

# The *Mi'raj* of Muhammad in an Ascension Typology

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The Night Journey and Ascension of Muhammad, the founder of the Islamic religion, may seem much like a fairy tale to the casual reader. It is however much more than just a fairy tale. If one were to dig around in the religious records of ancient people he would soon discover that this fantastic story is paralleled by a mound of other texts. These accounts have been called "Ascension texts," and have been the object of interest among scholars for quite some time. One might ask if Muhammad's story is out in left field or whether or not it fits into the general pattern of these other Ascension texts. In a close examination of the Night Journey (lit. *isra'*) and Ascension (lit. *mi'raj*) of Muhammad many of the aspects of other Ascension texts may be found. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that the Night Journey and Ascension of Muhammad does fit into a given typology of Ascension texts. It should be mentioned that this does not mean that the Ascension of Muhammad is valid or invalid, but rather that it simply fits the given pattern.

One might ask, "what is an Ascension text?" This question is not to be easily answered. Hastings has suggested that "as the idea of 'Revelation' presupposes the possibility of movement from heaven earthward, so the idea of 'Ascension' presupposes the possibility of movement from earth heavenward."<sup>1</sup> From his statement we get the general drift of what is contained in this body of texts. They each tell how a Patriarch is taken from the earth here and shown the world above. The common theme found in all of these texts is one of "communication between the natural and the spiritual order, and of a passage from the former to the latter."<sup>2</sup> M. Scopello has concluded that "the account of a heavenly trip during which divine mysteries are revealed to the initiate . . . seems to be linked with similar frameworks used in several Jewish Psuedepigrapha, describing the *ascension ad caelum* of the Patriarches."<sup>3</sup> This pattern is closely related to the procedure

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<sup>1</sup>Hastings, *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, 2:151.

<sup>2</sup>Hastings, *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, 2:151. See also Schmitt, "Zum Thema, Entueckung. im Alten Testament," 35ff. Mircea Eliade has indicated that it is "one of the oldest religious means of personally communicating with the Gods." in *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 78, cited in Jones, "Comparative Study of Ascension Motifs in World Religions," 80.

<sup>3</sup>Scopello, "The Apocalypse of Zostrianos," 376. Here he is specifically speaking of how the Apocalypse of Zostrianos relates to other ascensions, but this can be easily applied to the ascension of Muhammad.

followed in the "ritual of royal enthronement" in the Near East.<sup>4</sup> Rather than dwelling on texts related to coronation ceremonies or texts where the Patriarch is "translated without tasting death," this paper will concentrate on the typology of those texts in which the Patriarch ascends to the heavens above and then returns to the earth after seeing God.<sup>5</sup> These individual points are not found in all of the Ascensions but rather in the majority of them.<sup>6</sup>

For the purposes of this paper I have developed a general typology of Ascension texts. This typology is based primarily upon texts found in the Near East. The religions of which these texts are drawn are Jewish, Christian and Islamic.<sup>7</sup> The majority of these texts are dated from A.D. 100 to 400.<sup>8</sup> Some of the texts taken into account in the development of this typology are: 1 Enoch, Testaments of the 12 Patriarches, The Assumption of Moses, The Apocalypse of Abraham, The Testament of Abraham, The Book of the Secrets of Enoch (Slavonic 2 Enoch), The Ascension of Isaiah, The Apocalypse of Peter, IV Baruch (Greek), the *isra'* and *mi'raj* of Mohammad, etc.<sup>9</sup> These texts have been considered by the scholars to be some of the oldest and most authentic among the ascension texts.<sup>10</sup>

## The Typology

- I. The Patriarch is unsure if the event is a dream/vision or real.
- II. Appearance of angel(s) before the Patriarch.
  - a. Calls the him by name.
  - b. Tells him not to be afraid.
  - c. The angel then declares his purpose.
- III. The Patriarch sanctified.
  - a. Washed and anointed.
  - b. Clothed.

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<sup>4</sup>Scopello, "The Apocalypse of Zostrianos," 376. Cf. See Testament of Levi 8 and 2 Enoch 9. The problem has been treated by the same author in *Un rituel ideal d'intronisation dans trois textes gnostiques de Nag Hammadi* in *Nag Hammadi and Gnosis*, papers read at the First international Congress of Coptology, Cairo, December 1976, ed. R. Mcl. Wilson (Leiden, 1978) 91-95. A.M. Hocart has developed a typology of the Coronation ceremony among Kings which is similar to that of the Ascension. Hocart, *Kingship* (Oxford: University Press, 1969), 70-98.

<sup>5</sup>In the Testament of Abraham, the Patriarch only briefly returns to earth before he meets the Angel of Death. This account has been considered for this study.

<sup>6</sup>This typology was developed from primary sources based upon Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditional texts. The Egyptian parallels are mentioned only when I have felt necessary. I discovered a typology developed by George Widengren, cited by Edward T. Jones after this typology was already developed. It is not surprising that parallels exist between the two. The typology is cited in "A Comparative Study of Ascension Motifs in World Religions," in *Deity & Death*, ed., Spencer J. Palmer (Provo: Religious Studies Center of BYU, 1978), 95-96. typology is from *Muhammad, the Apostle of God and His Ascension* (Uppsala: Universitets Arsskrift, 1955), 92.

