

ASCENT TO HEAVEN  
IN ISLAMIC AND  
JEWISH MYSTICISM

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THE MATHESON TRUST  
For the Study of Comparative Religion

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## Introduction

The mythical garden of tradition is a closed and blessed system from which the contemplative does not willingly depart in order to become involved in the cold and neutral space of an “exact science”, such as “comparative religion”.

Frithjof Schuon

The motif of ascent to Heaven may be viewed as an archetypal topic of exceptional metaphysical importance in the history of religious and philosophical discourse. Those contemporary scholars who faithfully and rather blindly follow Mircea Eliade try to relate the ascent to the “mystical experience” of archaic spirituality with a clumsily labelled “shamanism” (this term sounds much less attractive in Russian than in English).

Putting aside this universalized scholarly construction (namely, “shamanism”), we entirely agree with Jeremy Naydler’s apt observation that “the mystical ascent to the sky is as central to the Hermetic tradition as it is to both Egyptian and Platonic mysticism.”<sup>1</sup>

Starting with the ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts,<sup>2</sup> the ascent to Heaven of various royal and priestly heroes is prominent in Near Eastern and Mediterranean cosmological, liturgical and soteriological systems, which simultaneously cover political, juridical and socio-mystical dimensions.<sup>3</sup> This metaphysical and literary topos of ascent is fundamental for the

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Naydler, “Plato, Shamanism and Ancient Egypt,” *Temenos Academy Review*, vol. 9, 2006, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> See Whitney M. Davis, “The Ascension Myth in the Pyramid Texts,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1977, pp. 161-79.

<sup>3</sup> See Algis Uždavinys, *Philosophy as a Rite of Rebirth: From Ancient Egypt to Neoplatonism* (Westbury: Prometheus Trust, 2008).

proper understanding of Second Temple Judaism and of early apocalyptic Christianity, whose mythologems can be traced back ultimately to Mesopotamian antiquity.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the motif of the spiritual flight is common in Neoplatonic literature (which faithfully follows Plato's *Phaedrus* in this respect) and the related hieratic arts (*hierourgia*, *theourgia*, *hieratike techné*) of late antiquity. Sarah Iles Johnston describes the theurgist's goal (similar to that of Plotinus and other Platonists, including Philo of Alexandria, the Jewish *hermeneus*) as follows: "he sought to experience *anagoge*—to cause his soul to ascend out of the material world and into the noetic realm where it could enjoy *henosis* with the *Nous patrikos* (theurgy's transcendent, supreme god)."<sup>5</sup>

In the context of Hellenic Platonism and the sacramental rites of theurgy, the term *anagoge* indicates elevation to the level of archetypes and principles, an ascent in the sense of an inner journey back to the "paternal harbour"; *henosis* means unification, union (sometimes understood in the sense of *unio mystica*); and *Nous patrikos* is the paternal Intellect whose luminous epiphany is tantamount to the irradiation (*ellampsis*) and creation of the psycho-somatic cosmos.

The pattern of ascent to the divine Throne in both the Jewish and Islamic traditions is less philosophical and more ceremonial, scriptural and liturgical, in accordance with the main paradigms and dogmas of monotheistic mythologies, systematically and uncompromisingly presented as "objective histories". For this reason (and also because so-called Middle East studies are extremely politicized, ideologized and theologized) it is difficult for any independent scholar to avoid various accusations and scrutiny conducted by the tacit or openly established *mihnas* (the *mihna* refers, historically, to the "inquisitia" instituted by the early Abbasid caliphs).

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<sup>4</sup> See Helge S. Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic: The Mesopotamian Background of the Enoch Figure and the Son of Man* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen Verlag, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Iles Johnston, *Riders in the Sky: Cavalier Gods and Theurgic Salvation in the Second Century A.D.*, *Classical Philology*, vol. 87, R.A. Saller (ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 303.

The key word in this particularly sensitive field of canonized mythologies (be they Jewish, Islamic or secular modernist) is “controversial”, as if any hermeneutical hypothesis, opinion or historical fact which cannot fit the comfortable standard picture of the socio-religious consensus is to be regarded as potentially scandalous and tantamount to a plot by evil forces. In this realm, therefore, not everything can be explicitly said, especially when relationships between the multiple branches of Judaism and Islam (and their respective doctrines) are involved.

In order to avoid crossfire from all kinds of puritans (those who pretend to be the very incarnation of kindness, godliness and truth) and mystical fundamentalists, we ritually confirm the orthodox boundaries, the borders of “property” in the flooded fields of comparative religion, at the same time as being unable to follow those rules of courtesy which require one to believe in certain supposedly “noble” but incredible things simply because they are “firmly established”.

We do not intend to compare and analyse the ascension material in Jewish Hekhalot literature and some early Sufi texts (using a great amount of contemporary scholarship) out of a particular ecstatic Dionysian enthusiasm or childish hope to reveal what “really happened”. Therefore our assertions are not to be displaced from their hermeneutical and metaphorical (or, in a sense, rhetorical) context. Hence, to say that Islam, in a certain respect, may be viewed as Third Temple Judaism is not to say that Islam “is” Judaism. Far from it—and generally we avoid making far-reaching conclusions. Yet in addition, since multidimensional explanations are better suited for approaching the civilizations and religious movements of late antiquity, we regard positivistic theories of cultural “borrowings” and external “influences” as too simplistic.

