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Mi' rāj

Muḥammad's ascent to God and return to the world is known as the *mi' rāj* (lit. ladder, stairway). This term, not found in the Qur' ān, is used synonymously with *isrā'* (night journey), a word that is the gerund of the verb used in the verse, "Glory be to God who made His servant [Muḥammad] journey by night" (Qur' ān 17:1). Qur' ānic commentators take sūrah 53:1–21 as making further references to it. Most accounts of the event go something like this: Gabriel came to Muḥammad at night, mounted him on a winged beast called Burāq (Alborak), and took him to Jerusalem, where Muḥammad led all the previous prophets in prayer. Gabriel then took him up through the seven heavens and introduced him to the angels and the prophet residing in each heaven, and then gave him a tour of hell and paradise. Finally Muḥammad went alone into the presence of God. On the way back, he took leave of each prophet. Moses asked him what he had received from God for his community, and he responded that it was fifty daily prayers (*ṣalāt*). Moses sent him back to God several times until the number was reduced to five. The link between this event and the most basic ritual act of Muslims is highlighted in the purported *ḥadīth*, "The *ṣalāt* is the *mi' rāj* of the believer."

The Journey by Night and the Night of Power.

The journey by night has had a profound influence on the Muslim imagination on both the elite and popular levels, not least because it complements the founding event of the tradition, the

descent of the Qur'ān on “the night of power” (*laylat al-qadr*). The link between the two nights is made explicit by the role of Gabriel, the angel of revelation. It is he who brought the Book down to Muḥammad and then, once it had been assimilated, took him up through the heavens. As the human response to the Qur'ān's descent, the *mi'raj* is the prototype of “the straight path” (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*), upon which all Muslims ask to be guided in their daily *ṣalāt*. The same path (*ṣirāṭ*) reappears on the day of resurrection as the bridge over hell that everyone must attempt to cross.

Some authors employ the imagery of the *mi'raj* in first-person accounts of their own encounters with the divine. AbūYazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. CA.875) provides an early version, stressing that every stage of the journey intensifies the realization of “There is no god but God.” Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240) describes his personal *mi'raj* in several passages, concluding one of them with the words, “My journey was only in myself.” Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) takes the *mi'raj* as the guide for the soul's rational development in *Mi'raj al-sālikīn* (The Ladder of the Wayfarers), pointing out that “Proofs are the ladders by which creatures mount up to their Lord.”

The Path to God.

The *mi'raj*, then, was understood as the model of the path to God, whether it was called *ṣirāṭ*, or *sharī'ah* (the “broad road” of praxis), or *ṭarīqah* (the “narrow path” of moral and spiritual perfection). The notion that the soul ascends by stages became central to theoretical Sufism and produced a whole genre, that of the stations or stages (*maqāmāt*, *manāzil*). Some authors described the path as having seven basic stages, like the *mi'raj*, and others described forty, one hundred, three hundred, or even 1,001 stations, not least to acknowledge the inadequacy of those who attempt to follow in the Prophet's footsteps. One of the best known examples is provided by the Persian poet ‘Aṭṭār (d. CA.1220) in *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* (The Speech of the Birds), which describes seven mountains of spiritual perfection over which the birds of the soul must fly before they can encounter their king, the Sīmurgh. In another work, *Muṣībat nāmah* (Book of Misfortunes), he speaks of forty stages.

Much of the early discussion of the *mi'raj* addresses the hotly debated issue of the vision (*ru'yah*) of God and related questions, such as whether Muḥammad's ascent was corporeal or spiritual and how his stature compares with that of other prophets. Various answers provided by Ṣūfī teachers were compiled by Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 1021; *The Subtleties of the Ascension: Early Mystical Sayings on Muhammad's Heavenly Journey*, translated by Frederick S.Colby, Louisville, Ky.: Fons Vitae, 2006).

If the *mi'raj* helped frame the discussion of the manner of following the *sunnah*, it also provided inspiration for a good deal of theological discourse, which is generally rooted in three basic notions: “There is no god but God,” “Muḥammad is God's messenger,” and “To God all matters are returned” (sūrah 2:210). These notions were fleshed out by theologians as the three principles of faith: *tawḥīd* (divine oneness), prophecy (*nubūwah*), and the Return to God (*ma'ād*, lit. a taking refuge) or eschatology.

The Origin and the Return to God.

The Return, which follows the route of the *mi'raj*, has two sides to it: compulsory and voluntary. In one respect, everyone experiences death, the grave (*barzakh*, lit. isthmus), the day of resurrection, and judgment. In another respect, people's success in achieving a happy return depends to a significant degree on the effort they exert in the path. In either case, the journey can be framed in terms of the fundamental interconnection between the cosmos and the human soul, both of which display a full range of the signs (*āyāt*) of God. What gives urgency to the human situation is that the voluntary return alone allows people to avoid the dangers highlighted by the Qur'ān's graphic depictions of hell.

Philosophers discussed the return to God along with the origin (*mabda'*) of the world. Their basic issues were the emergence of the universe from the Necessary Being, the peculiar human gift of rationality, and the quest to transform the soul into an actual intellect, possessing all the virtues. Love of wisdom was never merely academic, because it typically aimed at achieving union (*ittiṣāl*) with the transcendent origin of the universe. The *mi'raj* was a convenient way to express the nature of the quest (see Peter Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), With a Translation of the Book of the Prophet Muḥammad's Ascent to Heaven*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

Ṣūfī authors offer elaborate explanations of the interrelationship between the cosmos and the soul, making full use of *mi'raj* imagery. They frequently talk about Origin and Return in terms of the “two bows” (*qawsayn*) mentioned in sūrah 53:9, in which Muḥammad is described as two bow-lengths away from God during the *mi'raj*. Given the equivalence of “bow” and “arc” (as with Latin *arcus*), Ṣūfī authors see this as a reference to the descending and ascending arcs of the circle of existence, a circle that begins and ends with the Spirit, also called the Supreme Pen, the First Intellect, or the Muhammadan Reality (see William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabī's Cosmology*, Albany, 1998: State University of New York Press, pp. 233–237). Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 1274), elaborating on the teachings of Ibn al-'Arabī, talks of two “ladders,” that of composition (*mi'raj al-tarkīb*), through which the human essence enters into embodiment, and that of dissolution (*mi'raj al-taḥlīl*), through which the essence discards the mineral, plant, animal, psychical, and even spiritual dimensions of its own existence in order to return to God (William C. Chittick, “The Circle of Spiritual Ascent According to al-Qūnawī,” in *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*, edited by Parviz Morewedge, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, pp. 179–209).

Mir'āj in Poetry and Art.

Imagery drawn from the *mi'raj* is common in Ṣūfī poetry. Rūmī, for one, frequently employs it. He invites his readers to mount on the Burāq of nonexistence—the annihilation of ignorance and self-centeredness—so that it may carry them aloft. This *mi'raj*, he says, is not like that of the ascent of an earthly being to the moon or of vapor to the sky, but rather like that of cane to sugar, or an embryo to intelligence (cited in William C. Chittick, trans., *The Sufi Path of Love: The*

Spiritual Teachings of Rumi, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983, p. 80). The *mi'raj* also inspired the artistic imagination of painters, as in the fifteenth-century Turkish *Mi'raj nāma* (The Book of the *Mi'raj*, reproduced in facsimile in Marie-Rose Séguy, *The Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, New York: G. Braziller, 1977).

See also MUḥAMMAD, *subentry on* LIFE OF THE PROPHET.

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