<sup>7</sup>See note 7 for explanation.

<sup>8</sup>With the exception of the Islamic text which date post 750 A.D.

<sup>9</sup>The majority of these texts may be found in Charlseworth, *Old Testament Psuedepigrapha*, vols. 1-2.

<sup>10</sup>Culianu, *Psychnodia I*, 6.

- IV. The Patriarch is guided through the heaven(s) by an angel.
  - a. A vehicle may be used such as a chariot, horse, boat, etc.
  - b. Often simply carried.
  - c. Often the ascension takes place from an *axis mundi*/sacred space.
- V. The Patriarch passes through several heavens (3-7).
  - a. A Watcher asks for information at the gate to each heaven.
  - b. Answers to the questions must be supplied in order to pass by the Watcher.
  - c. The Patriarch Ascending is greeted by other Patriarches.
  - d. A question answer session takes place between the guide and Patriarch.
  - e. Each heaven often contains different kinds of angels and varying landscapes.
- VI. The Patriarch sees God on his throne (A Theophany).
  - a. God gives the Patriarch a commission.
  - b. A spiritual truth is revealed to the Patriarch.

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to fitting the *isra'* and *mi'raj* of Muhammad into the typology above and demonstrating some interesting parallels found in other ascension texts.

#### I. The Patriarch is unsure if the event is a dream/vision or real.

The *isra'* or Night Journey is considered a dream or vision when based upon the word *ru'ya* "vision" found in *sura* 27:60 of the Koran. Some however declare that it was an actual physical journey taken by the prophet. It is claimed that it was a vision in which the prophet "is said to have held 70,000 conversations with Allah, although the whole journey proceeded so quickly that, when he returned, his bed was still warm and the watercup which he had overthrown with his foot at his hurried departure, was not yet empty."<sup>11</sup> According to Gibb, this passage in the Koran "implies that the night journey was not a *real* journey but a *vision*."<sup>12</sup> "A'isha the prophet's wife used to say: 'The apostle's body remained where it was but God removed his spirit by night.'"<sup>13</sup> Ibn Ishaq said, "Ya'qub b. 'Utba b. al-Mughira b. al-Akhnas told me that Mu'awiy b. Abu Sufyan when he was asked about the apostle's Night Journey said, 'It was a true vision from God.' . . . Thus, as I see it, revelation from God comes to the prophets waking or sleeping."<sup>14</sup> Others declare that Muhammad himself was unsure, much like Paul, whether

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<sup>11</sup>The orthodox point of view according to a commentary by Tabari supports this interpretation in three ways: "1> If the Prophet had not been carried away in a corporeal sense the event would afford no proof of his divine mission and those who disbelieved the story could not be accused of infidelity. 2> It is stated in the Kur'an that God caused his servant to journey, not that He caused his servant's spirit to journey. 3> If the Prophet had been carried away in spirit only, the services of Burak would not have been required, since animals are used for carrying bodies, not for carrying spirits." cited in Gibb, *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, 183. Cf. Bevan, *Mohammed's Ascension to Heaven*, in *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentum Wissenschaft*, 27:56; Schrieke, *Der Islam*, 4:13; Tabari, Baidawi, and Baghawi, *Tafsir*, ad xvii, I. Gibb, *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, 183.

<sup>12</sup>Gibb, *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, 183. Italics added.

<sup>13</sup>Guillaum, *Life of Muhammed*, 183.

<sup>14</sup>Guillaum, *Life of Muhammad*, 183.

the experience was visionary or a physical journey.<sup>15</sup> "Only God knows how revelation came and he saw what he saw. But whether he was asleep or awake, it was all true and actually happened."<sup>16</sup> It appears we are in the same predicament as Paul concerning this matter.

## II. Appearance of angel(s)

- a. Calls the Patriarch by name
- b. Tells individual not to be afraid.
- c. The angel declares his purpose.

The account begins with an exurb from the *hadith*:: "I was told that al-Hasan said that the apostle (Muhammad) said: 'While I was sleeping in the Jijr Gabriel came and stirred me with his foot. I sat up but saw nothing and lay down again. He came a second time and stirred me with his foot. I sat up but saw nothing and lay down again. He came to me the third time and stirred me with his foot. I sat up and he took hold of my arm and I stood beside him.'<sup>17</sup> Gabriel then "tells him that God . . . has decreed that in the course of the night he will be raised up to the seventh Heaven and permitted to look upon the work of the Almighty and to worship the face of the Eternal."<sup>18</sup>

The Angel Gabriel plays the most prominent role among the Islamic Archangels. The other three are Michael, Azrael, and Israfil.<sup>19</sup> The role of these Archangels is to deliver the word of God to his prophets. The Angel Gabriel also dominates the picture in the Bible. He appears to the Mary (Luke 1:27-37) and to Zacharias (Luke 1:11-20). In traditional Ascension texts the function of the angel is one of a heavenly in addition to being a messenger. This is the role of Gabriel in the Ascension of Muhammad.

