

from:
Ornid Safi, Memories of
Muhammad

CHAPTER THREE

The Ascension of Muhammad:

FACE-TO-FACE WITH GOD

MUSLIMS, PARTICULARLY IN MODERN TIMES, make a sharp delineation between the authority of the Qur'an and that of other sources, even the words of Muhammad (*hadith*). Yet it is worth noting that while Muslims have always privileged and prioritized the Qur'an as the supreme source of authority, the Qur'an has never been for Muslims the sole source of authority. To put it differently, prior to the last few decades, Muslims had not historically adopted the *Sola scriptura* ("by scripture alone") notions that came to characterize the Protestant Reformation approach to reading scripture. It is only very recently that some Muslims have become so suspicious of all non-Qur'anic Islamic texts that they have sought to abandon everything but the Qur'an as a reliable source for Islamic thought. Before the present day, Muslims' understanding of God, humanity, and reality was always shaped by the Qur'an, but never solely by it. In this way, Muslims have been more similar to Jews and Catholics, who have always looked at scripture through the multiple lenses of the later tradition—a tradition that for Muslims was shaped by the words of Muhammad, extra-scriptural stories

("Tales of the Prophets"), oral narratives, mystical tales, and other texts. In addition, with the exception of select groups like the Kharijis, who were deemed extreme, Muslims always approached the Qur'an through the authority of interpreters. In other words, they understood that scripture never speaks by itself but is always interpreted and mediated through human voices. Another way of saying the same thing is to point out that until the twentieth century, no Muslim would have looked at the index of the Qur'an (or done a Google search) to find out what was expected of them. Divine guidance began with the text, but was always mediated through authoritative—human—teachers.

With the exception of scholars, most Muslims historically may not have even been able to differentiate exactly which parts of their understanding came directly from the Qur'an and which parts were derived from the later tradition. This is not unusual in religious history. For example, the understanding of many Christians in the West of the creation narrative (especially regarding the role of the snake/Satan) has been shaped by later sources, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as much as from any narrow reading of Genesis. Likewise, much of the Jewish understanding of the Bible historically was mediated through the lens of later Midrashic and Talmudic material. When Muslims look back on Muhammad, much of their understanding of his heavenly ascension comes from the tradition that developed around the Qur'an. The prominent Muslim understanding of the heavenly ascension (*mi'raj*) narrative provides a good way to get a sense of how this surrounding tradition fleshes out the occasionally elliptical Qur'anic narratives.

Focusing on this particular narrative is also apropos because, for Muslims, it was Muhammad's most important spiritual experience—it made him worthy of emulation and it inspired a group of mystically inclined Muslims to achieve their own face-to-face encounter with God.

Jacob's Ladder and Muhammad's Mi'raj

Muhammad's heavenly ascension actually comprises a few different journeys. The narrative begins in Mecca and ends with a return to Mecca. In the middle, Muhammad ascends to the heavens to meet with the previous prophets, visits both Heaven and Hell, and has a profoundly mystical face-to-face encounter with God. We explore the details of the narratives one by one and examine the meanings they contain for Muslims.

In the account from the biography of Muhammad, during his heavenly ascension the Prophet was taken up to Heaven on a ladder, the same biblical motif we have seen in the case of Jacob. In the Bible, Jacob put his head down on a stone,

And he dreamed.

And behold, a ladder set up on the earth,

and the top of it reached to heaven.

And behold, the angels of God ascending and descending on it.

(Genesis 28:12)

When Jacob awakened from his dream, he realized that the Lord was "surely in this place," and he was filled with a sense of awe. Muhammad's experience was quite similar, except that rather than angels ascending the ladder, it was Muhammad himself who ascended to—and descended from—Heaven. And like Jacob, Muhammad too becomes immediately aware of the pervasive presence of God. The ladder (*mi'raj*) in fact lends its name to the whole episode, as well as providing the crucial imagery of ascending. If God is "within," He is also surely "above." Today we conceive of the infiniteness of the universe in a horizontal fashion, measuring space and time in unfathomable light-years. Religiously, humanity has always imagined infinity through the vertical dimension. Divine presence both permeates and transcends this realm of reality. Muhammad ascended this

ladder—described as the ladder all of us will climb up at the moment of death—to demonstrate how he transcended this terrestrial realm.

