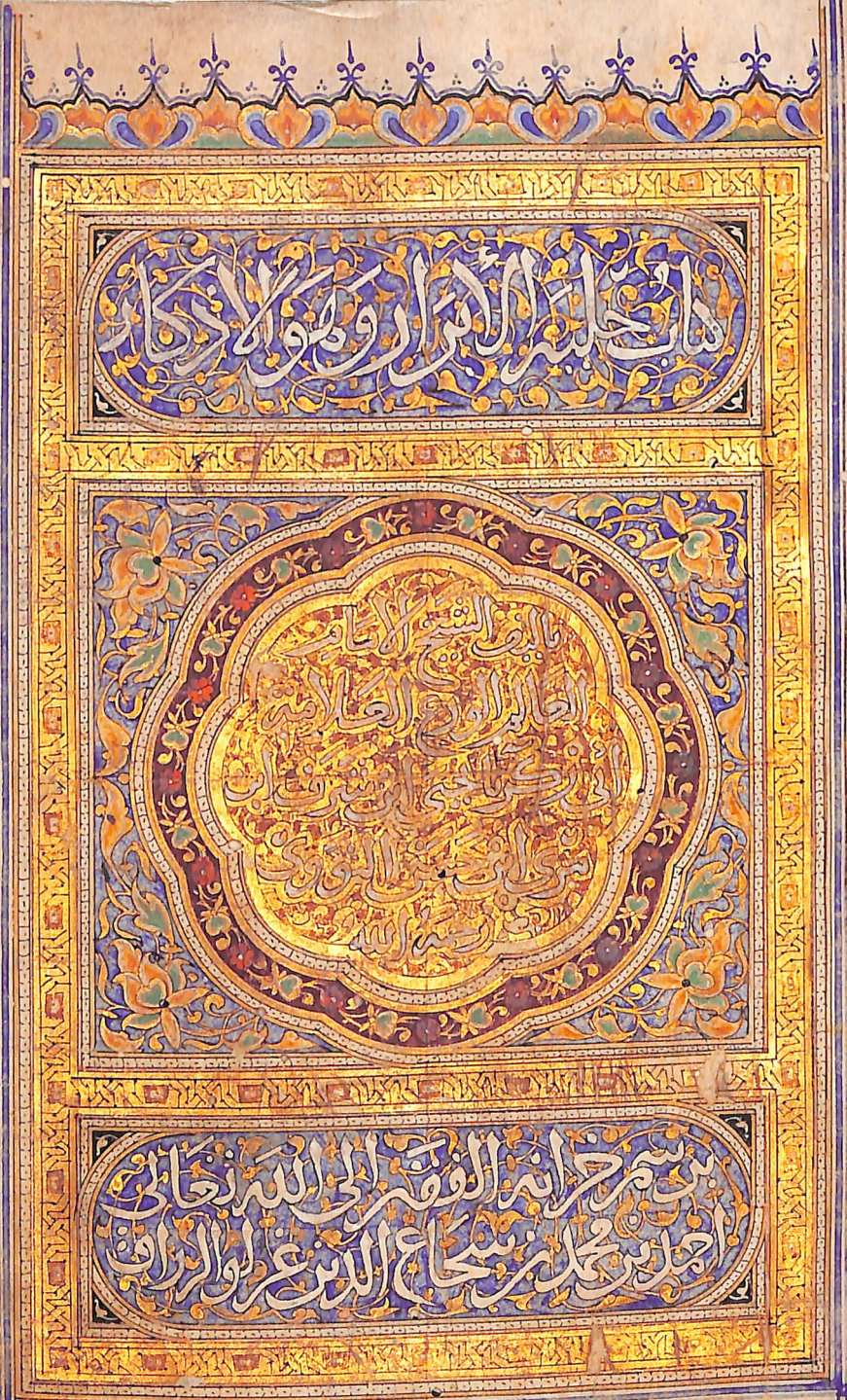


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رحمة الله عليه رحمة واسف

الحمد لله الذي انزل الكتاب علم  
القرآن والصلوة والسلام الامان  
على رسوله المبعوث باكمل الشرف  
وعلى الائمة الطيبين وعلى التابعين  
الطاهرين والفقهاء الصالحين