Although the feature of the angel appearing three times before delivering a message is not found in the any of Ascension texts that I reviewed, an interesting parallel exists. In the Bible the account of the Lord calling to the Prophet Samuel in the Temple closely resembles the call of Muhammad. The Lord called to Samuel three times. The first two times Samuel thought that Eli had called him. Finally Eli informed Samuel that he had not called, but rather the Lord had been calling to him and if the Lord should call again to answer, "speak Lord, because your servant is listening."<sup>20</sup> The Ascension texts, however

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<sup>15</sup>Guillaum, *Life of Muhammad*, 183. Cf. "Whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth," in 2 Corinthians 12:2. Cf. discussion by Hastings on the subject in Hastings, *Encyclpædea of Religion and Ethics*, 2:151.

<sup>16</sup>Guillaum, *Life of Muhammad*, 183.

<sup>17</sup>Guillaum, *Life of Muhammed*, 182. According to *Mirâj Nâme*, "the ascension of Mahomet came a few years after the start of his prophetic mission," It has been given the date of the 27th night of the 27th month of the year 620. *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, 10.

<sup>18</sup>*Mirâj Nâme*, pl. 2.

<sup>19</sup>*Mirâj Nâme*, pl. 2. The name Gabriel appears three times in the Koran but appears "many times under other appellations." "It was from him that the prophet received the Koranic revelation."

<sup>20</sup>Authors translation of 1 Samuel 3:9. This entire account is found in *ibid.*, 1-18.

rarely begin with the Lord speaking to the individual, but rather an angel as a messenger<sup>21</sup> of the Lord who is to be a guide to the heavenly realms above.<sup>22</sup> Gabriel, in the Night Journey of Muhammad is the guide and first takes Muhammad to the Mosque at Mecca and later to the heavens above.<sup>23</sup>

### III. The Patriarch sanctified.

- a. Washed and anointed.
- b. Clothed.

The Night Journey, in reality, actually proceeds the Ascension of Muhammad and is not considered a formal part of the Ascension, but contains initiation features which may also be found within our typology and therefore will it be considered in this study.<sup>24</sup> At the mosque a rather bizarre thing happens (by today's standard of thinking).<sup>25</sup> According to one legend Gabriel and Michael<sup>26</sup> "picked him [Muhammad] up and carried him to the courtyard of the the Holy Mosque in Mecca, where they put him down near the sacred well Zamzam. The Angel Jibril [Gabriel] opened Muhammad's chest in front, from his neck to his navel, and yet it did not hurt, although we are not told whether the angel used a knife or how he did the cutting." Gabriel then "proceeded to take out young Muhammad's heart, just like the stone from an apricot, and squeezed it. Out came a little black clot: that was the evil which we all have in our hearts, but it was not allowed to stay there in Muhammad's heart for he was destined to be God's messenger on earth."<sup>27</sup> "The angel asked his colleague to fetch up some water from the well, and with it he washed the heart of young Muhammad. That done, he put the clean heart back in its place, closed the ribs and the skin over it and no one could see where he had cut open the skin. The heart beat again and Muhammad felt as healthy as ever before. Indeed he felt better since now there was no impurity left in him."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>For more on the functions of angels see "Watchers or Sethites" presented by the author at the Near Eastern Studies Symposium, BYU, March 18, 1988 (to be published at a future date).

<sup>22</sup>Testament of Levi 8; Testament of Abraham 10.

<sup>23</sup>"The guide, frequently portrayed as a winged creature who points out the road to the mystical traveller and helps him along the way, is found in a number of accounts," says the *Mirâj Nâmeh* in *The Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, 18.

<sup>24</sup>"Isra' is, in fact, the first stage in Mi'raj, as before his Ascension to heaven, the prophet was taken to the remote mosque, or the Temple at Jerusalem," in Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, 544. Gibb states that the passage in the Koran mentioning the *isra'* is "an allusion to Muhammad's Ascension to Heaven" and has been omitted in connection to the ascension in later commentaries. He also correctly identifies that the *isra'* is a "initiation to the prophetic career" of Muhammad. Gibb, *Short Encyclopedia of Islam*, 183. The purification by washing is found in the preparatory initiation right of coronation ceremonies and Ascensions. Cf. parallel preparatory purifications in Testament of Levi 8 and Hoccart, *Kingship*, 70ff.

<sup>25</sup>This is one of the features which makes the Night Journey seem like a fairy tale.

<sup>26</sup>Some accounts have only one guide but, This account actually has two guides, Michael and Gabriel. They are the ones performing the sanctification here. See note below.

<sup>27</sup>Knappert, *Islamic Legends*, 1:188; Gibb, *Short Encyclopedia of Islam*, 382.

<sup>28</sup>Knappert, *Islamic Legends*, 1:188.