In this respect we agree with Michael Morony, inasmuch as conclusions based on unverified assumptions resemble “an intellectual house of cards” and tend to dissolve in “meaningless generalizations”.<sup>6</sup> The problem is more serious than it seems, since hermeneutical piecing together of this kind appears to be

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<sup>6</sup> Michael G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 16.

the normal practice for any cultural construction or reconstruction, in spite of the fact that “the imposition of an Aristotelian topical structure on material tends to give it an architectonic appearance, and makes circumstances appear to be more stable, ordered, and coherent than they actually are.”<sup>7</sup> Hence, if our discourse is not coherent and ordered according to semi-mythic standards, it turns out to be a great advantage, or at least an occasion for engaging in perennial irony. Recurring patterns or themes follow the logic of a dynamic arabesque which, nonetheless, is “static” in its continuity and change.

However, we are unable to share the naïve joy of the Spanish Christian professor when he, “on closer study of Ibn Arabi’s quasi-Dantesque allegory,” suddenly found that “it was itself no more than a mystical adaptation of another ascension, already famous in the theological literature of Islam: the Miraj, or Ascension, of Mahomet from Jerusalem to the Throne of God.”<sup>8</sup>

The nocturnal journey and ascension of the Prophet Muhammad may or may not be a prototype of Dante’s conception. Metaphysically, the problem of copyright is not so important. Likewise, when we compare the ascent of the Prophet and the descent of Revelation with well-known Neoplatonic conceptions, we are simply exploring possibilities and analogies (in the process of hermeneutical construction and deconstruction), not asserting “borrowings” and “influences”.

As Morony aptly remarks, “one can usually find whatever one looks for, and a predisposition to emphasize similarities or differences will have a prejudicial effect on the outcome.”<sup>9</sup> The art of scholarly presentation consists in turning this apparent disadvantage into a real advantage.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Miguel Asín, *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, translated and abridged by Harold Sunderland (London: John Murray, 1926), p. XIII.

<sup>9</sup> Michael G. Morony, op. cit., p. 16.

## *Introduction*

The main draft of this monograph was written during the Spring of 2008 at La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia. I am most grateful to Reza Shah-Kazemi, a Research Associate at the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, and the Matheson Trust (UK) for their support in producing this book.



## The Path of Descent and the Path of Ascent

In late Neoplatonic thought, both procession (*proodos*) and reversion (*epistrophe*) are required before actuality (*energeia*) is achieved, because the cyclic process of rest in the higher principle, procession (“descent”) from it, and reversion (“ascent”) to it, is the structural model which governs all activity within manifested reality, be it noetic, psychic or physical. Any irradiated (or “created”) entity fixes its essence only through reflecting back to its higher—one could say metaphysical—cause, which may be regarded both as producer of the effect and as goal of its perfection. Ultimately, all being springs from the ineffable One, and “Oneness in general is that which holds together every level of existence—and every individual—and gives it form.”<sup>1</sup>

This Neoplatonic motif, partly related to the metaphysical interpretation of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Parmenides*, is reflected in the Islamic Sufi mythology of two “great nights” that represent descent and ascent, manifestation and reintegration respectively.

The *laylat al-qadr*, the night on which the archetypal divine Book miraculously descended in the form of oracular verses (or signs, *ayat*) in Arabic, or rather the night on which the archangel Gabriel, speaking with the voice of Allah, placed the “recitation” (*qur’an*) in the heart of the Prophet Muhammad during one of his retreats in a cave on Mount Hira, is analogous to the Neoplatonic *proodos*.

The *laylat al-mi’raj*, the Night of Ascension, on which the Prophet was miraculously taken by the same archangel from Mecca to Jerusalem and thence up through the seven heavens

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<sup>1</sup> John Dillon, General Introduction, *Proclus’ Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides*, trs. Glenn R. Morrow and John M. Dillon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. XXI.

of Mesopotamian-Hellenistic cosmology to the divine Throne, is analogous to the Neoplatonic *epistrophe*.

In this particular context we are not concerned with the poignant theological question of who precisely (Gabriel or God Himself) appeared to Muhammad “on the night horizon” and by the lote tree near the “garden of the dwelling”. Since we are dealing with metaphysical *topoi* and canonized patterns of sacred mythology (or even with the pious inventions of the subsequent hermeneutical tradition), the different versions of how and when the Qur’an was sent down or how and when it was really collected cannot disturb our speculative philosophical approach.

According to this particular interpretation of Islamic sacred history, the heavenly Qur’an is tantamount to the Essential Living Being (*autozoon*) of Plato’s *Timaeus*, since this *autozoon* contains within itself not only the archetypes of the four Empedoclean elements, but also the Ideas of all the living creatures that are manifested in the sensible realm. For Plotinus, this intelligible world, viewed as an ideal paradigm of physical reality, as the noetic “well-rounded whole”, becomes “a globe of faces radiant with faces all living” (*Enn.* VI.7.15).