قبيل اربنا  
الاسماء الرضيا  
لبطل اولادنا  
موتة اشنة  
قلوبنا عليه  
الصفوة  
والجود



# CLASSICAL ISLAM

A sourcebook of religious literature

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY NORMAN CALDER,  
JAWID MOJADDEDI AND ANDREW RIPPIN

# **Classical Islam**

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religious literature

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**Norman Calder, Jawid Mojaddedi  
and Andrew Rippin**

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## 2.2 Ibn 'Abbās on the heavenly ascension

'Abd Allāh Ibn 'Abbās is one of the most famous transmitters of traditions in early Islam, especially those related to the interpretation of the Qur'ān. A cousin of Muḥammad, Ibn 'Abbās is said to have been born in 619 CE, three years before the *hijra* of Muḥammad, and he died in 68/687. He was the grandfather of those who are later called the dynasty of the 'Abbāsid caliphs, and so he became a very important figure for later tradition because of the political significance which his authority conveyed in affirming the solid Muslim foundation of the ruling family.

A number of books are ascribed to Ibn 'Abbās, but it is doubtful that any of them was actually written by him. Rather, his name has become attached to a series of texts which establish basic methods of approach to crucial Islamic religious topics. The *Kitāb al-isrā' wa'l-mi'rāj* is an example of precisely that. The work is probably the most widely circulated of all the texts dealing with the subject of Muḥammad's night journey and heavenly ascension. It has been characterized as a work which provides a firm foundation for Islamic doctrine and law, while at the same time allowing the Muslim imagination to flourish. As such, it is likely to be a reflection of ideas current in mature Muslim religious perception, rather than from the formative period.

In terms of the development of the story, this version can be profitably compared with those found in Ibn Ishāq [Ibn Hishām], *Al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, Cairo 1955, vol. 1, pp. 396–408, A. Guillaume (trans.), *The life of Muḥammad: a translation of [Ibn] Ishāq's Sīrat rasūl Allāh*, Oxford 1955, pp. 181–7, al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-rusul [Ibn] wa'l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Leiden 1879–1901, vol. 1, pp. 1157–9, and W. M. Watt, M. V. McDonald (trans.), *The history of al-Ṭabarī, volume VI: Muḥammad at Mecca*, Albany NY 1988, pp. 78–80. Ibn Ishāq's version may be characterized as a composite of the earliest stories in which the emphasis falls on Muḥammad's interaction with the Meccans. In Ibn 'Abbās's work, on the other hand, three accounts are combined, as they frequently are in other later works dealing with the heavenly ascension. The first deals with the miraculous initiation of Muḥammad, here treated fairly simply via the appearance of Gabriel and Burāq. Then follows the night journey to Jerusalem on Burāq and the test of the three drinks. Finally comes the ascension to the seven heavens themselves, with a glimpse of heaven and hell and a discussion with God. This is concluded by a return to the world. This latter section has much in common with literature dealing specifically with the events related to the resurrection, judgement day and the afterlife, the *aḥwāl al-qiya'ma* ('the stages of the resurrection day'). Overall, one can see the role of the popular preacher in the development of such accounts; the details are filled in with much embellishment, while the main aims of the story are to provide vivid accounts of the wonders of the divine realm, to assert the special qualities of Muḥammad through his experiences, and to provide an appropriate vehicle for the adoration of God and Muḥammad.

Ibn 'Abbās's work is short, being only forty-six pages of a dense but small format booklet published in Beirut in recent years; it is available in many prints but none of them is a critical edition. Such booklets reflect the popular nature of the work among Muslims in general. The repetitive nature of the story, with identical pieces of text structuring the visit to the seven heavens, for example, marks this as a popular folktale.