The sanctification of the prophet is a common occurrence in Ascension texts. Gibb states that "a purification" is found necessary "preliminary to an ascension."<sup>29</sup> Enoch and Levi are washed and anointed prior to their Ascension to the world above. Levi says, "the first [angel] anointed me with holy oil and . . . the second washed me with pure water."<sup>30</sup> In the Psuedepigrapha we are told that Moses's body of flesh and blood would be unable to withstand the glory of the places he was to visit. It was therefore necessary for the Angel Metatron (Enoch) to change Moses's body into fire.<sup>31</sup> In antiquity, the oil was said to bestow "vigor and endurance on ones body."<sup>32</sup> It was primarily used for the purification of the Patriarch prior to his ascension. After the purification, often the individual is clothed. In the Testament of Levi seven angels place "a holy and glorious vestment" upon Levi before he is to ascend.<sup>33</sup> In some accounts the Patriarch is told by the heavenly guide, "come with me, but first clothe yourself in white garments, put on your insignia, and with bared feet follow where I shall lead."<sup>34</sup> Some speculate that the clothing is necessary to pass by the Watchers at the gates of each heaven because the "powers do not see those clothed in the perfect light, and consequently are not able to detain them."<sup>35</sup> According to one text the garments of light are necessary for anyone wishing to attend the wedding (symbolic of meeting Christ).<sup>36</sup> Although the account of Muhammad does indicate a purification by washing, it contains no traces of special clothing donned by the Patriarch before his Ascension.

- IV. The Patriarch is guided through the heaven(s) by an angel.
- a. A vehicle may be used such as
    - a chariot, horse, boat, etc.
  - b. Sometimes simply carried.
  - c. Often the ascension takes place from
    - an *axis mundi*/sacred space.

After the preparatory purification, Gabriel then led the Muhammad outside of the mosque "and there was a white animal, half mule, half donkey, with wings on its sides with which it propelled its feet, putting down each forefoot at the limit of its sight and he

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<sup>29</sup>Gibb, *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, 382.

<sup>30</sup>Testament of Levi 8:4-5. Cf. 2 Enoch 8-10.

<sup>31</sup>Revelation of Moses

<sup>32</sup>A. Moret, *Le Rituel du Culte Divin Journalier* (Paris: Leroux, 1902), 196. Cf. A.M. Calverly and M.F. Broome ed., by A.H. Gardiner, *The Temple of King Sethos I at Abydos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 1:plate 6. It has been said that those anointed will leave behind those not, Gospel of Philip 78:5. The anointing by the priest gave the initiates a promise of immortality, since the same ointment was used to effect the resurrection of the deity," according to R. Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen* (Leipzig, 1927) 400. In the Hittite ritual some of the symbolism of anointing may be found: "Anoint ye the king, anoint his eyes, take away his illness, take away his anxiety, take away his harnapistas, take away sickness of the head, *take away the evil doing of man*, take away care, take away sickness of the knee, take away sickness of the heart," in B. Schwartz, "A Hittite Ritual Text," *Orientalia* 16 (1947): 31 (italics added).

<sup>33</sup>Testament of Levi 8:5. Cf. Ascension of Isaiah 4:14ff; 9:24-26; 11:40; Pistis Sophia and 1 & 2 Jeu *passim*.

<sup>34</sup>Neill Drury, *The Shaman and the Magician* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1982), 64 cited in R. Anderson, "Magic and the Temple," 23 (unpublished; in possession of author).

<sup>35</sup>Gospel of Philip 70:9.

<sup>36</sup>Acts of Thomas 6-7; 146.

mounted me on it. Then he went out with me keeping close to me."<sup>37</sup> This creature is known as the *Buraq*. In the *Mirâj Nâmeh* the creature is described as a small pony having a "young woman's face [which] is shown in three-quarter profile on an arched neck; its short body, regularly shown from the side, rests on long, slender legs."<sup>38</sup> "After the traditional stops at Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Tables of the Law, at the tomb of Abraham in Hebron, and at the birthplace of Jesus in Bethlehem," Muhammad and his guide arrive at the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>39</sup>

The motif of a vehicle being used as a mode of transportation in Ascension is very common. One might recall the fiery chariot that Elijah the prophet rode in to the heavens above.<sup>40</sup> The Hebrew term for chariot, *merkaba*, has taken on a whole school of study in the area of Ascension texts called *merkaba* literature. This area of literature focuses on the texts dealing with Ascensions in chariots and other vehicles of transportation.<sup>41</sup> In the case of Muhammad, he is simply taken to Jerusalem on the small steed named *Buraq*.<sup>42</sup>

A couple of events develop here which are unparalleled and not found in the typology. According to several accounts when Muhammad arrived at the temple in Jerusalem, he met "Abraham, Moses and Jesus among a company of the Prophets."<sup>43</sup> They say to him, "Rejoice, for the Most-High has filled you with His bounty. This night, all that you ask of the Lord, He will grant you."<sup>44</sup> According to plate 4 of the *Mirâj Nâmeh*, the prayer takes place within a Mosque, "probably the one built in Jerusalem on the very spot from which, according to Moslem tradition, Mahomet was taken up to Heaven, or else the later al-Aksa Mosque situated at the southeast end of the Temple enclosure."<sup>45</sup> The Angel Gabriel gives the call to prayer and Muhammad then acts as their imam in the prayer.<sup>46</sup> "He [Muhammad] was then brought two vessels, one containing wine and the other milk. The apostle took the milk and drank it leaving the wine. Gabriel said: 'You have been rightly guided to the way of nature and so will your people be, Muhammad. Wine is forbidden to you.'"<sup>47</sup> This event is not found as a standard part of any of the Ascensions that I reviewed and appears to be unique to the Night Journey of Muhammad.