The archetypal Qur’an is like the Plotinian *kosmos noetos*: “a completely coherent and comprehensive matrix, timeless, ungenerated, immaterial and perfect, of the physical cosmos.”<sup>2</sup> The descent of the Book (in its role of the demiurgic *Logos* and soteriological Revelation) and the ascent of Muhammad (in his role of the paradigmatic mystagogue and divine vicegerent, tantamount to the Assyrian sacred king) are celebrated every year as calendrical events on the twenty-seventh of the month of Ramadan and on the twenty-seventh of the month of Rajab respectively.

However, Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240), the inspired Sufi writer, boldly claims that the Night of Destiny (*laylat al-qadr*) is none

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<sup>2</sup> John Dillon, *Pleroma and Noetic Cosmos: A Comparative Study, Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, R.T. Wallis and J. Bregman (eds.) (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 100. See also Algis Uždavinys, “From Homer to the Glorious Qur’an: Hermeneutical Strategies in the Hellenic and Islamic Traditions,” *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, vol. 11, 2003, pp. 79-114.

other than the Prophet Muhammad himself, regarded as the metaphysical hypostasis of *anthropos teleios*, the Perfect Man. This figure of the angelic *anthropos*, cast in the image (*selem*) and likeness (*demut*) of God, is well known from the Jewish mystical tradition. The Perfect Man as the noetic Form of Muhammad (*al-surat al-muhammadiyah*), whose “nature” is the archetypal Qur’an, *kosmos noetos*, is called a copy (*nuskha*) of Allah by the Sufis and described as the pole (*qutb*) on which the spheres of existence revolve. Therefore Nathaniel Deutsch aptly remarks, while discussing Reynold Nicholson’s analysis of ‘Abd al-Karim ibn Ibrahim al-Jili’s (1365-1417) doctrine of the Perfect Man:

If Nicholson had been more aware of Jewish Merkabah traditions, however, he could have noted a number of striking parallels between Jili’s Perfect Man and the Jewish figure of Metatron. Indeed, the Perfect Man of Jili’s *al-Insan al-kamil* appears, in many ways, to be a transformation of earlier Jewish conceptions of the angelic vicegerent.<sup>3</sup>

For Ibn ‘Arabi, Muhammad as a perfect (or complete, *kamil*) *anthropos* is the Word (*kalimah*) which comprises the integral totality of paradigms. Therefore he may be designated as the brother of the Qur’an, if not equated with the all-encompassing Book itself, one which embodies both the path of descent and the path of ascent. These paths may be viewed as the “existential texts”, as the display of demiurgic (creative) and theurgic (elevating) signs to be read or recited (since to read and recite is to live the life-text) in both directions. If the Night of Destiny is equated with the Prophet Muhammad as *anthropos teleios*, it means that he fulfils and accomplishes the entire cycle of onto-semiotic manifestation which encompasses both construction and deconstruction. Michel Chodkiewicz says:

Thus, *laylat al-qadr* is both the symbolic date of the last message, and also, for man himself, the date of the second birth through which he becomes that which he was from all eter-

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<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Deutsch, *Guardians of the Gate: Angelic Vice Regency in Late Antiquity*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, p. 159.

nity. This correspondence between the Qur'an and the *insan kamil* is strengthened by the fact that the descent of one and the ascension of the other come under the sign of the same number.<sup>4</sup>

This number is twenty-seven, since, as previously mentioned, the descent of the Qur'an is celebrated on the 27th Ramadan, and the ascent of the Prophet on the 27th Rajab, thus symbolically forming two semicircles whose conjunction constitutes the whole circle, tantamount to the completed divine Year which may be likened to the restored macrocosmic Eye of Horus in Egyptian mythology.

The ascension through the seven heavenly spheres of traditional antique cosmology took the Prophet of Islam to the threshold of the divine Presence symbolized by the Throne, at a "distance of two bow's length or even nearer" (Qur'an 53:9). Ibn 'Arabi interprets these two as the two semicircles of existence (which may be likened to procession and reversion in Neoplatonism) whose conjunction brings together and unites the divine realities (or true realities, *haqa'iq haqqiyyah*, the *pragmata* of Proclus) and the created realities, thereby restoring the unity of the whole. The reunited ontological circle resembles Ouroboros, the Egyptian symbol of eternity, ritually reconfirmed when, *in illo tempore*, the *ba* (manifestation) of Osiris is united with the *ba* of Ra, of the solar Intellect.