### Further reading

- Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (ed.), *Le voyage initiatique en terre d'Islam. Ascensions célestes et itinéraires spirituels*, Louvain-Paris 1996.
- Jamel Eddine Bencheikh, *Le voyage nocturne de Mahomet*, Paris 1988.
- Heribert Busse, 'Jerusalem in the story of Muḥammad's night journey and ascension,' *Jerusalem studies in Arabic and Islam*, 14 (1991), pp. 1–40; reprinted in Uri Rubin (ed.), *The life of Muḥammad*, Aldershot 1998, pp. 279–318.
- B. Schrieke, J. Horovitz, J. E. Bencheikh, 'Mi'rādj,' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition.
- Jane Idleman Smith, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic understanding of death and resurrection*, Albany NY 1981.
- For some background on the image of the 'seven heavens', see Adela Y. Collins, 'The seven heavens in Jewish and Christian apocalypses,' in John J. Collins, Michael Fishbane (eds), *Death, ecstasy, and other worldly journeys*, Albany NY 1995, pp. 59–93; other chapters of this book are also helpful in coming to an understanding of this text.

### Source text

Ibn 'Abbās, *Kitāb al-isrā' wa'l-mi'rāj*, Beirut n.d. The extracts translated here are taken from pp. 2–5 (part I), 6 (part II), 7–8 (part III), 9–12 (part IV), 23–4 (part V), 24–5 (part VI), 38–40 (part VII), 42–4 (part VIII) and 44–6 (part IX).

### I Gabriel and Burāq

God, Most High, said, *Glory be to He who sent His servant on a journey by night from the holy mosque to the furthest mosque, which We have blessed, in order that We might show him some of Our signs. He is All-hearing, All-seeing* (Q 17/1).

It is reported on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās who reported on the authority of the prophet that he said that he was in the house of Umm Hāni', daughter of Abū Ṭālib, who was called Fākhita, on Monday, the twenty-seventh of Rajab, eight years after the beginning of the prophetic mission. Fāṭima al-Zahrā' was also there; she was nine years old and she had not yet married 'Alī (having been married later in Medina).

That night a visitor knocked on the door and Fāṭima went to see who was there. She saw an individual upon whom were jewels and vestments; he had green wings which covered the east and the west. Upon his head was a crown inlaid with pearls and jewels. Written on the front of it was, 'There is no god but God and Muḥammad is the messenger of God.'

Fāṭima asked, 'What do you want?' He replied, 'I want Muḥammad.' So she turned back and called the messenger of God and said, 'Father, there is someone at the door. He made me afraid, as I have never seen anything like him! He said to me, "I want Muḥammad."' I [i.e., Muḥammad] then went to the door and, when I saw him, I realized that it was Gabriel. Gabriel greeted me saying, 'Blessings and peace be upon you, lover of the truth and master of the creatures.' So I said, 'My brother Gabriel, is this a revelation sent down, a promise made manifest, or a decree come to pass?' He said, 'My love, stand and don your cloak and quieten your heart, for in this night you will approach your Lord, whom age and sleep do not affect.' When I heard the words of

my brother Gabriel, I rose up excitedly, drew my clothing around me, and went out into the desert. There stood Burāq with Gabriel leading it.

It was a beast unlike any other, something between a donkey and a mule. It had a face like that of a human and its body was that of a horse. It was a finer beast than any other on earth. Its mane was made of the finest pearls woven with precious stones sparkling in the light. Its ears were of green emerald and its eyes were like circular stars. Its eyes shone like rays of the sun. It was grey and black with three white feet and was decorated with pearls and jewels. A full description of it is impossible unless God Himself composes it, since the essence of the beast is like that of a human.

