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Descent and Ascent in Islamic Myth

Mūdū mūdā likallim, lā mūdū aj īmur

“Let the learned instruct the learned, the ignorant may not see!”¹

Although the formula of the Babylonian and Assyrian scribes may not necessarily always refer to strictly esoteric learning, it does remind one of the restricted audience of many highly interesting texts, as well as of the existence of underlying oral explanatory material. The recent years have shown a remarkable growth of interest in esoteric literature throughout the Near East.² One of the texts which has received renewed interest is the Descent of Ištar, which, as suggested by Simo Parpola, provides a key to Assyrian religion and should in fact be read as a Gnostic myth of the descent of a divine figure.³

This kind of reading must have already occurred to the Gnostics themselves. The parallels to the Descent of Ištar have been discussed by Parpola on several occasions, but one might also draw attention to the Neoplatonist Damascius (early 6th century AD), who summarized *Enūma Eliš* in very Gnostic terms, and saw Belus (Marduk) as the Demiurge who belonged to the later generations, or series of emanations, of the Divine forces. Against this background, it would be quite conceivable that also the Descent of Ištar would have been (re)analyzed and used as the Sophia myth within the Gnostic conceptual framework.⁴

The late date of Damascius leads to my topic, the early Islamic myths of descent and ascent, but it may be useful to start with some theoretical considerations. When studying the Assyrian and Babylonian intellectual heritage, it goes without saying that the cultures temporarily closer to the Mesopotamian civilization(s) will inevitably take precedence. Islamic culture is separated by one millennium from the last heyday of Mesopotamian culture.

In many ways, the Islamic evidence is late and secondary, derivable from well-known Jewish, Christian, Hellenistic and Sasanian sources. Yet the Islamic material has an interest of its own. The wealth of Arabic material is considerable and it has remained almost unsifted from a Mesopotamian point of view: Assyriologists and Arabists have rarely been interested in each others' work.

If all the Arabic material were secondary, it might as well be set aside, but there are two reasons why this is hardly possible. First of all, Islam developed in Iraq and Syria, in the very area where direct late Mesopotamian influence would still be lingering on, partly in the form of Assyrian remnants, like in Harran, partly in indigenous versions of other religions, like the Gnostic or semi-Gnostic movements on the margins of Christianity and Judaism.⁵

¹ Quoted from Livingstone 1986: 1.

² E.g. Stroumsa 1996.

³ See also the article of Parpola in this volume, discussing the origins of the Hymn of the Pearl.

⁴ Saggs 1978: 9, already drew attention to Damascius, on whom see also the article of Talon in this volume. Likewise we might see in the *primaeva* Anshar the *Deus*

absconditus (see also Parpola 2000, pp. 167-73).

⁵ That mainstream Judaism and Christianity themselves had been very much influenced by the Mesopotamian religion(s) is also naturally true, but from an Islamic point of view, this material came to Arabs in an already new form and its ties with Mesopotamian religion were already lost.

Secondly, very little is known of Iraqi religiosity in the centuries before the conquest of Islam. Thus, even though Islam surely received much of its Mesopotamian inheritance in Iraq through different versions of Christianity and Judaism, it is often the only tradition where we can find documentation for this Mesopotamian influence.

In assessing the Mesopotamian influence on Islam, one has to be careful in distinguishing between direct influence through remnants of Mesopotamian religion(s) and the less direct influence through, e.g., late Neoplatonism which was a major constituent in tenth-century and later Ismaili thought and Arabic philosophy in general and which came to the Arabs through Greek sources. This indirect influence has an interest of its own – it, too, testifies for the *Weiterleben des mesopotamischen Kulturguts* – but the direct influence is, I think, more interesting as it may bring new point of views to the Assyrian and Babylonian intellectual heritage. – By direct influence, I mean Mesopotamian ideas which stayed in Mesopotamia and influenced there the nascent Islam.

The Mesopotamian influence in Harran, continuing well into the Islamic period, has already been studied by Green 1992. Green, though, does not quite adequately discriminate between direct remnants of Mesopotamian religion and ideas which have, in a way, made a detour through Greek civilization and come out as Neoplatonism in Harranian thought.⁶

The written, Neoplatonic influence became strong in later Islam, after having re-

ceived an initial impetus from the translation movement of the ninth century,⁷ but the more direct Mesopotamian influence should be sought from within early Islam. Much oral material was absorbed into Islam in the first two centuries of Islam, until around AD 800, the period when the religion gradually found its final form in Mesopotamia.