The Prophet's ascent (*mi'raj*) through the seven heavens ("the naïve adoption by Muhammad of the Ptolemaic celestial construction," according to the ironic remark of W.H.T. Gairdner)<sup>5</sup> both constitutes the politico-mythical legitimization of Islam and establishes the paradigm for Sufi mystical ascension. However, it is only briefly mentioned (at least such is the shared opinion of all traditional Muslim commentators) in the

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi*, tr. Liadain Sherrard (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> W.H.T. Gairdner, Introduction, *Mishkat al-anwar ("The Niche for Lights") by Al-Ghazzali*, tr. W.H.T. Gairdner (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1994. First edition: 1923), p. 26.

opening verse of *surah* 17, whose aberrant rhyme, according to F.E. Peters<sup>6</sup>, is regarded as a later addition to the rest of the *surah*:

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. He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing (Qur'an 17:1).<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, *surah* 17:1 is the main point of departure in discussing all hieratic stories related to Muhammad's Night Journey (*isra*) and Ascension (*mi'raj*). According to the *hadith* accounts, one night the Prophet undertook the miraculous journey (either spiritually, *ruhan*, or bodily, *jisman*) from the sacred place of prayer (*al-masjid al-haram*, the holy mosque in Mecca) to the furthest place of prayer (or the most distant mosque, *al-masjid al-aqsa*), where God's *ayat* (signs, verses) were revealed to him. Ibn Ishaq (d. 761), as recounted by Ibn Hisham (d. 835), relates it as follows:

I have been told that al-Hasan said: The Envoy of God, God's peace and blessings on him, said: While I was sleeping in the sanctuary (*hijr*), Jibril came to me and roused me with his foot. . . . I sat up, he took my arm, and I rose with him. He took me out to the door of the place of prayer (*masjid*) and there was a white beast, part mule and part donkey. The beast had two wings for thighs with which he would propel his lower legs, placing his hooves as far as his eye could see. He mounted me on himself and took me out. . . . The Envoy of God, God's peace and blessings on him, went on, and with him Jibril, until he came at last to the house of the sanctified (*bayt al-muqaddas*) and found there Ibrahim, Musa, and 'Isa in

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<sup>6</sup> F.E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 144.

<sup>7</sup> See *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings*, translated and edited by Michael A. Sells (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 47.

a group of prophets. The Envoy of God, peace and blessings on him, led them in prayer and prayed with them.<sup>8</sup>

Uri Rubin maintains that the *isra-mi'raj* is in itself not only a dramatic event of revelation, but also one of confirmation in which the initiation of the Prophet is completed.<sup>9</sup>

The “most distant mosque” of Qur'an 17:1 probably first meant heaven. The early Qur'anic commentators reached an agreement (but not without some initial hesitation) that this *masjid al-aqsa* refers to Jerusalem or the Temple Mount (*al-haram al-sharif*) where the First and the Second Jewish Temples once stood. Thus, the Prophet of Islam is taken to Jerusalem by Buraq, a mythical beast which is equivalent to Solomon's flying carpet. He enters the house of sanctity (*bayt al-maqdis*, *bayt al-muqaddas*) and, after certain hieratic rites, initiations and trials (various drinks are offered to him and he chooses the milk, which signifies *al-fitrah*), the Prophet ascends through the seven heavens. Thereby he reaches the “house of life” (*al-bayt al-ma'mur*), usually regarded as an archetype or celestial analogue of the Ka'bah, the Meccan sacred house (*al-bayt al-haram*).

Hence, we have three different temples: in Mecca, in Jerusalem, and in the seventh (or fourth) heaven. It seems that initially the *isra* and the *mi'raj* were two different stories: Muhammad's climbing a ladder (*mi'raj*) or ascent to the Lote Tree of the Boundary (*sidrat al-muntaha*), and his night journey from Mecca to a place called *bayt al-maqdis*. When these stories were combined and *al-bayt al-maqdis* identified with Jerusalem, then the ascent to heaven followed the *isra*, the miraculous journey to *al-bayt al-maqdis*. As Peters observes, none of this is immediately apparent in the above-mentioned Qur'anic verse (17:1). Instead, there are what appear to be (according to Qur'an

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-55. See A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 181 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as viewed by the Early Muslims: A Textual Analysis* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995), p. 65.

17:90-93) “earlier denials of the possibility of a heavenly journey with the revelation to Islam”.<sup>10</sup>

Alfred Guillaume even raised a bold hypothesis (unsupported by other scholars) that the night journey, briefly described in *surah* 17:1, actually represents an *umra* that Muhammad allegedly performed from a place situated on the Iraqi pilgrim road (in Wadi Ji‘rana, at the boundary of the Meccan *haram*) and called *al-masjid al-aqsa*, to Mecca and back in one night.<sup>11</sup>

So *al-masjid al-aqsa* in *surah* 17:1 can theoretically designate three (or two, if the mosque at Wadi Ji‘rana near Mecca is discounted) sanctuaries. The Muslim scholars, however, reached a firm conclusion that it was nothing other than the *haram al-sharif*, the Temple in Jerusalem.

Since all different reports and narrative accounts of the Prophet’s miraculous journeys had not only theological, but also important social and political dimensions, Brooke Vuckovic emphasizes that the ascension narratives reflect the Muslim’s struggle with self-definition. She says: “The myth of the Prophet’s ascent should be viewed less as a miraculous historic event than as a means to understanding how early scholars wrestled with defining Muhammad, themselves, and the values of the Muslim community.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> F.E. Peters, op. cit., p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Guillaume, “Where was al-masjid al-aqsa?” *Al-Andalus* 18, 1953, pp. 323-36.

