

# The Prophet's Night Journey and Ascent

by David (Daud) Sander, Ph.D.

*Bismillah Al Rahman Al Rahim* [In the name of Allah, The One Who Acts with Mercy, The Source of Mercy]. All praise belongs to Allah. Allah owns everything. All power belongs to Allah and not to us. May Allah's peace and blessings be on Prophet Muhammad and his family and on all the other prophets and their families.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was taken from his home in Mecca, and through the air to Jerusalem, on the back of a winged steed named al-Buraq. From Jerusalem, he ascended up, through the various heavens, and ultimately into the divine presence. This holiday is an opportunity to contemplate the meaning of his journey as it has become the model for Sufis at many levels. To me the story shows that without *fana'* (annihilation) of the *nafs*, our "knowing" of religion, of Islam and of the world, is subject to endless illusion and misinterpretation. The Qur'an refers to the story simply as follows:

*May Allah be Glorified. He who carried His devotee (Muhammad) during the night from the Masjid Al Haram (Ka'aba) to the Masjid Al Aqsa [mosque<sup>1</sup> in Jerusalem], which is in a blessed area so that We may enlighten him of Our ayats [signs]. There is no doubt He is Al Sami [The Hearing], Al Basir [The Seeing].*

—Qur'an, 17:1

At the apex of the Prophet's ascent through the heavens, he encounters a tree, the *sidrat al-muntaha*, the Lote Tree of the utmost limit (Qur'an 53:14). By its name alone this tree can be understood as both a limit and a point of transformation between one type of existence and another. It has also been called the boundary between existence and non-existence. On the brink of this threshold, the archangel Gabriel, who had been accompanying the Prophet (pbuh) at each level, told him to go ahead alone, since "if I take one more step I will burn up". Muhammad (pbuh) went on alone, passed into annihilation [*fana'*], and returned.

The Lote Tree is elaborated upon in some *hadiths* that show it to be a kind of meeting ground or *barzakh*, (something like the "junction of the two seas" in the Moses story). A version of the story in the hadith gives a sense of the liminality of the Lote tree. In the words of the Prophet,

*(Gabriel) took me up as far as the Lote-tree, beyond which none may pass, which is in the sixth heaven. Anything which comes up from earth stops there and is taken from there, and anything which comes down from the region beyond stops there.*

—Sahih Muslim

Thus the Lote Tree is both a meeting point and a boundary. It is an upper limit for beings angelic and human, and anything arising from the created realm. Knowledge of the creatures stops at this zone. Yet also what rises to the level of the Divine Essence "is taken" from the zone of the Lote Tree. According to Ka'b, a companion of the Prophet (pbuh), the tree in question,

*is a Lote-Tree (sidra) above the heads of the [angelic] bearers of the Throne. At it terminates the knowledge of all the creatures. It is thus not for anyone to claim knowledge of what is beyond it. Wherefore is it named the Sidrat al-Muntahā (Lote-Tree of the Extremity) for knowledge terminates about it.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Masjid Al-Aqsa* is the term used, and the mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem continues to be called by this name.

The Lote Tree is thus a symbol for the limit of conscious creaturely knowledge, as well as a boundary for what descends from above. What comes from beyond is “sent down” [*tanzil*], which is a term for revelation used throughout the Qur’an. Yet what can be understood of the message from the “other side” among people limited to “this side” of such a cosmic boundary? Even the angels and arch-angels, in the hadith account, reached the limit of their *maqams* [stations] and could accompany the Prophet no further, yet he continued his “night journey”. Whatever is beyond the Lote Tree is hidden and known only by Allah, not relayed or transmitted or mediated in any way by creatures.

Who could speak the language of the other side and thereby natively read and interpret its depths? The Qur’an states that “it is not for any mortal that Allah should speak to him except by revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger” (Qur’an, 42:51). The angel Gabriel is a messenger who communicates divine messages to human prophets. But Gabriel cannot go beyond the Lote Tree, lest he be consumed in the light of the divine presence. It is in the person of Muhammad (p) himself that humanity crosses the boundary and returns. His *maqam* [station] enables him to withstand the vision of the Divine.

Another few verses refer to the encounter:

13. *Indeed, he saw him another time*
14. *by the Lote-Tree of the Boundary*
15. *nigh which is the Garden of the Refuge*
16. *when there covered the Lote-Tree that which covered;*
17. *his eye swerved not; nor swept astray.*
18. *Indeed, he saw one of the greatest signs of his Lord.*

—Qur’an, 53:13-18

This latter verse focuses on “the eye of the beholder” who I interpret to be the Prophet Muhammad. According to the tafsir commentary of Al-Kashani (d. 1330 CE), the phrase “*mayaghsha*”, meaning “that which covered” or “enveloped” or “enshrouded” refers to the zone of the Lote Tree when its own form was blotted out or concealed by the all-consuming reality of the divine self-disclosure [*al-tajalli al-ilahi*]. It was thus hidden and preserved from the human tendency to form images, definitions, words, ideas. The zone of the lote tree was covered by the annihilating light of absolute reality. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had entered the realm of annihilation (in which “the doors of perception are cleansed” as the British poet William Blake said). His perception, however, withstood this passage into *fana*’ [mystical death], with the result, says Al-Kashani, that he saw the Lote Tree with the “eye of *fana*” [*bi-‘ayn al-fana*’]. With this vision, he perceived its image without the mediation of Gabriel or any being other than Allah.<sup>2</sup>

“Verily he saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.” In a universe made of signs [*ayat*], no form or image could be greater. Yet instead of swooning away at this direct encounter with the divine theophany [*tajalli*], he remained firm. According to another commentator, Sahl Al-Tustari (d. 896 CE), he did not lose consciousness in the midst of his annihilation, letting his mind slip from the Object he was witnessing [*mashhud*]. That is, his own annihilation was the form in

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<sup>2</sup> Abdal Razzaq Al-Kashani, *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-Karim*, vol. 2: 277-8.

which he witnessed the greatest signs of Allah, and what he saw “only increased him in love [*mahabba*], longing [*shawq*] and strength [*quwwa*]”.<sup>3</sup>

The Prophet (pbuh) returned from this journey with the daily prayers [*salat*], the ritual that involves Muslims in a reenactment of the *mi'raj* journey itself, climaxing in repeated prostrations that enact an image of the worshipper's *fana* ' before Allah.

His journey is not just for him, because whatever blessing he was given by Allah, he wanted to share with his community. Which means that the doorway is there for us, not only to perform salat, but to come into nearness and intimacy with Allah, alive, with our senses, hearts and intelligences activated. Another famous sufi term for this experience is *dhawq* (or *zawq*), the “tasting” of the divine. This is a generous gift to offer humanity, so generous that we have trouble imagining that we could ever live up to it. But the Prophet (pbuh) and his spiritual descendants leave a path, encouragement, and a direct invitation to us.

Ya Shakur, Ya Karim!

Call of the Divine

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<sup>3</sup> Sahl Al-Tustari's commentary on Surah 53:15. www. Al-Tafsir.com