

Muḥammad's Night Journey to Heaven or the Initiatic Path to a Temporal and Spiritual Leadership¹

Abstract

In many religious traditions, ascension into heaven is a specific way to become initiated into a new, sacred status. It is a journey which implies a dichotomy of plans: firstly the profane–sacred plan, secondly the telluric–celestial plan, both of them being transformed by the possibility of communication through transcendence. This possibility waives the dichotomy during the ascension and keeps an opening status between the elements of each dichotomy, after the ending of the ascension: the sacred will be opened to the profane, the celestial will be opened to the telluric. Muḥammad Night's Journey is an event which can be read through such a key. However Muḥammad's Night Journey cannot be limited at this point of view. The event is more complex as we deal with an initiatic path to a temporal and spiritual leadership. As Geo Widengren concluded in his two studies *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* and *Muhammad, the Apostle of God and His Ascension*, Muḥammad's Night Journey reflects a ritual of sovereignty which is specific to the Ancient Near East, in regards with the ascension of the king as a central event concerning his coronation. Muḥammad's Night Journey reflects also a ritual during which Muḥammad sees God, and he is sacred as a prophet, being in direct contact with God and with the other monotheistic prophets (as the literature of the 9th century in the Islamic milieu tries to describe). This initiatic path does not have (as a result) the transformation of Muḥammad into a character with divine powers; it has (as a result) the unification into Muḥammad's person of two different powers, the temporal and the spiritual one, and the confirmation of Muḥammad as a spiritual and temporal leader for a new community.

Keywords: initiation, sacred, kingship, ladder, Islamic community.

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In order to receive the message of his mission, Muḥammad will start a night journey described by the Koran² and by Ibn Ishaq (Guillaume 2004: 103–109). Using the first sura from the 17th chapter of the Koran, a devotional tradition will be developed starting with the late 7th century around the prophet's night journey, creating a story with a mythical foundation.

The journey takes place in a critical period from Muḥammad's life, during the night of the 27th day of Rajab month, 620. After his wife Khadija and his uncle Abū Tālib, two of his most power supporters, died, the pressure from the part of the Meccan's tribes, especially Qurays reached its top level. In this context, during this night, the Prophet was sleeping in the Umm Hānī's house, situated near the sanctuary of Kaaba. In that moment, Muḥammad is awoken by the angel Gabriel who is taking him to a fabulous animal, *al Burāq*. This is the time when the night journey begins.

The night journey starts as a horizontal journey relating to Mecca and Jerusalem and continues with a vertical journey, relating to Jerusalem and the seventh skies. Concerning the first part of the journey, the terrestrial one, Muḥammad acts as a mythical hero, connecting two sacred centers through Abraham, the common ancestor.³ The presence of Abraham in Mecca is related to Kaaba, the sacred sanctuary built by Abraham through the divine commandment received by the agency of the divine revelation. In this way, Mecca becomes a center of spirituality equal to Jerusalem. By means of the night journey, Muḥammad is preparing a change of paradigm concerning the Holy City. The sacred geography of Jerusalem will be transferred to the city of Mecca, which will become an *Axis Mundi*, a place where men and the divine can meet.

By connecting the two points, the Prophet makes the voyage into *illud tempus*, an anamnestic voyage during which he recovers the abrahamic tradition, the pure tradition before Judaism, Christianity or politeism.

On the second part of the journey, Muḥammad appears as a prophet who receives his prophetic mission by ascending to heaven.

Even the motive of ascension is common as far as monotheistic traditions are concerned and seems to be inspired by the Hebrew and Christian religions or by the Iranian religious tradition as Zoroastrianism (for example Geo Widengren thinks that the Islamic ascension follows the pattern of the Arda Viraf's ascension into heaven (Widengren 1950: 204–216) relating it to the Iranian image of the ascension), Muḥammad's ascension is an original tradition related to the Arab imaginary as Culianu (1993: 57) also states as the circumstances, the development and the objectives of the story are different (Kappler 1987: 287).

2 “Exalted is He who took His Servant by night from al-Masjid al-Haram to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing” (Koran 17: 1).

3 Both the Koran and the Islamic tradition, show the presence of Abraham at Mecca. As a divine command, Abraham starts a journey to Mecca in order to build Kaaba. Following the idea of Ali bin Abi Talib, Abraham received divine aid to discover the place where the sanctuary has to be built through a fantastic being, *Sakina* (Firestone 1992: 12). The name of the fantastic being is hiding the divine presence as *sh-k-n* means ‘to hide the divine presence’ (Firestone 1992: 22). For Mujahid this journey to Mecca was made under the protection of angel Gabriel, on the back of a horse named *al Buraq*. In Mecca, the place where the sanctuary has to be built is revealed by a djinn. Once the sanctuary is built, Abraham regains Syria; Agar and Ismael remain in Mecca (Firestone 1992: 15–16). The version of Ibn Abbas follows the biblical Genesis in the purpose to relate Abraham to the Ismael descent in Mecca (Firestone 1992: 21).