What would it mean to experience death before one has died? One of the most famous statements of Muhammad invites his followers to “Die before you die.” Here life and death stand not as opposites but rather as lenses through which the inner meaning of each can be contemplated. What would it mean to live one’s life as if one had already tasted death? If we knew that we were going to die tomorrow, how would we treat our loved ones? How would we say our prayers? How tenderly would we hold our children? Would we spend this last series of breaths in spreading war and mischief or accumulating belongings that we could not possibly live long enough to enjoy? Or would we live in compassion and harmony with others? We all have to die at the end of our earthly existence, but what would it mean to live again after the “death” of one’s selfishness and the annihilation of the “me-first” part of one’s being? These questions provide a taste of the spiritual experience that Muhammad embarked upon. Muhammad was not dead, yet he climbed the ladder that mere mortals climb only after death. His experience is no less than a call for spiritual death—and rebirth—before one has to experience physical death. For Muslims, the memory of the Mi’raj is nothing short of a mandate to recall the reality of the eternal face-to-face encounter with God and to strive for it here in this life as it is promised in the afterlife.

From Mecca to Jerusalem and Meeting with the Prophets

The narrative starts in a quite ordinary way. Muhammad had gone back to the Ka’ba to perform the nighttime prayer. He loved the solitude and the peaceful nature of the Ka’ba at nighttime and often used it as a place of retreat. This night, however, he would be visited by the angel Gabriel, who was to be his companion on an extraordinary journey. That journey would not lead him directly “heavenward”

from Mecca, but would first take him to Jerusalem. Thus, before the heavenly ascension proper (*mi’raj*) from Jerusalem to Heaven, there is first the night journey (*isra*) that takes Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem. The *isra* emphasizes the commonality of the revelations of Muhammad, Jesus, and Moses, thus reiterating the sanctity of all Abrahamic faiths. It was Jerusalem that served as the first direction of prayer for Muslims, before the decision to change to Mecca. The choice of Jerusalem as the initial site and the ultimate redirection to Mecca indicate both the shared origin of Islam as part of the Abrahamic family and the particularity of Islam.

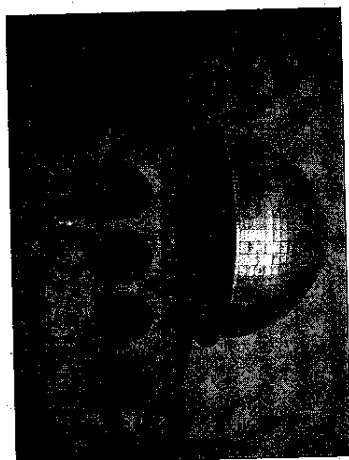
The *isra* is alluded to in the Qur’an in the following narratives:

Glory to the one who took his servant on a night journey from the sacred place of prayer to the furthest place of prayer upon which we have sent down our blessing, that we might show him some of our signs. (Qur’an 17:1)

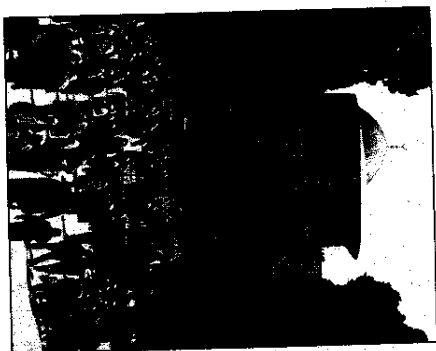
The “sacred place of prayer” (*masjid al-haram*) is the vicinity of the Ka’ba, whereas “the furthest place of prayer” (*masjid al-aqsa*) is the famed Al-Aqsa Mosque, today situated adjacent to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. This narrative connects Mecca, the city of the Ka’ba, built by Abraham and renovated by Muhammad, to Jerusalem, the biblical city of King Solomon.

By Muhammad’s time, the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem had long been demolished. Palestine had gone through multiple hands as the Persians, the Ptolemaic dynasty, the Seleucid Empire, the Romans, and the Byzantines took turns ruling the land of Palestine. By this point in history, the majority of Jews had been exiled from Palestine. Jerusalem played a central spiritual role in the religious life of Judaism, though politically and culturally most Jews were assimilated into their local cultures outside of Palestine. Jerusalem and the surrounding regions, of course, would be sacred to Jews and Christians, and God’s plan in transporting Muhammad from Mecca to Heaven via Jerusalem would forever link Muslims with the biblical heritage. For better and

for worse, the spiritual destiny of Muslims, Jews, and Christians would be linked in this small piece of land—a place the size of Rhode Island.



*The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Photo by Larry Jones, 1994.
Courtesy of the Aga Khan Visual Archive, MIT.*



Muslims emerging from Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem after Friday prayers. The picture is taken from the adjacent Dome of the Rock, indicating its proximity to Al-Aqsa. Photo courtesy of Naghm Haliloglu.



The Heavenly Ascension of Muhammad. Unlike most images, which veil the Prophet's face with light, in this fine sixteenth-century Persian miniature, Muhammad's face is uncovered. Photo by Scheer Lee. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, U.S.A.