<sup>12</sup> Brooke Olson Vuckovic, *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns: The Legacy of the Mi‘raj in the Formation of Islam* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), p. 41.

## The Meccan Sanctuary

The Arabic term *haram* means “prohibited, forbidden by the *shari‘ah*”, and thereby stands in contrast to the term *halal*, “permitted”. It also covers the concept of the sacred, especially when related to the Ka‘bah, the chief Islamic sanctuary in Mecca. For every pious Muslim who turns towards the Ka‘bah, it represents the *axis mundi* as a primordial temple containing the presence of *Allah* or *al-Haqq*, the Truth, viewed as the supreme Principle. This Principle, tantamount to the Ultimate Reality, is the Sacred as such, which manifests all subsequent sacred phenomena, including symbolic and qualitative spaces arranged and modified by the presence of the Divine. In this respect, Seyyed Hossein Nasr speaks of a sacred geography, or even geosophy, for which the directions and properties of our physical world are not uniform, but rather qualitatively distinct.<sup>1</sup>

In both the Islamic and Pre-Islamic Arabian milieux, the political, economic and social order cannot be separated from the sacred. The sanctity of the Meccan *haram* played a decisive role in regulating and maintaining peace among the Arabs, thereby providing a spiritual context for their trade and ensuring both protection and safety. Therefore, it is no wonder that the term *mu‘min* in early Islamic times means not simply “believer”, but a person to whom security is guaranteed by his adherence to the juridically based system of tribal custom and the religious community (*ummah*) of the Prophet. According to al-Razi, “believing goes back to the sense of security.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1988), p. 202.

<sup>2</sup> R.B. Serjeant, “*Haram and Hawtah*, the Sacred Enclave in Arabia,” *Studies in Arabian History and Civilization* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 1981), p. 57.



The two complementary ideas of circularity and centrality are involved in the establishment of a *haram*. The Arabic word for pilgrimage, *hajj*, in its original sense is not related to any intrinsic metaphysical idea, but rather denotes a regular, well-traversed route. Of several different objectives, the route may lead to a sanctuary, which at the same time presupposes the *sūq*, or market-place, maintained under the special protection of the local gods. The *sūq* cycle is regulated by the sacred calendar and ultimately by the deity who inhabits the *haram*. However, as Mohammed Bamyeh has pointed out, neither Mecca nor its *haram* were in themselves the objects of veneration or worship.<sup>3</sup> They simply housed the tribal idols—sacred stones, statues and symbols. A *haram* may be created in order to protect the possessions acquired by raiding, which is symptomatic of the so-called *ghazw* economy.

During the time of Islam, the Meccan *haram*, or sacred territory, expanded to include not just the area around the Ka‘bah, but the entire city of Mecca and the surrounding valleys. Within the territory of the *haram* it is usually prohibited to kill any human being or animal (except for the purpose of sacrifice), or cause any damage to its vegetation. In addition, the Meccan *haram* becomes forbidden to those who are not Muslims.

The esoteric interpretation of the pilgrimage to the Ka‘bah, regarded both as the symbolic centre of the terrestrial world and as the innermost heart of the individual as microcosm, is provided by the Sufis and the Shi‘ite mystics. However, for every Muslim who enters Mecca in order to perform the circumambulation around the Ka‘bah, this means to enter the holy place where the first House of God (*bayt Allah*) was built, according to the Qur’an:

Lo! the first Sanctuary appointed for mankind was that at Bakkah, a blessed place, a guidance to the peoples (3:96).

*Allah* has appointed the Ka‘bah, the Sacred House, a standard for mankind. . . . (5:97).

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<sup>3</sup> Mohammed A. Bamyeh, *The Social Origins of Islam: Mind, Economy, Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 32.

The Arabic verb *tafa*, from which the term for the circumambulation (*tawaf*) is derived, has the meaning “to attain to the summit of a thing by spiralling around it”.<sup>4</sup> Hence, it is thought that through the *tawaf* the pilgrim participates with the angels in their circumbulation of the Divine Throne. This is so because cosmologically the Ka‘bah is regarded as the reflection of the archetypal Divine House in the seventh (or fourth) Heaven, above and beyond which stands the Throne of *Allah*, around which the angels are constantly rotating.

Those and other similar interpretations are based on the metaphysical premise that everything in the lower world is a projection and image of something in the higher noetic world. Everything in the sensible realm is a form (*surah*), a reflection or image of its spiritual archetype (*haqiqah*). When understood in this sense, the Ka‘bah on earth corresponds to the Ka‘bah in the fourth Heaven, as indicated in the Qur’an (*al-bayt al-ma‘mur*: 52:4). It is square in form, because it is viewed as a cosmological mandala supported by four pillars, elements or limits (*arkan*, sing. *rukn*).