The three versions have a common idea: the building of the sanctuary in Mecca is related with the name of Abraham and is revealed by a divine command. Taking into consideration this situation, Mecca becomes a center of spirituality equal to Jerusalem.

The journey to the seventh skies offers the opportunity to communicate directly with the monotheistic prophets before Islam. We are assisting prophetic pyramid; a prophetic hierarchy related with the importance that each prophet has in the Islamic history. That is why, Adam is situated in the first sky, Jesus Christ in the second one, Joseph in the third one, Enoch in the fourth, Aaron in the fifth, Moses in the sixth, Abraham, who is sitting on a throne at the entrance into paradise, in the seventh. This is a fine example of reordering in an Islamic way, the prophetic pantheon common concerning monotheistic religions. To complete the omissions related with the Ibn Ishaq's description, late traditions refer to a short dialog that Muḥammad had with each prophet. Muḥammad is greeted with "Be blest true brother and true prophet" (Al Ghaiṭi 1962: 621–639). During the voyage to Jerusalem, Muḥammad leads other prophets in prayer as *imām*. He is also the prophet who ascends to the highest level (Colby 2002: 172).

Taking into consideration these aspects, we can see that Muḥammad's journey is presented as a ladder, linking the sky and the earth, each step helping him to understand God's will and his own universal mission between men. The ladder is the symbol revealing the initiation into the prophetic mission (Piemontese 1987: 298). Muḥammad becomes initiated into the secrets of life and death. The celestial ladder is under the angels observation and it is a symbol of death as only the souls of dead humans can use it. The ladder is under Allāh's power as one of the names that Allāh is using in his quality of sovereign-judge is *dhū'l-ma'ārij* 'the master of the ladder' (Koran 70: 3-4). This ladder can be found in Jerusalem, which is designed for this occasion *Bayt al-Muqaddas* 'temple, sanctuary, Holy House, Sacred Tent' (Piemontese 1987: 297) and has a beginning the stone that Jacob used as a pillow during the night when he had the vision of the ladder.⁴

Traditions state that Muḥammad was taken in front of the presence of God, from whom he received the secrets of the otherworld. In order to receive them, Muḥammad will be aware, step by step, by passing from one sky to another, of the meaning of the world, of the unity and the multiplicity inside the creation, of the truth of the revelation. As regards the last station, Muḥammad will see clearly and will understand God's will and his own universal mission between men. He will be designed as the first of the prophets, being the only prophet who saw God, will be close to God, and will be also sacred as a temporal leader for a new *umma*.

James R. Porter relates Muḥammad's ascension and the shamanist phenomenon. In his vision, this type of connection can explain, in a holistic way, the implications of this type of journey inside Islam. The author tries to relate the ecstatic experience that Muḥammad is living to ecstatic experience of a shaman. The two images are not to be identified; it offers an explanation of the ascension to heaven as essential part of the prophetic vocation, vocation which seems to follow the plan of a shamanic initiation "transformed by the Muhammad's own experience and his personal genius" (Porter 1974: 80). As regards this subject, we have to assert an important difference between the two types of a journey. If the shamanic experience takes place spiritually, only the spirit having the capacity to sustain an ascension into heaven, with regard to Muḥammad's ascension Islamic tradition confesses that it was a corporal

4 In first century the apocryphal writing known under the name of *Jacob Ladder* we can find the description of the event (Kugel 1994: 117–118) presenting the stone as the beginning of the ladder. The mythical implications of the stone are huge. This stone is considered as being in the same time the place from where God created the earth and where he left the print of his foot, the place where the Ascension of Jesus took place, event during which he left on the stone the print of his foot, the stone which sustain the Holy of Holies from the Temple, the place from where Muḥammad started his ascension, leaving the print of his foot (Newby 1989: 30, 89).

journey. Al-Ṭabarī offers three arguments to sustain this assertion. The first argument is that the Prophet is found in an intermediary stage, wakefully, when the journey takes place. The second argument which is the conclusion of the first one is that he is conscious of this event in every moment of the journey. The third argument, as an extension of the first two, is that the corporal journey is a sign (*āya*), an incontestable proof of his divine mission. For these three arguments al-Ṭabarī's uses, as a base Koran 17: 1 were we can find the mention that God allows his servant to make the journey and not the spirit of his servant (al-Ṭabarī 1989: 230). Even though this opinion is accepted by the majority of the scholars dealing with the problem of the Prophet's ascension, there are also different opinions stating that the ascension was rather spiritual than a corporal one (see Gatje 1976: 74–77). The conclusion is that, corporal or spiritual, Muḥammad's Night Journey reflects a ritual during which Muḥammad sees God, and he is sacred as a prophet.