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<sup>37</sup>Guillaum, *Life of Muhammad*, 182.

<sup>38</sup>Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 6. See plate 6 for the illustration discussed.

<sup>39</sup>Séguy, *The Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, 10.

<sup>40</sup>2 Kings 2:11-12: "There appeared a chariot of fire, . . . and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven."

<sup>41</sup>In many of these the prophet does not return to the earth. Egyptian Ascensions almost always occur via a heavenly bark.

<sup>42</sup>Denny, *Introduction to Islam*, 76.

<sup>43</sup>Guillaum, *Life of Muhammad*, 182. Cf. *Mirâj Nâmeh*, pl. 4. It is interesting to note that Muhammad sees these figures in Jerusalem and a few moments later in the heavens above. Something seems amiss here.

<sup>44</sup>*Mirâj Nâmeh*, pl. 4.

<sup>45</sup>Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 4 of the *Mirâj Nâmeh*.

<sup>46</sup>The term *imam* refers to one who stands in front of the faithful to direct the canonic prayer and indicate the ritual acts that must be performed by the assembly. In the beginning, the *imam* was the Prophet himself." Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 5.

<sup>47</sup>Guillaum, *Life of Muhammad*, 182.

The Night Journey takes on the formal Ascension at this point. The *hadith* indicate that Muhammad once said, "after the completion of my business in Jerusalem a ladder was brought to me finer than any I have ever seen. It was that to which the dying man looks when death approaches."<sup>48</sup> The idea of the ladder acting as an *axis mundi* is not unique to the Ascension of Muhammad. H.P. Block has written, "There, where earth and heaven meet at the horizon, lay according to ancient Egyptian ideas, the linking bridge [a ladder] which led from the dwellings of men to the kingdom of the sun. . . . Whoever ascends the ladder is accepted into the number of the gods."<sup>49</sup> According to Orphite belief, the "initiate actually mounted a ladder in order to ensure his entrance upon the Elysian soul-path."<sup>50</sup> Perhaps one of the best known examples of the ladder connecting the heaven and earth is that of Jacob's ladder. Genesis 28:12 reads, "and he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it." At the top of the ladder stood the Lord.<sup>51</sup> The Ascension of Muhammad fulfills this point of the typology quite well.

#### V. The Patriarch passes through several heavens (3-7).

- a. A Watcher questions asks for information at the gate to each heaven
- b. Answers to the questions must be supplied in order to pass by the Watcher.
- c. The Patriarch is greeted by other Patriarches.
- d. A question and answer session takes place between the guide and Patriarch.
- e. Each heaven often contains different kinds of angels and varying landscapes.

The next part of the Ascension is marked by a journey through the heavens. After the Muhammad left Jerusalem, he was led by Gabriel to the first of the seven heavens.<sup>52</sup> At each heaven the prophet encounters a gate and Watcher fulfilling on of the points in the typology.<sup>53</sup> According to tradition Muhammad said, "My companion mounted it with me

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<sup>48</sup>Guillaum, *Life of Muhammad*, 182.

<sup>49</sup>Blok, "Zur altagyptischen Vorstellung der Hemmelsleiter," 257-69. T. MacCormack claims the doctrine of Mithraism taught that "the heavens were divided into seven spheres, each of which was conjoined with a planet. A sort of ladder, composed of eight different metals, was the symbolic suggestion in the temples, the the road to be followed to reach the supreme region of the fixed stars. To pass from one story to the next, each time the wayfarer had to enter a gate guarded by an Angel of Ormazd. The initiate alone, to whom the appropriate formulae had been taught, knew how to appease these inexorable guardian." see Cumont, *Mysteries of Mithra*, 144-45.

<sup>50</sup>Cook, Zues, 2.1:114-140.

<sup>51</sup>Genesis 28:13.

<sup>52</sup> It has been debated whether or not the location of Muhammad's ascent actually took place from Mecca or Jerusalem. The majority of literature seems to lean in the direction of the Jerusalem interpretation.

<sup>53</sup>Rashi explains the term Watcher "to mean an angel, deriving the word from the Hebrew *ir* 'to be awake' and explains that an angle is always awake. The Greek version of Aquila and Symmachus translate the term, 'Wakeful One,' a translation which is the source of our English, 'Watcher.'" Fitzmyer, *The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave One*, p. 72; Cf. *Jewish Encyclopedia*, under "Watcher." For more information of Watchers wait for



until we came to one of the gates of heaven called the Gate of the Watchers."<sup>54</sup> "When I reached the nearest heaven. Gabriel said to the heaven gate-keeper, 'Open the gate.' the gate-keeper asked, 'Who is it?' He said, 'Gabriel.' The gate-keeper said, 'Who is accompanying you?' Gabriel said, 'Muhammad.' The gate-keeper said, 'Has he been called?' Gabriel said, "yes." Then it was said, "He is welcomed. What a wonderful visit his is!"<sup>55</sup> At the gate of the second heaven the same questions were ask by the gate-keeper and the same responses given. The same procedure occurs at each of the gates of the seven heavens.<sup>56</sup>