Since the Meccan sanctuary is an image of the Throne surrounded by four limits, namely, a beginning (*awwal*), an end (*akhir*), an inner aspect (*batin*) and an external aspect (*zahir*), the square inscribed within the circle represents a descent (*tanazzul*) of the suprasensible world (*‘alam al-ghayb*) to the level of the sensible world (*‘alam al-shahadah*).<sup>5</sup> For the Sufis, the general form of the Ka‘bah is a symbolic configuration of the Perfect Man, regarded as the first divine emanation, that is, as the Muhammadan Light (*nur muhammadi*) which contains all lights and is tantamount to the divine Intellect (*Aql*, the Neoplatonic *Nous*) or the Throne (*‘Arsh*). The three dimensions of the cube represent the three aspects of divine unity: that of

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<sup>4</sup> Fritz Meier, “The Mystery of the Ka‘ba: Symbol and Reality in Islamic Mysticism,” *The Mysteries: Papers from Eranos Yearbooks*, Joseph Campbell (ed.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 184.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, tr. Philip Sherrard and Liadain Sherrard (London: Kegan Paul International and Islamic Publications, 1986), p. 204.

the Essence (*tawhid dhati*), of the Attributes (*tawhid sifati*) and of Activity (*tawhid fi'li*).

Needless to say, those and other theological interpretations are later developments. They were not current among the members of the early Islamic community which, however, inherited the oral Semitic traditions of Adamic and Abrahamic mythology. Therefore, for the mythologically inspired Muslims, the original and "real" Ka'bah was not simply an *'arish* (a sacred tabernacle covered by the *kiswa*) or a man-made sanctuary built in the Jahiliyya with loose stones without clay, but rather a pavilion from among the "tents" of Paradise which God caused to descend. According to an account related by the fifth Shi'ite Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, the surface of this tent, set up upon the site of the future Ka'bah, exactly covered the area to be occupied by the future Abrahamic sanctuary. The central pillar of this marvelous tent was made of red hyacinth, the four tent pegs were of pure gold, and the ropes were woven of violet threads.

According to Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq, a white cloud (*ghammah*) descended onto the future site of the Ka'bah, and the angel Gabriel ordered Adam, the first among the Muslim prophets, to trace with his foot an area covered by the shadow of this archetypal cloud. Thereby Adam traced the limits of the *haram* with the sanctuary as its centre.<sup>6</sup> In this case, a spiritual realm of archetypes determines a terrestrial figure and becomes immanent therein. Though remaining beyond the scope of sensory perception, the realm of archetypes and their psychic images can, however, be perceived by the eye of the heart.

For Ibn 'Arabi, the Ka'bah itself takes on life through those who circle around it, that is, the building is animated like a hieratic statue of the ancient theurgists. He says: "I see the building animated by those who circle round it. And there is no self-animation, except through a physician with effective power."<sup>7</sup>

Since the Ka'bah symbolizes the Essence (*dhat*) of God, the Black Stone (*al-hajar al-aswad*), believed to have descended

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>7</sup> Fritz Meier, op. cit., p. 161.

from Heaven, not only represents the human spiritual essence, but also symbolizes the primordial covenant between man and God. This covenant justifies Islam as the *din al-fitrah*, the original religion of those who are the children of Adam. Therefore, the circumambulation of the Ka'bah (the seven prescribed circuits corresponding to the seven attributes of *Allah*) represents the road to God which leads through the heart (*qalb*). Moving around the Ka'bah (or the invisible Divine Throne) the pilgrim is regarded as being purified of everything that is other than God. This purification and meeting with the Lord is accomplished through continual *dhikr*, that is, through constant remembrance and invocation of the Name *Allah*.

Fritz Meier describes the Ka'bah as a symbol of where the annihilated human self touches upon the divine Self, in the same way as the *atman* becomes identical with *Brahman* in the Upanishadic teachings.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, this comparison finds its rather peculiar confirmation in the Islamized Arabic translation of *Amrtakunda* (under the title *Hawd ma'al-hayat*, or *The Pool of the Water of Life*), a work on *hatha-yoga* where Brahma and Vishnu are rendered respectively as Ibrahim and Musa, that is to say, Abraham and Moses.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Fritz Meier, op. cit., p. 164.

<sup>9</sup> Carl W. Ernst, "The Islamization of Yoga in the Amrtakunda Translations," *JRAS*, Series j, 13, 2, 2003, p. 208.

## Each Prophet has a *Haram*

In Islam, Abraham (Ibrahim) is regarded as a prophet and called the intimate Friend of God (*Khalil*). He typifies the Sufi mystic who is possessed by the divine love that conceals itself from this world, thereby imitating the so-called exile of Ibrahim, and accordingly follows the *din Ibrahim*, that is, the original and primordial Islam.