When I saw Burāq I was amazed by it. Gabriel said, 'Stand up, lover of God, and mount it.' I rose up to mount it but Burāq was shaking like a fish in the net. Gabriel admonished it, saying, 'Burāq, be settled! Are you not ashamed to turn away from the master of the creatures and the lover of the truth? By He who created me and created you, no one has mounted you who is more esteemed before God than Muḥammad.' Burāq said, 'Adam, the chosen of God, rode me, as did Abraham, the friend of God.' Gabriel said, 'Burāq, this is the lover of God and the messenger of the Lord of the worlds. He is the most favoured of the people of heaven and earth. His *qibla* is the worlds. He is the most favoured of the people of heaven and earth. His *qibla* is the Ka'ba and his religion is Islam. All creatures hope for his intercession on the day of resurrection. With paradise on his right and the fire on his left, those who believe in him will enter paradise, while those who deny him will enter the fire.'

### II The three vessels

Then Gabriel went ahead to the holy house (in Jerusalem) and I followed him. When I approached, he had three vessels. In the first was milk, in the second, wine, and in the third, water. Gabriel said to me, 'Drink whichever you desire.' So I took the milk and drank virtually all of it. Gabriel said to me, 'You took all of the natural disposition which is Islam. If you had taken the wine, your community would have gone astray. If you had taken the water, your community would have drowned. Since you drank all of the milk, no one from your community will enter the fire.'

### III The first heaven

Gabriel said, 'Rise, Muḥammad.' So I rose up alongside Gabriel. He allowed me to view the many places of worship. Angels, the number of which can only be calculated by God, were unceasingly worshipping and glorifying God. I saw stars attached like suspended candelabras in the mosque. The smallest one was larger than the biggest mountain. I then ascended to the sky of the world during this night journey in the twinkling of an eye. Between the lowest heaven and the earth is a distance of five hundred years and its breadth is the same.

Gabriel then knocked on the door. They said, 'Who's there?' He replied, 'Gabriel.' They said, 'Who is with you?' He said, 'Muḥammad.' They said, 'Has he been sent for?' He said, 'Yes.' They said, 'Welcome to you and to him who is with you. Your arrival is wonderful!'

Then they opened the door for us and we entered. It was a heaven of mist, known as al-Rafi'a ['the highest']. There was no open spot because everywhere was occupied



of Israel claims that I am the most noble of creation before God. But this one (in front of me) is more noble than I am before his Lord. This is the prophet of the Quraysh, the Meccan, the Hashemite Arab, the man from the open *wādī*. This is the lover; this is the great, noble one. This is Muḥammad the faithful, Ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib. Welcome, pious brother and wise prophet.' Then he called out good tidings and blessings upon me and my community.

### VI The seventh heaven

The angels were lined up in rows and I prayed two *rak'as* with them for the community of Abraham, the friend of God. Then we ascended to the seventh heaven in the twinkling of an eye. Between it and the sixth heaven is five hundred years and its breadth is the same. Gabriel knocked on the door and they said, 'Who's there?' He said, 'Gabriel.' They said, 'Who is with you?' He said, 'Muḥammad.' They said, 'Welcome to you and to he who is with you, for you are the two best of those who have arrived together.' They opened the door for us and we entered. The sky was made of white pearls and it was called al-'Ajība ['the wondrous']. It is the highest heaven and I could not hear anything except the scratching of pens.

In it I saw some of the angels of my Lord who were called 'The Spiritual Ones'. I turned to the right and there beside me I saw an old man with a nice face and fine clothes sitting on a chair of light, the back of which supported the celestial house which is the heavenly counterpart of the divinely honoured Ka'ba. I said, 'My brother Gabriel, who is that?' He said, 'That is your father Adam, may the prayers of God be upon him. Draw near to him and greet him.' So I approached him and greeted him. He greeted me in return. He congratulated me on the favour which my Lord had bestowed on me and said, 'Welcome my pious son and wise prophet. Spread the good news, Muḥammad. The best of all creation are you and your community until the day of resurrection. Indeed, your Lord raised you up to Him in order to greet and honour you.' He said, 'You saw the celestial house and in it were candelabras of jewels with lights surrounding them, some yellow rubies, some green chrysolites and some fine pearls.'

The angels circumambulated around the house and I arose and circled with them seven times. I said to the angels, 'How long have you been visiting this house?' They replied, 'From 2000 years before the time that God created your father Adam.' Every day 170,000,000 angels visit the house and they will not get another chance to do so before the day of resurrection.