The journey from the Ka'ba to Jerusalem became one of the favorites of Muslim artists, who often depicted Muhammad riding what can only be described as an angel-horse (*buraq*). Some of the extraordinary miniatures even depict Muhammad's face. More widespread are the versions in which his face and whole visage are engulfed in a halo of light and flame. We learned in the previous chapter that Muslims do not produce graven images to be displayed in places of worship. In many parts of the world, however, such as Persia, Turkey, Central Asia, and India, the production of miniatures depicting these sacred narratives was always a treasured courtly art.

According to Ibn Ishaq's biography of Muhammad, when Muhammad was led to Jerusalem, he was taken to a reunion with

Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other prophets. This was nothing less than a reunion of monotheistic prophets. The prophets joined each other in prayer, again affirming that, from an Islamic point of view, all the prophetic traditions are one and all come from the One. Muhammad, in his capacity as the last of the messengers, led the prophets in prayers, acting as their *imam* (prayer leader).

After seeing the prophets during the meeting in Jerusalem as they had each appeared on Earth—though not in their earthly forms but rather in their spiritual and cosmic reality—Muhammad began the next phase of the journey: the step-by-step ascension to Heaven, the beginning of the Mi'raj proper. Having already seen and prayed with the prophets in Jerusalem, Muhammad again experienced a prophetic sense of fellowship as he visited different prophets in each heavenly sphere. Many in the ancient world believed that the heavens consisted of seven layers and that our own Earth occupied the layer beneath that of the moon. Muhammad's visionary experiences are articulated through this very model of a seven-layered heaven. Upon ascending from the Earth, Muhammad climbed through Heaven layer by layer: Adam was in the first Heaven, greeting the souls of humanity. Jesus and John the Baptist were in the second heavenly sphere. In the third Heaven, Muhammad met Joseph, who is described as a man so beautiful that his face was like a full moon. In the fourth level was Idris (Enoch), and in the fifth Aaron. Moses was in the sixth heavenly sphere, and in the seventh heaven, right before the gates of Paradise, was Abraham. Underscoring the connection to Abraham, Muhammad said: "Never have I seen a man more like myself. This was my father Abraham."¹ We have seen the depictions of Muhammad as recapitulating the monotheism brought forth by Abraham; in Paradise Muhammad came face-to-face with his spiritual—and genealogical—ancestor. As we shall see in the next chapter, Muslims would often link Muhammad and Abraham, devotionally sending blessings on both.

The Choice Between Milk and Wine and the Inner Jewel of Primordial Nature

One of the characteristic features of Islam is the way it intertwines theology and history, mystical insight and biography. In the midst of the biographical narrative of Muhammad's heavenly ascension we are introduced to an episode that contains profound theological meaning for Muslims. At this point in the narrative, Muhammad is brought two vessels, one filled with milk, and the other with wine. Both options are blessed, as both liquids are to be found among the rivers of Paradise, according to the following verse of the Qur'an:

*Here is the parable of the paradise
which the God-conscious are promised—
In it are rivers of water incorruptible,
and rivers of milk of which the taste never changes,
and rivers of wine, a joy to those who drink it,
and rivers of honey, pure and clean. (Qur'an 47:15)*

There is a choice in Paradise between milk and wine, and yet during the ascension Muhammad picks the cup filled with milk and drinks from it. Gabriel praises Muhammad: "You have been rightly guided to the way of the primordial path, and have thus led your people thereto. Wine is forbidden to you."²

What is this "primordial path," referred to in Islam as the *fiṭra*? It is one of the keys to a true understanding of Islam. The Qur'an emphasizes the need for us to remember who and what we are—made in the image of God and intended to know God. From this *fiṭra*-perspective, the goal is more than merely being saved from sin. It is to return to that state of primordial purity and illumination in which each human being has already been created. According to the Qur'an, there was a period before the entities of time or space existed, a period of pre-eternity (*azal*) when God gathered up the souls of all of humanity and asked them the ultimate rhetorical question:

Alastu bi-rabbikum? (Am I not your Sustaining Lord?)
(Qur'an 7:172)

The question is one that resonates through Islamic spirituality, as does humanity's answer, the emphatic "Yes!" (*ind*). The Qur'an never pauses to question the existence of God, a reality that it simply takes for granted. Rather, it bears the testimony of humanity's covenant with God's Lordship. There is a difference between divinity and lordship: lordship (*rabbūhiya*) is the relationship between humanity and the Divine. God is always God—divinity precedes, permeates, and endures after eternity—but lordship is different. For lordship to exist, humanity has to exist so that the relationship between the lord and the servant can be established. It is well known that humans, as God's servants, need God, yet even the lord "needs" servants if the lord is to assume the quality of lordship. Before humanity enters the cosmic picture, God is God, but until then even God has not yet fully assumed and realized the potential of lordship. Human creation is not an accident, nor is it meaningless. Before creation, God is God, but the quality of lordship has not yet been actualized. Our creation has cosmic consequences even for God, as it enables God to perfect the attribute of lordship through relationship with humanity. An analogy might illustrate the point more clearly. Before a man and a woman have a child, they may be tender and compassionate, but the quality of parenthood has not yet been expressed and actualized. Having a child brings out those latent qualities in parents. That might be an analogy for how lordship creates a situation in which the divine qualities of lordship are expressed. Our creation is not an accident, but a necessary part of the process of divine self-fulfillment.