The motif of the Watcher at the gate is found in many Ascension texts. This class of angels, known as Watchers, were given certain duties. Like the "angels", who are defined as "messengers"<sup>57</sup> the Watchers were given the stewardship to "instruct the children of men."<sup>58</sup> The "Sent Ones" in the Koran are practically identical.<sup>59</sup> Gustav Davidson states that there are both "good and evil Watchers."<sup>60</sup> The good Watchers are the seven arch-angels found in the Psuedepigrapha.<sup>61</sup> One of the prominent roles of the Watcher is that of the guardian of the gate leading from hell to the heavenly realms.<sup>62</sup> In the Coptic Gnostic Library we find a typical reference: "He [Jeu] will set up a rank corresponding to the treasuries, and will place watchers at the gate of the treasuries."<sup>63</sup> The Watchers or "Guardians at the Gate," have the duty "to guard the portals of the divine abode, to drive away any hostile force which mighty seed to penetrate the sanctuary and to introduce into the presence of their overlord those applicants who sought admission for a

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upcoming publication of "Watchers and Sethites" presented at Near Eastern Studies Symposium at BYU, March 18, 1988 by the author.

<sup>54</sup>Guillaum, *Life of Muhammad*, 182. According to Ségy, in *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, in the commentary on pl. 7, Muhammed and Gabriel are greeted at the first heaven by "twenty divisions of angels."

<sup>55</sup>Muhammad Muhasin Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 4:287.

<sup>56</sup>Muhammad Muhasin Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 4:289.

<sup>57</sup> R. H. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Marsai* (Cambridge: University Press, 1909) 3-4; Three beings assisted in the creation and later wee messengers to men on earth, Tha'labi, *Qissas al anbiya* (AH: 1345) Cairo 35-37; John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* chapters 3-4; "'Watcher' is a very common Syriac synonym for 'angel'," R. H. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Marsai* (Cambridge: University Press, 1909) 3 note. Cf., Acts of Thomas 36.

<sup>58</sup> Jubilees 4:15; Gustav Davidson, *A Dictionary of Angels* (New York: Free Press, 1967) 311; Michael taught Adam "how to sow [grain] and reap it," O. H. E. Burmester, "Egyptian Mythology in the Coptic Apocrypha," *Orientalia* 7 (1938): 356; The Book of Adam and Eve 8; Noah is given instruction in Jubilees 10:12; Alexander Eliot, *Myths* (New York: McGraw & Hill, 1976) 202.

<sup>59</sup> Koran 22, 31, 36.

<sup>60</sup> Davidson, *Dictionary of Angels*, 311.

<sup>61</sup> Compare Davidson's in *A Dictionary of Angels* to 1 Enoch 7: Revelation 8:2; Testament of Levi; The Book of Tobit; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 5:24. The seven arch-angels are: Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Zerachial, Gabriel, and Ramiel.

<sup>62</sup> Two Watchers stand as guards before the throne as well as acting as judges of those coming before the throne, 3 Enoch 28:5-8.

<sup>63</sup> 1 Jeu 6, 7, 32.

rightful purpose."<sup>64</sup> In the Book of Am-Tuat, "each gate of the Seven Arits was guarded by a gatekeeper, by a watcher, who reports the arrival of every comer, and by a herald, who receives and announces his name. Provided that the deceased knew the correct formulae, or words of power, and magical names, he could easily disarm the opposition of the watchers of the gates."<sup>65</sup> The deceased must testify that he is clean and pure, that he has been washed in preparation to pass the gates to behold the god.<sup>66</sup> The Watchers ask, "who art thou?" and, "what is thy name?" After the deceased gives his name and the Watchers reply, "advance straightway . . . pass in over the threshold of the Hall of Maati, for thou hast knowledge of us."<sup>67</sup> The Egyptians also held the same motif of giving information to pass certain gates on the ascent to the world above.<sup>68</sup> The parallels found between the *mi'raj* of Muhammad and other texts are without question.

At each heaven Muhammad meets a prophet of the book. These prophets are: Adam, Jesus and John, Joseph son of Jacob, Idris, Aaron, Moses and Abraham.<sup>69</sup> These encounters with the prophets of old are very interesting. The prophet Adam greets Muhammad as "son" and then demonstrates some surprising behavior.<sup>70</sup> "The legend tells us that he appears happy looking to his right, and smiles; but looking to his left he turns grave and weeps." The Angel Gabriel then explains to Muhammad that on the right side of Adam he sees "the souls of the saints, the prophets and the chosen," and when Adam looks to the left he sees "the souls of the unfaithful, the wayward and the unbelievers." He rejoices over the righteous and weeps over the wicked.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> E. Douglas Van Buren, "The Guardians of the Gate in the Addadian Period," *Orientalia* 16 (1947): 312; "It is the business of the Porter to guard the threshold, the sacred entrance to the Lodge, to challenge every candidate for admission and naturally prevent his entry unless worthy," Mary Williams, "An Early Ritual Poem in Welsh," *Speculum* 13 (1938): 45; Cf., William Morgan, "Illustrated of Masonry" (Chicago, Ill.: Cook, 1827) 42.

