled enclosure" (from *pairi* ["around"] and *diz* ["to build a wall"]). In classical Greek, it came to refer to a royal estate or a park for animals. It is a protected garden.

Muhammad's experience with this paradisiacal tree seems to be alluded to in Qur'an 53:

And he certainly saw him/Him in another descent, at the Lote-Tree of the Boundary. Near it is the Garden of Refuge [*jannat al-ma'wa*], where there covered the Lote-Tree that which covered it. The sight [of the Prophet] did not swerve, nor did it transgress. He surely saw the greatest of his Lord's signs.⁶⁷

One of the passages in al-Bukhari preserves this purported first-person account:

Then I was shown Sidrat al-Muntaha (i.e. a tree in the seventh heaven) ... and four rivers originated at its root, two of them were apparent and two were hidden. I asked Gabriel about those rivers and he said, "The two hidden rivers are in paradise, and the apparent ones are the Nile and the Euphrates."⁶⁸

This episode is plainly reminiscent of the Garden of Eden:

And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads.

The name of the first is Pison: that is it which compasseth the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold;

And the gold of that land is good: there is bdellium and the onyx stone.

And the name of the second river is Gihon: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia.

And the name of the third river is Hiddekel: that is it which goeth toward the east of Assyria. And the fourth river is Euphrates.

Strikingly, as I have pointed out elsewhere, the Qur'anic version of the Garden of Eden narrative, which is very like that of the Bible, mentions not two trees, but only one: "the tree of eternity."⁶⁹ I conclude now as I concluded then:

Consistent with the principle that eschatology (or 'last things') often recapitulates protology (or 'first things'), I think we may, in the lotus tree of the boundary, be seeing the Edenic tree of life yet again. Muhammad ascended to the garden from which

Adam and Eve fell. It is the same garden to which the righteous may aspire.⁷⁰

As T. S. Eliot expressed it in his *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.⁷¹

Notes

1. Qur'an 17:1 (my translation). The third-person masculine singular compound verb *asra bi-* is a finite form derived from the same triconsonantal root as *isra'*, which is its verbal noun or *masdar*. I will briefly allude to the other verse from this chapter in what follows below.
2. Owing to at least two earthquakes and several major renovations in medieval times, the current structure on the site is, on the whole, somewhat more recent still.
3. See Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, 2d ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1980), 295-296. Paret points in particular to the phrase that I've translated as "whose surroundings We have blessed," comparing it to Qur'an 7:137 and 21:71, 81, which definitely allude to the Holy Land, and to Qur'an 34:18, which probably does. On the latter passage, compare Rudi Paret, *Der Koran*, 3d ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1979), 300, where, in his translation of the verse, he includes the parenthetical comment "*damit ist wohl Palästina gemeint*."
4. I will be using A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1967) [hereafter, "Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*"], along with the Arabic original text published by Mustafa al-Suqa, Ibrahim al-Abyari, and 'Abd al-Hafiz Shalabi, eds., *Al-sira al-nabawiyya li-ibn Hisham* (Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1955) [hereafter, "Ibn Hisham, *al-Sira*"].
5. I will be using Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari, Arabic-English*, 3d rev. ed. (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1979) [hereafter, *Sahih al-Bukhari*]. As its title indicates, this is a bilingual edition containing the Arabic original as well as an English translation.

6. Accordingly, that dating system is known as the “*hijri* calendar.” There are many biographies of the founder of Islam. Among them, Daniel C. Peterson, *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), is probably not the worst.
7. *Sahih al-Bukhari* 1:211; compare 4:287. The Arabic verb translated here as “ascended” is based on the same three-letter root as the term *mi’raj*.
8. *Sahih al-Bukhari* 4:287.
9. Thus, for example, in Egyptian colloquial Arabic pronunciation, one says *iddinya harr* (“it’s hot”; literally, “the world is hot”) and *iddinya bitmattar* (“it’s raining”; literally, “the world is raining”).
10. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 181; Ibn Hisham, *al-Sira*, 1:396.
11. Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, 296.
12. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad* 182; Ibn Hisham, *al-Sira*, 397. *Buraq* is cognate with the verb *baraqa* (= English “to flash,” “to sparkle”) and the noun *barq* (“lightning”).
13. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 182; Ibn Hisham, *al-Sira*, 398.
14. For an excellent basic manual on Islamic ritual prayer, see Mustafa Umar, *How to Pray: A Step-by-Step Guide to Prayer in Islam* (Seattle: CreateSpace, 2011).
15. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 182. The Hijr is an area within the sacred precinct in Mecca (i.e., within al-Masjid al-Haram) that is directly adjacent to the Ka’ba. At *Sahih al-Bukhari* 4:287, *Buraq* is described as “a white animal, smaller than a mule and bigger than a donkey.”
16. Muhammad’s prophetic call is discussed in Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, “The Throne Theophany/Prophetic Call of Muhammad,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 323-337; Peterson, *Muhammad: Prophet of God*, 49-64.
17. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 184.
18. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 184.
19. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 183-184.
20. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 182-183.
21. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 183.
22. 2 Corinthians 12:2-4. All biblical quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.
23. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 184-185; Ibn Hisham, *al-Sira*, 403. Again, this clashes with the account already cited above, from *Sahih*