If this covenant is significant for God, how much more so for humanity: the imprint of this testimony, this witnessing to the lordship of the Divine, is left upon the hearts of humanity. We are created for a purpose: to know God, to be fully human, and to mirror God's attributes in this realm. It is one thing to ask the question of the meaning of life and existence. It is another to state that the creation of human-

ity is a necessary part of the very process of meaning. The knowledge of this primordial covenant (the *'ahd-e alay*, which the mystics of Islam never tire of referring to) is imbedded deep in the human spirit. Here is the ultimate key to understanding Islam: when the Qur'an speaks of "infidels," the term refers not simply to those who have rejected faith, or Muhammad's message. To be an infidel (*kāfir*) in the Qur'anic worldview is literally to cover up something—to cover up the realization of what we are created for. It is the covering up of our own inner jewel of primordial nature, *fiṭra*, that is the egregious error of *kūfr* (infidelity).

With that theological connotation of the narrative in mind, let us return to Muhammad's choice between wine and milk. Celestial wine is permissible—even the Qur'an mentions the existence of wine in Paradise, albeit a wine that does not hamper one's judgment or cause drunkenness (Qur'an 37:47)—but wine is forbidden on Earth, as it leads to the clouding of cognition and remembrance. As we have seen, Muhammad picks milk—the drink of babes, the drink that is closer to the primordial sustenance, the maternal sustenance—over wine. In the Islamic tradition, Muhammad is called the *Ummī*, which all too often is translated as the "unlettered" prophet. Muslims have generally sought to emphasize the miraculous nature of the Qur'an by pointing to Muhammad's lack of formal education, even in reading and writing, prior to receiving the revelation. It is true that Muhammad did not have earthly schooling and that his knowledge of God came to him through revelation. But the word *Ummī* has another meaning that is much more immediate and intimate than "unlettered." The word comes from *Umm*, meaning "mother." So Muhammad is also the maternal Prophet, the one who chose the milk of the mother over the wine. Likewise, Muslims who follow in his footsteps choose the innocence of babes, a return to the pure spiritual innocence of the *fiṭra*. In a remarkable gender-bending narrative, the Persian mystic poet Aṭṭār even asks the Prophet to be like a mother, nursing the infantlike *innama*—also derived from *Umm* (mother)—from his breast of mercy.

Shir deh mā rā az pešān-e karam
(Give us milk from the breast of generosity.)³

Muhammad's Visit to Heaven and Hell

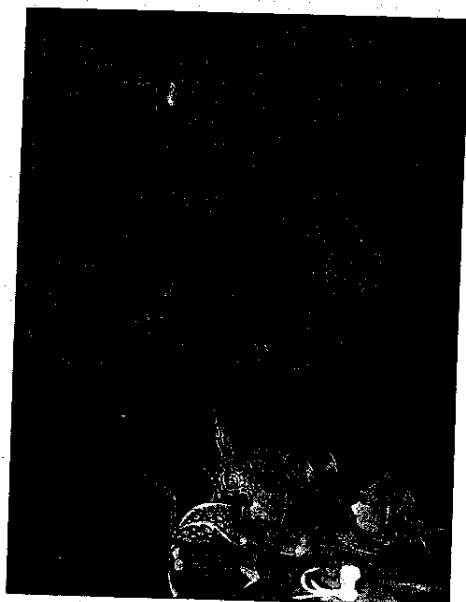
In a way that is characteristic of Islam, the mystical and the social again coningle in Muhammad's experience of Heaven and Hell. Those spiritual experiences of witnessing the joys of Paradise and directly encountering God take place, not in isolation, but right alongside social reflections. Even though Muhammad rises through the seven layers of Heaven and has a direct vision of God, not all celestial realities prove to be beatific. As Heaven is real, so is Hell. Muhammad was also taken on a tour of Hell to show him the punishment that awaits the sinful. One episode in particular impresses upon the reader the dire and serious consequence of evil actions. Throughout his visit Muhammad is greeted by smiling prophets and cherubic angels, but when he meets the Keeper of the Gates of Hell he finally confronts the one angel who does not smile upon meeting him. Yet the ascending Prophet is assured that, if this angel, named Malik, were ever to smile, he would smile upon meeting Muhammad.