### VII The number of prayers

I was just about to descend (from the seventh heaven) when my Lord called upon me, saying, 'Wait, Muḥammad! Indeed I have entrusted a religious obligation upon you and your community. Those who fulfil it will enter paradise; as for those who fail to attain it, if you desire, I will forgive them, or, if you desire, I will punish them. I have placed a religious duty on you and your community of fifty prayers every day and every night.' I said, 'We hear and we obey.' Then I descended and He blessed me. I continued the night journey until I came to my brother Moses ibn 'Imrān. When he

saw me, he arose and said, 'Welcome faithful loved one. Did you just return from your Lord?' I said, 'Yes.' He asked, 'What did He give you?' I said, 'He gave me something and the offer pleased me.' He said, 'What did He give your community?' I said, 'He gave them something and it pleased them. He placed a religious duty upon me and them of fifty prayers every day and every night.' Moses said, 'Return and ask Him to lighten this for your community, the final community of time. Their bodies are frail and their lives are short. They are not capable of that, so ask your Lord if He will lighten this burden for them.' I said, 'Brother, who can pass through these barriers which you passed through?' Moses said, 'Ask Him from here, for He is nearby and can answer.' I swear by the summons from the Highest and Exalted, He said, 'Ask what you will and I will answer you.'" I said, 'Lord, my community is frail and is not in a position to perform fifty prayers. Reduce the number of prayers for me and my community by five.' So I returned to Moses and I told him about this and he said, 'Return to your Lord and ask him to lighten the burden for your community as they are still not capable of this.' I did not cease asking my Lord and Moses did not cease talking to me about it, until He granted me release from forty-five prayers and made the duty upon me and my community to be only five prayers. Moses said, 'Ask Him to lighten this burden.' I said, 'My brother, I am ashamed to face my Lord! My Lord called me saying, "Muḥammad, return! We will make it five deeds and it will be counted as fifty works in the scales. Every prayer is equal to ten prayers. The words are substituted in My presence as being equal to ten. Whoever does an evil act, I will write it against him as an equal sin."'

### VIII The return to Mecca

When we concluded our journey in the heaven of the world it was still night, for time had not moved. I rode on and came to Mecca, which God has made noble and great, and I got off Burāq and Gabriel placed me on the ground. He said, 'Muḥammad, when morning comes, tell your people about what you saw tonight and announce the good news of God's mercy to them.' I said, 'Gabriel, my brother! I fear that they will think I am lying.' Gabriel said, 'If they say you are lying, your companion Abū Bakr will not pay attention to those who say that you lied (and he will support you).'

I slept on my cushions until the time of the morning prayer. Then I awoke and prayed the morning prayer. Afterwards I went out of the door of the mosque and there was, as usual, Abū Jahl, the evil one. When he passed by me, he said, 'And what did you prophesy yesterday, Muḥammad?' Whenever he passed by me he would ask me about various matters. I told him that I had travelled in a night journey. He asked, 'To where?' I said, 'To the sacred house [in Jerusalem], and from there to the throne. I spoke to the Truth [God] and He spoke to me, gave me gifts and was generous to me. I also saw paradise and what God has promised to the people of eternal blessing. I saw the fire, the Zaqqūm ["the tree of bitter fruit" of Q 37/62, 44/43 and 56/52] and the pools of hot water which God promised to the people of hell.' Abū Jahl said, 'Muḥammad, conceal this statement and do not speak of it or they will think you a liar.' I said to him, 'Should I keep what was decreed and blessed by God a secret?'

God said to me, *You should speak of the good blessings of your Lord* (Q 93/11). Abū Jahl, may God curse him, said, 'By God, the wonder of your words! Are you able to tell your community what you have reported to me?' I said, 'Yes.' So Abū

## 26 THE LIFE OF MUḤAMMAD

Jahl called out to the people of the blessed community of Mecca, 'People of Mecca, gather round!' All of them did so.