The Arabs maintained the conviction of their direct genealogical descent from Ibrahim and Isma'il, two mythical heroes of the Near Eastern tribes. According to the later hagiographic and theological tradition, 'Abd al-Muttalib (the well known grandfather of the Prophet) claimed: "We are the people of *Allah* in His town. This has always been according to Ibrahim's covenant."<sup>1</sup>

The Quraysh, the tribe from which the future Prophet Muhammad was to come, were regarded as the noblest descendants of Isma'il. Hence, the authority they held among the rest of the Arabs was based both on this mythologized descent and on their adherence to the religion of Ibrahim. *Din Ibrahim* means the Abrahamic way of life which is symbolically centred at the sacred House of Abraham, namely, the Ka'bah. A certain House of Abraham is already indicated in the Jewish Book of Jubilees, although its location in Mecca (instead of Jerusalem) was not shared by the Jews themselves, except those who, like 'Abdallah ibn Salam of Medina, venerated the Meccan sanctuary. 'Abdallah ibn Salam (d. ca. 663-664), a member of the Jewish Arab tribe of Qaynuqa, though a real historical Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Uri Rubin, "Hanifiyya and Ka'ba: An Inquiry into the Arabian Pre-Islamic Background of Din Ibrahim," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13, 1990, p. 107.

convert to Islam, “functioned as a symbol of the Islamization of the Jews,” according to Steven Wasserstrom: “This figure was used by Muslims to give voice to purportedly Jewish age-old traditions that had prophesied the coming of Muhammad.”<sup>2</sup>

The ancient Arabs viewed the Meccan *haram* as the site where the offering of Abraham’s son had taken place. For this reason, the prophet Ibrahim had allegedly hung the horns of the ram (*kabsh*) on the water spout of the sanctuary, because a founder of any *haram*, or *hawtah*, demarcated its boundaries, usually with white-washed cairns. It seems that the Abrahamic associations with the Ka’bah are mainly established by identifying the spring of Zamzam with the “well of water” of *Genesis* 21, which saved Ishmael and his mother Hagar from dying of thirst. Therefore Gerald Hawting, while speaking about the process of Islamization, or rather of the “Abrahamification” of the Meccan *haram*, maintains that the Zamzam mythologies were introduced as a secondary development, being “a part of the transformation by Islam of the Meccan sanctuary into an Abrahamic institution.”<sup>3</sup>

However, this transformation is clearly pre-Islamic and related to the *hanifiyya* of the Meccan Quraysh. The Qur’an describes the Prophet Muhammad as a *hanif*, a primordial monotheist, and his religion as the “right religion” (*al-din al-qayyim*: 30:43), related to that of the prophet Ibrahim: “So set your purpose (O Muhammed) for the religion as a *hanif*—this is the nature (framed) of Allah, in which He hath created man. . . . This is the right religion” (30:30-31).

There are two versions of the construction of the Ka’bah, both current in early Islamic times. The first links it with Ibrahim and has been supported by some passages of the Qur’an. The second establishes the foundation of the settlement of Mecca by Qusayy ibn Kilab, known as the “unifier” (*mujammi*) of the Quraysh. The ancient Ka’bah, described as an

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<sup>2</sup> Steven N. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 175 & 176.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald R. Hawting, “The ‘sacred offices’ of Mecca from Jahiliyya to Islam,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13, Jerusalem, 1990, p. 83.

*'arish* without any roof—it was turned into a permanent roofed structure by the Byzantine carpenter Baqum a few years before Muhammad's first revelation—belonged to the legendary tribe of Jurhum. Afterwards it passed on to the Khuza'a, and was eventually inherited by Qusayy, who married a daughter of the Khuza'a cult official of the sanctuary.

The carpenter Baqum (a name taken to reproduce the Greek Pachomius) is himself almost a legendary figure, and is described as a passenger from a Byzantine ship wrecked at Shu'ayba. The timber of this ship was used for the Ka'bah's roof. In a more elaborate version, the Byzantine ship was carrying building materials for the reconstruction of an Ethiopian church destroyed by the Persians.<sup>4</sup>

Qusayy ibn Kilab consolidated the pre-eminence of the Quraysh, combining the cultic (*hijaba*) and political (*siyada*) functions of the re-established *haram* which symbolized the unification of his tribe on behalf of *Allah*, presumably based on the idea of *din Ibrahim*. Walter Dostal supposes that a place name Macoraba, put on the map of Ptolemaeus (in the second century AD), though not exactly in the present area of Mecca, corresponds to the Sabaic word *makoraba*, which designates a holy place or temple (*mukariba*).<sup>5</sup> Patricia Crone rejects this identification, arguing that the name of Macoraba has nothing to do with that of Mecca. She says:

After all, we only make things worse by postulating familiarity on the part of Greco-Roman authors with both Mecca and Quraysh before they mattered, whereas neither was known until after they had risen to commercial and political importance. It is the sixth-century silence that is significant, and this silence cannot be attributed to the fact that sources have been lost, though some clearly have. The fact is that the sources written after the conquest display not the faintest sign of *rec-*

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Dostal, "Mecca before the time of the prophet: attempt of an anthropological interpretation," *Der Islam*, vol. 68, issue 2, Berlin, 1991, pp. 193-231; reprinted in *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, F.E. Peters (ed.) (Aldershot, Ashgate/Variorum, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

*ognition* in their accounts of the new rulers of the Middle East or the city from which they came.<sup>6</sup>

Being chief custodian of the Ka‘bah, Qusayy emerges as a cultic reformer. According to early Islamic chronicles, he renovated the periphery of the *haram* district in order to enable the settlement of Mecca, whilst at the same time assuming control of the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca by establishing the *siqaya* and *rifada* institutions, dealing respectively with the supply of water and food. And control over the Ka‘bah means control over the town.