While Muslim artists have commonly focused on depicting Muhammad's ascension through Paradise, a few have also imagined Muhammad's visit to the torment of hellfire.

Muhammad's look inside Hell reveals the suffering of the Children of Adam to be real and tangible. Evil is not left abstract, but connected in a most direct way to earthly abominations. When Muhammad sees men who take a firelike stone into the pit of their stomach, he is informed that these are those who usurped the wealth of orphans. Muhammad's vision literally acts out and confirms what the Qur'an has described, comparing the usurping of orphans' property to devouring hellfire:

*Those who unjustly devour the property of orphans,
 devour a fire into their own bodies.
 They will soon be enduring a blazing Fire. (Qur'an 4:10)*

Time and again, the Qur'an speaks out on behalf of the disenfranchised, the poor, the needy, the traveler, and always, always, the orphans. The orphans, who in a tribal society were among the most vulnerable, were close to Muhammad's own heart because his own father had passed away prior to his birth.



*The Miraj-Nama, Persian, fifteenth century. Gabriel shows Muhammad how those who devour the property of orphans on Earth are punished in hell by having molten lead poured down their throats.
 Courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.*

Usurping the property of orphans is not the only sin whose punishment Muhammad witnesses. He also sees the punishment of those who grew rich through usury on earth, and of those who chased after illicit

sexual relations and betrayed the good partners God had given them. In each case, God had provided a way that was good and beautiful but some chose to pursue their own passions. In Hell the very thing they pursued is transformed into a hideous punishment they must literally devour. Lastly, Muhammad also witnesses the punishment of those who transgressed against the bonds of familial relations.

The horrors of hellfire in this narrative are directly attributed to our own vices. In other words, injustice, lust, greed, and cruelty are the very source of hellfire. We are the fuel of our own burning. The Qur'an repeatedly talks about how we "send forth" our actions to the Hereafter. The reader is left to ponder what would happen to hellfire if we stopped feeding it with our sins.

If the description of Hell is graphic and painful, the imagery for Paradise depicts a garden of delight. Consistent with the spiritual nature of these passages, the joy of Paradise is first described through Muhammad's encounter with different prophetic figures at various layers of Paradise. Some of the loveliest of all Islamic miniatures depict the scenes of Muhammad ascending through Paradise.

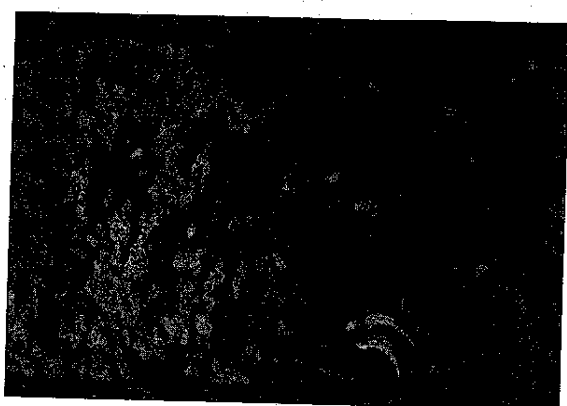
In seeking to convey the beauties of Paradise to an earthly audience, Muhammad states:

*A piece of Paradise the size of a bow is better than all beneath the sun,
whereon it rises and sets.
If a woman of the people of Paradise appeared unto the people of
earth, she would fill the space between Heaven and here below
with light and with fragrance.⁵*

A Direct Encounter with God

As we have seen, Jerusalem would not be the destination of Muhammad's journey, but rather the Lord of Jerusalem, the Lord of Mecca, and the Lord of all the worlds. Likewise, Heaven and Hell would not be the end of the journey, but rather the Lord of Heaven. The

Qur'anic narrative gives us another passage that broadly outlines the zenith of Muhammad's heavenly ascension toward a direct encounter with God.



*Muhammad ascending through the heavens, accompanied by angels.
From Nezami's Khamsa, produced in Tabriz, Iran, 1539-43.
©The British Library Board.*

*By the star when it sets
Your companion has not gone astray nor is he deluded
He does not speak out of desire
It is nothing less than an inspiration inspired
Taught to him by one of great power
And strength that stretched out over
While on the highest horizon.
Then drew near and descended*

*At a distance of two bows' lengths or nearer
He revealed in his servant what he revealed. (Qur'an 53:1-10)⁶*

This passage, simultaneously vibrant and veiled, has captured the spiritual imagination of Muslims for over one thousand years. The narrative here, like a great Hitchcock mystery, works precisely by allowing the imagination of the audience to supply the details as it leaves things suggested, indeed unsaid. The combination of saying, unsaying, and imagination provides an inviting context in which the reader is not just reading words on a page but participating in the production of the meaning. In the passage, the phrase "Your companion" clearly refers to Muhammad: it is affirmed that Muhammad is not going astray, and that the words do not arise out of Muhammad's own desires or delusions. Then the picture becomes elliptical and mysterious. In response to this mystery, Muslims have offered varying opinions about the precise meaning of these verses. These different opinions tell us a great deal about how different Muslims have come to conceptualize the relationship not just between God and Muhammad but between God and humanity. To appreciate these differences, we turn to a close reading of these verses.