The study of Islam has traditionally centred on what later became considered orthodox, and the illusion of Islam being born and developed on the Arabian Peninsula has hindered scholars from realizing that Islam is, and has been in its manifold manifestations, a largely Mesopotamian religion – on the Arabian Peninsula, Islam had remained embryonic.⁸

The Mesopotamian influence which we see in Islam did not travel from Mesopotamia to the Arabian Peninsula to become there absorbed into Islam, but it influenced Islam directly in Iraq. Naturally one cannot wholly deny a Mesopotamian influence on the Peninsula also, but this is a marginal phenomenon. It is well known that the strongest Mesopotamian influence on the Peninsula is to be sought in Eastern Arabia, an area which had little effect on the development of Islam.

This possible direct Mesopotamian heritage is seen most clearly in the sectarian Islam of the seventh and eighth centuries when Islam quickly developed from a religious movement into a fullgrown system and received religious influences from the peoples that came to be under Islamic government.

Religious influence came to Islam both

⁶ Green shows herself sometimes aware of this as in writing (1992: 189): “Certainly late antique Neoplatonism and Neopythagoreanism had already blurred the boundaries between philosophical school and religious sect as well as between magic and prayer, but the existence and persistence of ancient forms of sacrifice, feasts and fasts would seem to point to the continued survival of ancient Mesopotamian practices, in whatever way now

transformed and given new meaning by later accretions of esoteric doctrines.” Yet she does not draw the necessary conclusions from this.

⁷ See in general Gutas 1998.

⁸ The discussion concerning the birth of Islam is still going on, but the old model which saw Islam as the product of the Arabian Peninsula is now hopelessly outdated.

through conversions and contacts. Biblical lore was also absorbed without conversions, as the Biblical characters were common to both Islam and Christianity and Judaism and there was a need for more material concerning the lives of Moses as well as Jesus and other prophets – to use the Islamic terminology – to add bulk to the rather sketchy stories of the Qur'an. So all traditions concerning the venerable prophets of Islam were welcome, even if they came from Jewish or Christian non-converts and their books.⁹

The remnants of Mesopotamian religion(s) were in a different situation as there was little common ground between Islam and what from an Islamic point of view was paganism. Thus, one may suggest that “pagan” material was most probably absorbed through conversions. The Gnostic mythology is parasitic – I use the term of Kurt Rudolph 1977: 63 – in character, and the same probably held true for the patterns of Assyrian mythology as outlined by Parpola in his publications, so that combining it, as an esoteric tradition, with the mythology and cosmogony of Islam was easy once the transmitters of this lore switched their religious affiliation, while still keeping to the basic structures of their older religion. The Gnostic Redeemer can as easily be Ninurta or Christ

as it can be the Imam.

People who converted obviously brought their religious traditions with them, and these later surfaced in Islamic sects.¹⁰ In general, though, the monotheistic system of Islam proved resistant to any deep changes, and the basic structure of a transcendent God who speaks through His emissaries to humankind, was kept.

In the seventh century AD, Assyria was already an ancient empire. Traces of Mesopotamian culture were to be found everywhere, starting with borrowed words and ending in cosmological speculations, but the system of the Mesopotamian religion was no longer intact. Even the remnants of “pagan” religion in Harran had been heavily influenced by Neoplatonic, academic speculations.

This was the situation when the Muslims arrived in Iraq. When absorbing materials of Mesopotamian origin, they received it as bits and pieces already built into other systems. Thus, it is not to be expected that we can still find complete systems of Mesopotamian thought within Islam.

As the myths of descent and ascent in their many forms are very central in esoteric and Gnostic movements both within Islam and in other religions and as they can be traced back to Mesopotamia, they may be a good starting point for ana-

⁹ As a case of the mechanism of this transmission, one might quote an *isnād*, chain of transmitters, of Ibn al-Munādī in his *al-Malāḥim* where he speaks about a Daniel apocryphon (p. 76): “I have been told by Abū Sulaymān ‘Abdallāh ibn Jarīr al-Jawāliqī who said: I have been told by a certain man who belongs to the People of the Book [i.e. either a Christian or a Jew] who is said (*mawṣūf*) to have collected *malāḥim* [i.e. narratives of eschatological battles].” – The text he then transmits (pp. 76-111) is a Muslim creation, but this does not diminish the importance of the *isnād*. Even such a late scholar as Ibn al-Munādī (d. 947), himself a respected author in religious studies, is ready to quote material through a non-Muslim. That the *isnād* is fabricated, not necessarily by Ibn al-Munādī, though, only shows more pointedly the

prestige the older religions and their esoteric books still enjoyed.