<sup>65</sup> O. A. E. Brumester, "Egyptian Mythology in the Coptic Apocrypha," *Orientalia* 7 (1938) 364-65; Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 6, 28. Cf., Coffin Texts 1085, 1108, 1125, 1132.

<sup>66</sup> The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani 125; Moshe Weinfeld, "Instructions for Temple Visitors in the Bible and in Ancient Egypt," *Scritta Hierosolymitana* 28 (1982) 237.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 125; J. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy* (Leiden: Brill, 1960) 4, 6, 28. Cf. E. Douglas Von Buren, "The Salme in Mesopotamian Art and Religion," *Orientalia* 10 (1941): 65, 88-89; Coffin Texts, *Spells* 75, 1085, 1132, 1108, 1125; Koran 22, 31; Pyramid Texts 510:1141; 508:1114-15; *The Scroll of the War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness* 17:27; 18:7-8, 28.

<sup>68</sup> Book of the Dead 125.

<sup>69</sup> Abraham is also found in the seventh heaven in the Revelation of Moses.

<sup>70</sup> Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 8.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Adam plays an important role in the Koran as the father of the human race who in the pre-earth existence was worshiped by the angels, Koran 67:65-70; 69:47-48. For interesting parallel of the worshiping of Adam by the angels see Altmann, "The Gnostic Background of the Rabbinic Adam Legends," in *Jewish Quarterly Review* n.s. 35 (1944-45): 380-81. Also "Discourse on Abbatôn" by Timothy, Archbishop of Alexandria in Ernest A.W. Budge, *Coptic Martyrdoms* (London: British Museum, 1914), Coptic account on 225ff and the English 474ff.

The Psuedepigrapha also contains Ascensions in which prophet of the past appear in the various heavens. In the Apocalypse of Paul, Abraham appears in the seventh heaven. He is described as "an old man . . . light [and his garment] was white . . . [his throne] , which is in the seventh heaven, [was] brighter than the sun by [seven] times." The guide then tells Paul to give the Abraham "the sign that you have, and [he will] open for you."<sup>72</sup> In the Testament of Abraham, Able, the son of Adam, is seen by Abraham. He appears in one of the heavens and is said to be responsible for the judgement of the righteous and the wicked. He is described as a, "wondrous man who sat on the throne [and] was the one who judged and sentenced the souls."<sup>73</sup> A lengthy dialogue then takes place between Abraham and his guide concerning the manner of judgment of the souls of men. In a similar manner Enoch is taken up and shown the "prison house" of the spirits after the judgement.<sup>74</sup>

The question and answer session is prominent in all ascension texts.<sup>75</sup> However, in the *mi'raj* Muhammad remains strangely quiet. This is not standard at all, and strangely unique. In the Psuedepigrapha, questions are ask by both the angel and the prophet. For example, Enoch asks his guide, "Why are these ones being tormented unceasingly?" in reference to the prisoners of the second heaven who have been kept "under guard, hanging up, waiting for the measureless judgement."<sup>76</sup> The angel in turn readily answers his question: "These are those who turned away from the Lord, who did not obey the Lord's commandments, but of their own will plotted together and turned away."<sup>77</sup> The examples of these trivia sessions are almost endless.

Descriptions of different angels and landscapes also are prominent in ascension literature. Before arriving at the first heaven the prophet sees "the shores of an immense sea suspended in air."<sup>78</sup> In the *Mirâj Nâme* the *Kawthar* (the sea) is illustrated as "a wide and very dark body of water textured with many finely combed waves of gold and silver which originally must have given it a shimmering effect."<sup>79</sup> The prophet then continues his Ascension through the first heaven and passes the "White Cock whose comb grazes the foot of God's Throne and whose feet rest on the earth."<sup>80</sup> Before leaving the first heaven, Muhammad is brought "to an angel made half of fire and half of snow."<sup>81</sup> Nearby stand the "angelic troops who call upon the Eternal, imploring Him, saying: 'Oh God, Thou hast

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<sup>72</sup>Apocalypse of Paul 22:20-23:30.

<sup>73</sup>Testament of Abraham 12:11.

<sup>74</sup>Enoch 18.

<sup>75</sup>In the ones I have viewed anyway.

<sup>76</sup>Enoch 7.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 6.

<sup>79</sup>Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 6.

<sup>80</sup>For more information concerning the symbolism and theological importance of the White Cock see Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 9. Here the prophet Muhammad asks questions and is answered by the angel Gabriel following the question answer pattern found in both Apocalypses and Ascensions.