What we know from the verse is that Muhammad has been taught by "one of great power" who sends down the inspiration (*wahy*) to Muhammad. But who is this mysterious character? Is it God? Is it Gabriel? Does it make a difference in the meaning of the episode? The difference is as great as the difference between God and angels. Different Muslims have come up with different ways of imagining the identity of this unnamed character identified simply as "one of great power," and those differences tell us a great deal about their assumptions vis-à-vis God and humanity. A dominant tradition has been to state that the unnamed character is in fact Gabriel, since Gabriel is said to be the angel of revelation. According to this reading, Muhammad is said to have had a vision of Gabriel during his spiritual journey. This type of narrative has appealed to those Muslims who theologically like for God to remain God and humanity to remain humanity, with the twain

never meeting. This has been a popular interpretation of the passage among many Muslim theologians and rationalists.

Yet other Muslims have read the same narrative and imagined this encounter in powerfully different ways. These are the Muslims who yearn for nothing less than seeing the very face of God. For them, the "one of great power" who teaches the Qur'an is none other than God. In this reading of the Qur'an—which the rules of Arabic grammar make equally plausible—Muhammad has a face-to-face encounter with the Divine. What is more, if Muhammad ascended to God—if it is indeed possible to have a direct encounter with God—then this possibility is open to all of humanity, including modern Muslims. The Muslims who gravitate toward this reading of the ascension are usually known as the mystics (*Sufis*) of the Islamic community. For them, these narratives are not just about accounts of the time of Muhammad but descriptions of reality even now: as it was then, so it is now. As with Muhammad, so with us. In fact, for these mystical Muslims the very model of a spiritual life becomes nothing short of first aspiring to and then attaining (God willing) a direct encounter with God.

This difference of interpretation also tells us a great deal about the ways in which these various groups of Muslims see and emulate Muhammad. All Muslims emulate the Prophet. It is in how the Prophet's ascension is interpreted that Muslims differentiate themselves. If Muhammad went to see God, then ordinary Muslims want to emulate the one who saw God. The mystics of Islam, on the other hand, want to follow Muhammad completely by stepping in his footsteps. Not being content to merely imitate Muhammad, they want to experience what Muhammad experienced, and embody what he embodied. If Muhammad saw God, they want to see God. If Muhammad ascended to heaven, they want to ascend to heaven. All of these interpretations have something very important in common, namely, the reverence for Muhammad who shows Muslims the path to God. The first group so reveres Muhammad that they believe he attained spiritual experiences—like direct encounter with God—that are not open to most human beings. The second group so reveres Muham-

mad that they wish for a Muhammadi encounter with God of their own. Paradoxically, these mystics take following in Muhammad's footsteps literally. Here is one of the intriguing aspects of a religious tradition in which God is revealed through a sacred language: mystical readings of scripture, and of God, emerge not by going around the literal meaning—that is, by arguing that literal interpretations are not the most important readings—but rather by going through them. The literal meaning of scripture does not close off the possibility of deeper meanings—it leads to them.

Meeting God (or Gabriel) Face-to-Face

Almost every part of the passage has been subject to further elaboration and unpacking over the years. How close did Muhammad come to God/Gabriel? According to the narrative, it was two bows' lengths (*qab qawṣayn*), or even nearer (*aw adna*). The first commentaries that grew up around the verse speculated on the meaning of "two bows' lengths." Those who are more theologically inclined and who like to keep God and humanity at arm's length from each other interpret this phrase as twice the distance that a bow can shoot an arrow—thus, about the length of a football field. Others read it as the length of two bows, that is, a few feet. Yet others, more mischievous, imagine a bow whose string has been pulled—as in the distance between the two ends of the bow, a few inches apart. What matters in the end, of course, is not the actual distance intended by the phrase but the involvement of the human being in imagining increasing levels of intimacy between humanity and God.