¹⁰ These sects are usually called extremist (*ghulāt*) Shiites. The term is handy but one should realize that these sects had not much to do with the Prophet's family. The seventh and early eighth century “Shiism” is a common name for a group of Gnostic sects outwardly professing Islam, and has little to do with any tribal or personal schisms connected with the person of ‘Alī ibn abi Ṭālib. Shiism, in the modern sense, started developing in the first half of the eighth century. It was the later heresiographers who perpetuated the misuse of the term by applying the ninth-century term to earlier movements and simultaneously retrojecting the ninth-century content onto earlier centuries.

lyzing direct Mesopotamian influence on Islam.¹¹

The Islamic myths of descent and ascent may roughly be divided into two categories. The first is a *primaeva* descent of a divine figure which leads to the creation of the material world. This descent myth is found in Islamic Gnosticism and it is paralleled by the ascent of the penitent soul.

The second category is the ascent of a mortal to Heaven.¹² The Islamic ascent narratives resemble different apocalypses which had been popular in the centuries before Islam.¹³

Beginning with the oldest layer of Islam, we may start with the Qur'ān which very probably dates back to the early 7th-century Arabian Peninsula.¹⁴ It is highly significant that the Qur'ān contains almost no descent/ascent material¹⁵ – the only creatures who descend and ascend in the Qur'ān seem to be the angels and the Spirit (“The angels and the Spirit descend during it,” sc. *Laylat al-Qadr*, the Night of the Destiny, Surah 97:4) and even their descent does not have any cosmogonical, redemptory or apocalyptic meaning. They are merely the divine

errand boys who transmit God's messages.

There are some cases in the Qur'ān which might briefly be mentioned in this connection. The idea of ascending to Heaven seems to have been known to contemporary Arabs, which is no wonder since there was a strong Jewish presence on the Peninsula.¹⁶ Qur'ān 6:35 mentions ladders with which to ascend to Heaven, but the implication is that not even Muḥammad can ascend to Heaven.¹⁷ The idea of an ascent was familiar but it was rejected.

The most interesting case of descent comes in Surah 53, a very early Surah which is almost completely free from Jewish or Christian influences, and belongs to the early, “pagan” period of the Prophet. The Surah is complicated, and the preponderance of equivocal personal pronouns makes it very difficult to interpret.

The Surah contains two visions by Muḥammad. In both, he saw the descent (*nazla*, 53:13)¹⁸ of a numen, later interpreted as Allah or Gabriel, depending on the opinion of the commentator, but as there is almost no Biblical influence in the Surah,¹⁹ we have to think of the descending numen in

¹¹ In Islamic studies, the Neoplatonic Ismailism and its cosmogonical speculations have received much attention, but this material is in its main part very late, dating from the tenth century and later, and it taps the Greek Neoplatonic sources and is for this reason strictly speaking secondary. From an Islamic point of view, this is not Mesopotamian heritage but Hellenistic heritage – even though it may ultimately be derived from Mesopotamia.

¹² The most recent attempt to discuss the Islamic ascent in general is the volume edited by Amir-Moezzi 1996. For Neoplatonic and Hermetic ascents, see, e.g., Netton 1982: 50, quoting *Rasā'il Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā* I:138 and III: 502 (Hermes); Ullmann 1972: 373 (Hermes); Nasr 1993: 153 (Universal Spirit); etc.

¹³ A third type of descent, the descent of the Redeemer in a Gnostic vein seems to be lacking in Islamic mythology. The Redeemer, the Imam, does come from the World of Light (the *pleroma*) but his descent is not given much attention: it is his earthly life which is the focus of the Islamic myths.

¹⁴ For a differing, though hardly convincing, view, see Wansbrough 1977.

¹⁵ In Qur. 2:210 there is a reference to the eschatological

descent of God with his angels (“Are they waiting for God to come down to them in the shadow of a cloud, with all the angels?”) but the theme is not further elaborated and it is, moreover, put in the mouth of the Unbelievers.

There is little Mesopotamian material in the Qur'ān in general. The two Babylonian angels in Qur. 2:102, Hārūt and Mārūt, obviously come from Jewish tradition, despite their Iranian names (< Haurvatāt, Amrtāt), although the magician brothers Jannes and Jambres might also be worth considering, see Pietersma 1994: 35, and the references given there.

¹⁶ See in general Newby 1988 who, however, exaggerates the Jewish presence on the Peninsula and all too easily accepts 9th-century stories to represent the situation of late 6th/early 7th-century Arabia.

¹⁷ Contrast this with the story of the *mi'rāj*, to be discussed below.

¹⁸ Note that the word does not necessary imply that the numen descended from heaven; it may also mean “alighting.”

¹⁹ Excluding the verses which are unanimously taken to be later, Medinan, additions to the older text.

more pagan terms. Whichever way we choose to understand the passage, it is clear that it has no relation with any cosmogonical myth nor a story of redemption. Like any *kāhin* or prophet on the Peninsula, Muḥammad had a vision which has direct relevance for his mission but no mythological background.

All these cases are results of a world view where God inhabits heaven. To communicate with mortals, He either has to come down or to send someone. It is hard to see any connection between Surah 53 and the Mesopotamian or Gnostic descent/ascent mythology.