al-Bukhari 1:211, according to which it was while Muhammad was at home in Mecca that “Gabriel descended” and then “took my hand and ascended with me to the nearest heaven.” One possible way of looking at the *mi’raj* in this sense would be to compare it with the famous “tunnel” often described in accounts of near-death experiences. As Allan Kellehear, *Experiences near Death: Beyond Medicine and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), and others have shown, other items often play the same role as the tunnel, especially in reports from cultures where tunnels are rare or unknown.

24. Genesis 28:10-19.
25. The fact that the *mi’raj* is “brought to” Muhammad needn’t imply the portability of a ladder; the Arabic verb can equally mean “offered to” or “presented to.”
26. H. L. Ellison and D. F. Payne, “Genesis,” in F. F. Bruce, ed., *The International Bible Commentary* (Basingstoke and Grand Rapids: Marshall Pickering/Zondervan, 1986), 133. See also James L. Mays, ed., *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 104. Reginald C. Fuller, ed., *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (London: Nelson, 1975), 198, proposes not only “stair” but “ramp.”
27. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 29.
28. Fuller, *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 198.
29. Brown, et al., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 29.
30. Fuller, *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 198.
31. See 1 Kings 12:25-33.
32. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 185; Ibn Hisham, *al-Sira*, 403.
33. See *Sahih al-Bukhari* 4:287-289.
34. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 186; Ibn Hisham, *al-Sira*, 407.
35. See Ibn Hisham, *al-Sira*, 407, note 6.
36. *Journal of Discourses* 2:31.
37. *History of the Church* 7:240.
38. *Journal of Discourses*, 1:278.
39. *Journal of Discourses*, 2:139.
40. *Journal of Discourses*, 2:315.
41. *Journal of Discourses*, 10:35.
42. *Journal of Discourses*, 10:172.
43. *Journal of Discourses*, 12:163-164.

44. *Journal of Discourses*, 6:63
45. *Journal of Discourses*, 8:106.
46. *Journal of Discourses*, 6:154-155.
47. Doctrine and Covenants 132:19.
48. *Sahih al-Bukhari* 1:211.
49. *Sahih al-Bukhari* 4:287. The passive verb *ursila* is derived from the same root (*rsl*) that is used to denote Muhammad as a “messenger” or “apostle,” and, in Arabic editions of the New Testament, to refer to Christ’s apostles.
50. The English word *magazine* derives from *makhzan*, probably by way of a “powder magazine.”
51. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 185.
52. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 185.
53. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 185-186. It has, in fact, been suggested by several scholars that the *mi’raj* stories had some influence on Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, which, of course, is itself a classic ascension story.
54. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 185. I have corrected Guillaume’s “our father Adam” according to the Arabic at Ibn Hisham, *al-Sira* 405. Compare *Sahih al-Bukhari* 1:211-212; 4:287.
55. *Sahih al-Bukhari* 1:212.
56. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 186. Another account has *Abraham* in the sixth heaven. 1:212
57. See Genesis 5:24; Hebrews 11:5; Doctrine and Covenants 107:48-49; Moses 7:68-69. The pseudepigraphic Enoch literature represents another rich vein of ascension materials.
58. *Sahih al-Bukhari* 4:289. The irregular transliterations are artifacts of the translation by Muhammad Muhsin Khan; there are no differences in the original Arabic.
59. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 186. In the Arabic original, at Ibn Hisham, *al-Sira*, 407, Gabriel identifies him to Muhammad as “your brother Abraham.”
60. Ellison and Payne, “Genesis,” 133. See also Mays, *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, 104. Fuller, *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 198.
61. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 186; Ibn Hisham, *al-Sira*, 407. Zayd b. Haritha was an early convert to Islam, and ultimately one of its earliest martyrs, who was, for a time, considered Muhammad’s adopted son.
62. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 186.

63. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 186-187. For the sake of clarity, I've inserted "every day" from the Arabic of Ibn Hisham, *al-Sira* 407. Guillaume's translation here is rather paraphrastic, but it alters nothing substantial.
64. *Sahih al-Bukhari* 1:213-214.
65. *Sahih al-Bukhari* 1:214.
66. *Sahih al-Bukhari* 1:214.
67. Qur'an 53:13-18 (my translation).
68. *Sahih al-Bukhari* 4:289.
69. Daniel C. Peterson, "The Qur'anic Tree of Life," in John W. Welch and Donald W. Parry, eds., *The Tree of Life: From Eden to Eternity* (Provo: Maxwell Institute, 2011), 193-216.
70. Peterson, "The Qur'anic Tree of Life," 215-216.
71. T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1943), 59.

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