And after books have been written speculating on this question, after words have been exhausted—as the Qur'an says, if the oceans were ink and trees were pens, the praise of our Lord still could not be exhausted—in one short phrase the Qur'an points simultaneously to the limitation of language and the invitation to dream

more: "or nearer." God—or Gabriel—came as close as two bows' lengths (however that is understood)—or nearer. This is what great literature has in common with scripture, with *The X-Files*, and with Hitchcock: the power of suggestion. The Qur'an repeatedly warns humanity about baseless conjecture (*ẓann*) in attributing to God falsehood. Yet there is another type of imagination that the tradition identifies as beatific (*khayal*), and as one that can lead humanity closer to God.

The concluding lines of this Qur'anic verse state:

The heart did not lie in what it saw.

Will you then dispute with him on his vision?

He saw him descending another time

At the lote tree of furthest limit.

Therein was the garden of sanctuary

When there enveloped the tree what enveloped it

His gaze did not turn aside nor did it overreach.

He had seen the signs of his lords, great signs? (Qur'an 53:13–18)

Here again the mystery of the passage continues: Muhammad sees not with his eyes but rather with his heart (*fu'id*). The heart spoken of here is not just the lumpy muscle in the chest but the very throne of God's spirit. Did God not reveal to Muhammad in a private communication that the "Heavens and the Earth do not contain me, but the heart of my faithful servant" does? Of all the human faculties, it is the heart that is most suitable for beholding the Divine. When humanity was created, God breathed into humanity something of Divine Spirit. As the Qur'an states in one of those rare and marvelous verses in which God speaks in the first-person voice:

Wa nafakhu fihī min rūhī.

(I breathed into humanity something of My own Spirit.)

(Qur'an 38:72)

The spirit, whose seat is always the heart, is that in humanity which is from God, closest to God, and thus most suitable for perceiving and beholding the Divine.

Traditional Accounts of Muhammad's Encounter with God

As we have seen, the Qur'anic narratives about Muhammad's heavenly journey are rich, yet elliptical. These verses invite us to engage them using the faculty of imagination. And this is precisely what Muslims have done throughout the centuries, taking these Qur'anic passages and fleshing them out by weaving them together with the teachings of the Prophet, the commentary of scholars, and the inner intuition of Muslims who reflect on God's word. The first layer, as always, came from Muhammad's own memory, as preserved through the standard biography of the Prophet. Subsequent layers came from the later sources that attempted to fill in the elliptical Qur'anic nuggets and create a more complete narrative. Here we examine one such later, fuller narrative of the ascension.

The full description of Muhammad's encounter with the Divine is told in slightly different versions in different treatises. One of the most explicit is the version from the fifteenth-century scholar al-Suyuti, whose *al-La'ih al-masnu'ah* details the following:

Now when I was brought on my Night Journey to the [place of the] Throne and drew near to it, a green ruffaf [a silk brocade] was let down to me, a thing too beautiful for me to describe to you, whereat Gabriel advanced and seated me on it. Then 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 tasbeeh, takmilah and takhniya [words of praise] to Allah.

By Allah's leave, as a sign of His mercy toward me and the perfection of His favor to me, that ruffaf 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 brought my Lord to complete his favor to me by granting me the 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.⁸

A key aspect of this narrative deals with how Gabriel brings Muhammad from Earth through the levels of Paradise but is unable to enter into the direct divine presence. There the intensity of divine light and love is too great for Gabriel, who, as some later Muslim poets would put it, is afraid that the intensity of divine love will burn his feathers. Muhammad alone disembarks and enters into the divine presence. Here is the full promise of what it means to be human: we can ascend to a height and a level of intimacy with God that angels dare not attempt. This is the return to one's Origin—to be transformed into the very light of God at the core of our *fi'ra* (primordial nature). Only light can enter into light—only that which comes from God can enter into divine presence. The Mi'raj exemplifies the astonishing capability of humanity to enter into this communion, this mystical experience with God. As Muhammad ascends, so too does the community of Muhammad aspire to ascend. As Muhammad goes, so goes the Muhammad community.

Gabriel's shielding of his eyes and Muhammad's awe correspond to what some religion scholars have called *mysterium tremendum*. We have seen this same quality acted out in the Bible when Isaiah shouts out that he is a man unworthy of beholding the Divine. Before one enters into the tender presence of God, there has to be awareness of

the awesome quality of God (*mysterium tremendum*) and the complementary quality of *mysterium fascinans* that draws one toward and into the Divine. Without the awesome, majestic quality of God, the Divine is nothing more than a cosmic Santa Claus. With it, the cosmic dance of majesty and intimacy continues. These dual qualities of the Divine are what Muslims have referred to as the qualities of *jalal* (majesty, glory, might, power, awe-inspiring) and *jamal* (beauty, mercy, compassion, tenderness). The key, as always, is not to abandon the *jalal* (glory) or the *jamal* (beauty)—not to subliminate the *mysterium tremendum* or the *mysterium fascinans*—but rather to go through them and harmonize them, arriving at what Muslims have called *kamal* (perfection). The harmony of *jalal* and *jamal* leads to *kamal*—yet another series of rhyming words whose sound resonates in the meaning.