The “Sacred House of God” was considered the property of a divinity, therefore Qusayy acted both as upholder of the *hijaba* (the priest’s office) and as its administrator. Hence, the control of the sanctuary (*wilayat al-bayt*) provided a guarantee for political leadership and was essential for establishing the superiority of Quraysh, who represented the *hanifiyya* based on the obligation to worship *Allah*, the Lord of the Ka‘bah. Accordingly, the *hanifiyya* consisted mainly of adherents of the religion of Ibrahim and devotion to the House of Ibrahim, that is, the Ka‘bah. The young Muhammad was introduced into the idea and realm of the *din Ibrahim* by Zayd ibn ‘Amr, a local *hanif*. Zayd used to pray facing the Ka‘bah, saying: “This is the *qibla* of Ibrahim and Isma‘il. I do not worship stones and do not pray towards them, and do not eat that which was sacrificed to them and do not draw lots with arrows.”<sup>7</sup>

Muhammad himself used the Ka‘bah as his *qibla* before adopting, for a short time, the *qibla* of Jerusalem when he established the *haram* of Medina on the model of the Abrahamic *haram* of Mecca. Two assertions of the Prophet, quoted by Ibn Hanbal, run as follows: “Each prophet has a *haram*, and al-Madinah is my *haram*”; “Mecca was Ibrahim’s *haram*, and al-Madinah is my *haram*.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 137.

<sup>7</sup> Uri Rubin, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

<sup>8</sup> R.B. Serjeant, *op. cit.*, p. 50.



According to R.B. Serjeant, the process by which Muhammad became established in Medina is analogous to the growth of a *hawtah*, a sacred enclave.<sup>9</sup> The crucial importance attached to the institution of *hawtah*, or *haram*, is proved by the fact that Muhammad had been rejected by the Banu Hanifah tribe, conceivably because they had their own *haram* already, established by the prophet Musailimah, the chief rival of Muhammad.

The term *hawtah* (still used in contemporary southern Arabia) is a synonym of *haram* and means a sacred enclave that could be created by a member of a holy family by declaring a certain piece of land a *hawtah*, where security under God's law is established. When the founder of a *hawtah* was recognized by the tribes as an administrator and representative of the divinity, the merchants could settle in it and found a market (*suq*). The founder of a *hawtah*, himself turned into a semi-divine hero, would remain forever Lord of this *haram*. His descendants kept the office with the title of *mansab*, or *mansub*, and could tax the inhabitants of the enclave.

Bearing in mind the oft-repeated pattern related to this kind of sacred institution, one can understand the importance of the Medinan *haram* within which *Allah*, but for practical purposes His "oracular voice", the Prophet Muhammad, is the announcer and *hermeneus* of the law for the surrounding tribes linked to this *haram*. In fact, the *haram* constitutes a nucleus around which might gather many different tribes that adhere to the centralized authority of the *mansab*, who is able to judge all inter-tribal disputes. In this case, Muhammad as a *mansab* represented the *din Ibrahim*, restored by the Qur'anic revelations. Since these tribes were asked to give up very little of their traditional habits, Serjeant argues that Muhammad fitted well into the system of law and custom into which he was born.<sup>10</sup>

Both the ancient Arabs and the early Muslims tended to consider themselves attached to a *haram* rather than to a dynasty. Therefore the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik feared that the pilgrims might form an allegiance to 'Abdullah ibn al-

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

Zubayr, who held the Meccan *haram* for a few years, and for this reason the caliph re-created a new *haram* in Jerusalem, namely, *al-haram al-sharif*. This fact provides additional evidence that to hold sacred offices in Mecca was to hold power. Since the Prophet Muhammad became the holder of both the Medinan and the Meccan sacred enclaves, the expansion of his power was quite easy and without requiring military effort, except when directed against Musailimah, the owner of his own *haram*, and in other similar cases. The two *harams* possessed by the Prophet contributed to his politico-religious success in creating the confederation based on his allegiance to *Allah* and to the sacred House of Ibrahim.

Therefore, it is little wonder that in various ascension accounts the archetypal *hanif Ibrahim* serves as a father figure to Muhammad. Abraham is depicted as a celestial *anthropos*. Like the Jewish angel Metatron, he sits on the throne at the gate of *bayt al-ma'mur*, the venerated house of immortality, where every day 70,000 angels go to stay until the Day of Resurrection. Abraham himself is pictured as a venerable and solemn shaykh, whom the Prophet Muhammad meets either in the Temple of Jerusalem or in the seventh heaven on the Night of Ascension. He is astonished by their physical similarities. As Vuckovic observes, in the *mi'raj* narratives Abraham has “looks and mannerisms similar to the Prophet’s”.<sup>11</sup> By having Muhammad appear as a son of the *hanif Ibrahim*, the Jewish and Christian claims on Abraham are surpassed and neutralized.

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<sup>11</sup> Brooke Olson Vuckovic, *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns: The Legacy of the Mi'raj in the Formation of Islam* (Routledge, 2005), p. 56.