Al-Ṭabarī's explanation (seen previously) is considered as a part of the traditions without a historical background, rather devotional than historical, his arguments can be used in order to create the Prophet's image as a temporal and spiritual leader. By using the classical myth of the ascension, Islam will lay the foundation of its universalism, the first experiment of this universal vision being the community created in Medina.

We find in this type of investigation a real fact that allows us relate this episode to a general characteristics of the oriental world, referring to the investiture with a type of authority following initiatic rituals. Muḥammad's Night Journey can be a part of a sovereignty ritual specific to the Ancient Near East concerning the king's ascension as a central event of his coronation (Widengren 1950: 81; cf. Widengren 1955: 95), ritual which was maintained and transferred with this mythical heritage to the divine messenger, the chosen one, in conclusion, to the being who overcomes the human condition, whoever, without being transformed into a divine character, a character with divine powers. In this context we have to keep in mind the difference that Eliade makes with regard two types of overcoming the human condition. The first type refers to the contact with the spiritual realities; contact which assures the participation of the spirits. The second one refers to the transfiguration of the human condition into a being of divine order (Eliade 1998: 109; cf. Eliade 1956: 3). In the case of the Prophet's night journey, overcoming the human condition represents the unification into Muḥammad's person of two different powers, the temporal and the spiritual one, and the confirmation of Muḥammad as a spiritual and temporal leader.

The fabulous animal which is used in order to make the journey from Mecca to Jerusalem is also a part of the Semitic symbol of a kingship. The description made by Anas b. Māik, one of the Prophet's companions, shows that we deal with a white animal situated between donkey and mule (Muslim 1978: 101).⁵ The red colour in a Semitic key, this image could refer to the triumphal entrance of Solomon in Jerusalem to become a king and to the triumphal entrance of Jesus Christ in the same city, described in the New Testament. The beast is introduced into a ritual of prophetic initiation because Adam and Abraham traveled on its back (Ibn Abbas 1995: 13) and on the Resurrection Day Muḥammad will appear on its back. In this way *al Burāq* becomes the symbol of the relation with the ancient prophets (Vuckovic 2005: 49), Muḥammad uses the same practices and customs. In this way Muḥammad is placed in the holy tradition of the divine revelation.

5 The name of the fantastic beast seems to be related with *barq* (lightning), an allusion to his speed. In the Ibn Abbas' version this beast is described as having a human head and a horse body (Ibn Abbas 1995: 12). A hadīth mentioned by Mālik ibn Sa'sa'ah states that only one leg of this creature could cover a great distance. Ibn Sa'ad using Wāqidi's information, describes this creature as having two wings (Hajjāj 1995: 33).

Taking into consideration these elements, we can notice four implications of Muḥammad's ascension and of his nocturnal journey. These implications influence the way in which the Prophet will relate himself to his *umma*, his community, and his community to the prophetic experience. The first implication is the spiritual implication resumed in the ecstatic experience and in the vision of God. The second implication, the religious one, emphasizes the importance of Jerusalem as the third city of Islam. The third implication, the theological one, asserts the unity of Revelation inside the prophetic pluralism and the priority of the Prophet into what we can call a prophetic pyramid; in this context, the ascension is a guarantee of the authenticity of the divine promises (Piemontese 1987: 294). The fourth implication, the ritualistic one, refers to the institutionalizing of the five daily prayers. Analyzing these four images, we can aver that both the ascension and the journey to Jerusalem produce mutations in the perception of the prophetic phenomenon and the understating of the sacred. For example, the night journey to Jerusalem and then to the seventh sky, inserts Jerusalem into a sacred and political Islamic heritage. That is why, Jerusalem appears as the first direction for the daily prayer and, when Omar conquers the city in 638, he builds a cultic house on the same place from where the Islamic tradition tells that Muḥammad started his ascension, the Hebrew tradition mentions that Isaac's sacrifice took place, and Solomon and Herod's temples were built.

In conclusion, Muḥammad's Night Journey to heaven explores the mythical capacity of the Arab imaginary to develop a story which is a metaphor of the metahistory. Following the path of the ancient ascensions, Muḥammad will find the authenticity and the authority of his mission at the end of his journey, and he will be sacred in the same time as a spiritual and temporal leader. Each dialogue that he has with the ancient prophets is, at the same time, recognition of his prophetic status and recognition of the place that the Islamic *umma* has among the monotheistic community. The final purpose of the journey is at the same time the legitimacy of Muḥammad as a new leader and the legitimacy of his community as being the greatest and more perfect community of mankind, the reflection of his leader's initiatic path into temporal and spiritual.

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