As we have said previously, for the Muslim the goal of human creation is for humanity to reflect divine qualities onto this realm. If God is perfect, then there is a way for the human being to reflect the perfection of God on this Earth. It is this quality of perfection that the later mystics would summarize as the attributes of *Insan al-Kamil* (the perfected and completed human being), the one who brings together all of the divine qualities and attributes. And naturally, in the Islamic tradition the very model of the perfected and completed human being is recognized as Muhammad. Muhammad's ascension replicates this complete and perfect encounter with the Divine.

Whereas the Qur'an leaves Muhammad's encounter with God to the imagination, the biographical tradition fleshes it out. The Mi'raj narrative continues to open up the corresponding verses of the Qur'an. It is worth mentioning that the very word for commentary, *sharh*, literally means "to open up." These commentary traditions are seen as opening up the inner meanings of scripture:

"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 of great power

*And strength that stretched out over
While on the highest horizon.*

Then drew near and descended

*At a distance of two bows' lengths or nearer"
(Qur'an 53:5-9).*

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. "He revealed in his servant what he revealed" (Qur'an 53:4), that is, which matters He had decided to enjoin upon me."

In this telling of the ascension, the narrative has already identified the "one of great power" directly with God. Here is a potential drawback of these narratives that flesh out the ambiguity and nuance of the Qur'an: some of the possibilities have to be laid aside in order to clarify the other possibilities. Yet these texts in general do not aim to dismiss the other possibilities; instead, each provides one possible point of view. This text goes on to record in even more glorious detail Muhammad's most personal encounter with God:

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 fingertips 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 I was 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.¹⁰

The coolness and delight in his heart that Muhammad describes upon meeting God—recall that in Arabic coolness of the eyes and heart denote the utmost joy, whereas in English we speak of “warming” the heart—come to epitomize spiritual ecstasy and joy. Later mystics who engaged in intense spiritual experiences referenced even their own swaying to Muhammad’s motions. As for Muhammad himself, he summarized this “time” with God by saying: “Indeed I have with my Lord a Moment (*waqt*).”

Note that he does not say “I had” a moment with my Lord, but rather, “I have” a moment. This encounter with God—*this* moment—becomes a relationship that never entirely disappears. Muhammad returns to the moment (*waqt*), and so do the later mystics of Islam, who come to identify themselves as *im al-waqt*, Children of the Moment. All mystical paths speak of the need to “live in the moment”—that is, to be unattached to past suffering and unconcerned about the anxieties and hopes of the future. For the Muhammadi mystics, a goal of the spiritual path is to be with God here and now—in the very moment, as they say, when the breath has gone into the chest and has not yet departed.

Mystical Tales of Ascending in Muhammad's Footsteps

Even the minute details of Muhammad’s ascension would be emulated by these Children of the Moment who followed in the Muhammadi path of grace. One of the last details of the ascension mentioned in the Qur’an is that “his gaze did not waver nor did it stray. Truly did he see some of the most profound of his Sustainer’s symbols” (Qur’an 53:17–18). Here Muhammad is revealed as a mature spiritual being, whose eye-of-the-heart can behold God and not turn away and not be distracted in the awe of the moment. As Muslims through the centuries have emulated Muhammad in their own spiritual lives, this quality is one that they have sought to replicate and duplicate. Since Muhammad went on an ascension, a select group of saintly beings, referred to in the Islamic tradition as the Friends of God (*Awliyā*), also had spiritual experiences of ascension. One of the early Friends of God whose fame would travel down through the centuries was Bayazid (Abu Yazid) Bisrāmī, a ninth-century Muslim mystic from Persia. Bayazid was among the first to pattern his spiritual experiences of ascension after Muhammad and to describe his own tale as one of the annihilation of his ego-self in God, with the permanence of only that which is God. Echoing the common cosmology of his day, Bayazid described having ascended through seven layers of Heaven. At each layer of Heaven, he meets a different prophet or angelic figure in Islam’s spiritually populous cosmos. Each dazzlingly beautiful, these angels offer the Friend of God (*walī*) “gifts of every kind” and “dominion over every Heaven.” Yet following in the footsteps of Muhammad, Bayazid turns down these offers by stating: “O my dear one, my goal is other than what you are showing me.”

Bayazid ascends as Muhammad did, in the footsteps of Muhammad, until he too reaches God, who addresses him, as Muhammad had been addressed:

*To me, to me!
O my chosen one,*