<sup>81</sup>For more information concerning the function of this angel see Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 10

brought snow and fire together. In the same way let all Thy servants be united in the faith of obedience to Thy law."<sup>82</sup>

The second heaven is described as being "as wide as a road five hundred years long."<sup>83</sup> Gabriel accompanies Muhammad into "the presence of twenty divisions of angels ready to serve him [Gabriel]."<sup>84</sup> Gabriel indicates that they should also serve Muhammad and the angels in turn "stand in ranks before the new arrivals, their hands crossed in the attitude of slaves in the presence of their master."<sup>85</sup> Also in the second heaven, resides the Angel of death. This angel "has a chair of light on which he rests one foot while the other stands on the bridge between Paradise and Hell."<sup>86</sup> He also meets an angel with seventy heads, each head having seventy tongues, with "each tongue speaking seventy forms of praise in honor of the Most-High."<sup>87</sup>

In the Revelation of Moses we find scenes in each heaven. In this text the Angel Metatron acts as the heavenly guide. The first heaven is full of angels standing by windows. The second heaven consists of angels of clouds, wind, and rain. The third has the angels placed over the grasses and the herbs, as well as the trees and fruits. The fourth has the heavenly temple with the angels of the earth, sun, moon, stars and planets. The fifth contains angels of fire and snow in contrast to the angels of the sixth which are of ice and hail. The seventh heaven consists entirely of fire. This heaven is not exactly a pleasant place and Moses is absolutely terrified in viewing it. Metatron therefore embraces the prophet and he is instantly calmed.<sup>88</sup> Again the examples are almost endless of texts containing descriptions of strange angels and the landscape of each heaven the patriarch passes through.

## VI. The Patriarch sees God on his throne (A Theophany).

- a. God gives the Patriarch a commission.
- b. A spiritual truth is revealed to the Patriarch.

"That Muhammad appeared before Allah's throne in the seventh heaven and that the conversation about the obligatory prayers took place there, is already recorded in the oldest stories but only rarely do they extend the conversation . . . to other subjects."<sup>89</sup> The instructions regarding prayer given to Muhammad here are definitely unique and are not paralleled by other texts.

A common motif is for the Patriarch to receive some kind of commission at this point. In the Revelation of Moses we are told that because Moses has ascended to God he

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<sup>82</sup>Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 10. Cf. the Syrian Apocalypse of Baruch 31:6 which state that they were made of fire and and flame, and in 1 Enoch which talks of angels of snow, hail, heat, and cold.

<sup>83</sup>Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 11.

<sup>84</sup>Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 11.

<sup>85</sup>Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 11.

<sup>86</sup>Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 12.

<sup>87</sup>Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, commentary on pl. 13.

<sup>88</sup>Revelation of Moses found in Gaster, "Hebrew Visions of Hell and Paradise," 571-611.

<sup>89</sup>Gibb, *Short Encyclopedia of Islam*, 382. Also Tabari, 27:26; *Musnad*, 4:66; Andrae, 70.

Moses "is therefore called Elohim like unto his Master."<sup>90</sup> Other prophets receive a call to preach to the people.<sup>91</sup> Therefore it is not therefore totally out of context for Muhammad to receive instructions for his people concerning prayer.

In this paper we have established that the Night Journey and Ascension of Muhammad can be considered a standard Ascension text because it fits the majority of the points within the Ascension typology. The Night Journey and Ascension of Muhammad, is not just a fairy tale read by the casual reader. But to the contrary it can accurately be called an Ascension text. This paper has also established that this account is paralleled by other texts. This, however, in no way proves or disproves the validity of the Ascension. The reason for the similarities can easily be explained in two ways. Either Muhammad's Ascension really happened and contains all of the elements listed as we now have it or the Ascension is the creation of later historians, who borrowed from the Ascension pattern found in other available texts and applied it to the *isra'* and *mi'raj* of Muhammad. Bases for the later of these hypothesis is drawn from the fact that the majority of the information concerning the Night Journey and Ascension of the Muhammad has been drawn from the *hadith* and Islamic legends and only a small amount of information contained in the Koran itself as was discussed at the beginning of this paper.<sup>92</sup> We are told that "the ascension of Mahomet came a few years after the start of his prophetic mission."<sup>93</sup> However the accounts that we now have were compiled much later and this may have given ample time for the account to be doctored up and adjusted to fit the typology.<sup>94</sup> Fazlur Rahman, for one, is convinced that it was "developed by the orthodox (chiefly on the pattern of the Ascension of Jesus) and backed by Hadith is no more than a historical fiction whose materials come from various sources."<sup>95</sup> Many non-Muslim scholars also take this same approach.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Revelation of Moses.

<sup>91</sup>Isaiah 6.

<sup>92</sup>Cf. sources of Koran and debates about their authenticity in Gibb, *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, 381-82.

<sup>93</sup>Séguy, *Miraculous Journey of Mahomet*, 10.

<sup>94</sup>The first recorded account of the Ascension and Night Journey was compiled by Ibn Ishaq (*Sirat Rasul Allah*) who died in 767 A.D. indicating that the earliest recorded account could be as great as 150 years after the event. Some one would have to have a great memory of oral traditions.

<sup>95</sup>Rahman, *Islam* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 14 cited in Jones, "A Comparative Study of Ascension Motifs in World Religions,"<sup>94</sup>.

<sup>96</sup>See Culianu, *Psychonodia I*, 55-57 for a discussion on this subject.

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\*These are excerpts from Daniel C. Peterson, *A Survey of Some Materials Relating to the Mi'raj of Muhammad* (for Prof. Poonawala of the University of California at Los Angeles, not published and in possession of the author). Other sources in the body of the paper should have full citations, with a few exceptions.