

**Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey:
Tracing the Development of the
Ibn Abbas Ascension Discourse**

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The story of Muhammad's night journey to Jerusalem and ascent to heaven enjoys huge popularity across the Muslim world. It has functioned as a vehicle for many forms of artistic expression throughout the ages as well as having been subject to much literary development. In addition, it has impacted and interacted with legal and theological dogma that may be seen in elements ranging from the establishment of the five daily prayers (on which see the fascinating essay by Ron Buckley, "The *Isra'/Mi'raj* and the prescription of the five daily prayers," in Andreas Christmann, Robert Gleave [eds.], *Studies in Islamic Law: A Festschrift for Colin Imber* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 23-49) to the conceptualization of paradise and hell (see

the treatment in Nerina Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire: Heaven and Hell in Islamic Culture* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2008], especially pp. 26-39).

Historically, the narrative makes its basic appearance in some of the earliest Muslim texts, for example, in Ibn Ishaq's eighth-century work entitled *Life of Muhammad*. The emergence of the story has been seen (in, for example, Brooke Olson Vuckovic, *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns: The Legacy of the Mi`raj in the Formation of Islam* [New York and London: Routledge, 2005]) as an important element in the historical formation of Islamic identity; it has also been seen by some as having had a powerful impact on European imaginings of the hereafter, as found in medieval writers such as Dante.

Many of the popular accounts of the night journey that are in circulation today, often in the form of small mass-produced Arabic booklets and in translation, are attributed to Ibn Abbas (d. ca. 680), a figure whose mythic role in the emergence of much early Islamic literature (as a result of his attachment to the lineage of the later ruling Abbasid family) has been widely studied. Colby's task in this book is to examine the various existing versions of Muhammad's ascension story, define their core elements, and consider the controversies within the development and dispersion of the themes in medieval times.

His book starts by looking at the Qur'an and how Muslim writers have used it to support elements of this narrative. In chapter 2 the author turns to what he calls the "primitive" version of the Ibn Abbas text. This gets the discussion off to something of a confusing start because he does not necessarily mean (but does not discount the possibility of) that this is really the earliest version. Rather, he points to certain aspects of it, such as its focus upon angels and the absence of any mention of Jerusalem, as providing the text's defining characteristics – observations that then form the basis for his following analysis. Chapter 3 looks at the ascension account in foundational works on the Prophet's life by Ibn Ishaq (d. 767) in the transmissions of Ibn Bukayr (d. 814) and Ibn Hisham (d. 833), and by Ibn Sa`d (d. 845), while chapter 4 turns to Shi'i accounts, especially from Saffar Qummi (d. 902-03). This is followed by an overview of versions found in Sunni hadith collections.

The final four chapters deal with the later development of Ibn Abbas' primitive version. First this is pursued through the material found in Qur'anic commentaries, primarily those of al-Tabari (d. 923), al-Qummi (d. ca. 919), and al-Tha`labi (d. 1035); attention subsequently turns to versions connected to writers from the area of Nishapur, including the traditionists

Ibn Hibban (d. 965) and al-Bayhaqi (d. 1066), and the Sufis al-Sulami (d. 1021) and al-Qushayri (d. 1072). Finally, an analysis is conducted of the “total and complete” version attributed (somewhat for convenience’s sake) to the shadowy historical figure Abu al-Hasan al-Bakri (d. perhaps in the thirteenth century but also perhaps in the ninth century, and to whom later works were attributed). This is followed by two translations, one of the “primitive” version and the other of al-Bakri’s fuller version. A table of key themes and tropes completes the work.

From the very outset it is clear that this work is not meant for beginners, which is unfortunate, given the topic’s appeal. Colby invokes versions of the text before he ever discusses or clarifies their existence, presuming, it would seem, that his readers will know what he is talking about. He pays no attention to trying to clarify the versions of the text that readers might have at hand in printed or translated copies; rather, he focuses purely on a number of newly uncovered manuscript versions of al-Bakri’s account (and developments thereof) and on the text as incorporated into the work of other major medieval authors.

Certainly this is a valuable book for its analysis of the components of this narrative (far more nuanced – and complicated – than that found in Heribert Busse, “Jerusalem in the Story of Muhammad’s Night Journey and Ascension,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 14 [1991] 1-40, for example). It is also a mine of data culled from an impressive range of well-documented sources. Those not equally as immersed in the subject as the author, however, will need to start elsewhere. They may find a work such as Vuckovic’s, mentioned above, more suitable.

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