Yet there is a famous passage in the Qur'ān which is usually referred to as the *mi'rāj*, the ascent of Muḥammad into Heaven. In the story of the *mi'rāj* we have a clear case of ascent. However, the *mi'rāj* is not found in the Qur'ān. The verse traditionally connected with it (Sūrat al-Isrā', Qur. 17:1)²⁰ only describes a miraculous nocturnal journey of someone from *al-masjid al-ḥarām*, "the Sacred Mosque," that is probably to say, the Ka'ba, to *al-masjid al-aqṣā* "the Furthest Mosque"; the latter is

described in terms that do fit Jerusalem as is traditionally explained. As it comes to any ascent, there is not the slightest hint of it in the verse, and it is evident and commonly accepted among scholars that the ascent story was only secondarily added to the *isrā'*, the nocturnal journey. In fact, even some Mediaeval Muslim scholars denied the *mi'rāj*.²¹ The whole idea of ascent is alien to the very transcendent God of the later²² layers of the Qur'ān.

Later exegesis, though, did discuss the *mi'rāj* extensively, but in the Qur'ān, there are no traces of any mythology built on descent or ascent and, accordingly, we have nothing to indicate that this mythology would have entered the Arabian Peninsula.²³ The roots of the *mi'rāj* have to be sought in Syria and, especially, Iraq – the Arabian heritage cannot account for a celestial ascent.

The earliest version of the *mi'rāj* is found in the biography of the Prophet (Sīra II:5-17),²⁴ written in Iraq in the late 8th century. The work conforms with the general mode of writing history, and it offers a fragmentary narration²⁵ of the *mi'rāj*.

²⁰ *Subḥāna lladhī asrā bi-'abdhī laylan mina l-masjidi l-ḥarāmi ilā l-masjidi l-aqṣā lladhī bāraknā ḥawlahū li-nuriyahū min āyātina. innahū huwa s-samī'u l-baṣīr* (Praise be to Him who took His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Furthest Mosque, the surroundings of which We have blessed. (This We did) to show some of Our signs. He [i.e. God] is Hearing, Seeing). – Note that it is not stated that the servant is Muḥammad. The verse might as well refer to history, and it has nothing essentially supernatural in it. What the verse tells us is that God took a servant of His at night to a faraway *masjid*. Note that travelling aboard ship seems to be one of the main themes of the Surah. If there is any unity in the Surah, one should rather try to connect the *isrā'* with sea travel!

²¹ See al-Maqdisī, *Bad'* IV:159 ("Know that there is nothing more controversial than this story [of the *mi'rāj* and *isrā'*]. As for the *mi'rāj*, some people deny it and others claim that the *mi'rāj* was the same as the nocturnal journey ...").

²² In the form in which it is told in later sources, the *mi'rāj* is built on Biblical materials. If it derived from Muḥammad himself – which it does not – it would have

to be from his late period. The earliest layers of the Qur'ān, and thus Muḥammad's early career, contain very few traces of Biblical materials.

The Qur'ān, rather unanimously accepted as dating from the early seventh century, seems to prove that Muḥammad started his career in a pagan context – the stylistically earliest passages lack Biblical elements – and later came into contact with monotheist religions, Judaism and Christianity. If, further, the *mi'rāj* had to do with the initiation of Muḥammad, the preponderance of Biblical motifs would be incongruous with what we know of the development of Muḥammad's message from the Qur'ān.
²³ Halperin, in his interesting article on Ibn Ṣayyād (1976), comes to another conclusion, but cf. below.

²⁴ The biography of Muḥammad (*Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*) was compiled by Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767) and later abbreviated and revised by Ibn Hishām (d. 218/834). There is a complete translation of the book into English (Guillaume 1955). In a convenient translation, one may also read the brief version of the *mi'rāj* in at-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh* VI:78-80, also drawing on old sources.

²⁵ In the so-called *akhbār* style, for which see Rosenthal 1968: 66-71.

The ascent is, in most versions, preceded by the nocturnal journey (*isrāʿ*) from the Kaʿba to Jerusalem, on the winged mount Burāq and accompanied by the angel Gabriel.²⁶ Whether the ascent itself was spiritual only or corporeal, was heatedly discussed, but the strongest case was that it was corporeal.²⁷

In Jerusalem, Muḥammad ascended a ladder²⁸ accompanied by his companion, Gabriel, the *angelus interpres*. There are several variants of the story, but common to all is a brief visit to all seven heavens, and in each, the gate is opened only after Gabriel has introduced Muḥammad to the guardian angels. Yet there is no hostility in the attitudes of these guardian angels towards Muḥammad, as so often in apocalypses, *hekhalot* texts²⁹ or Mandaean and Gnostic accounts of the ascent of the soul. The gate is simply opened after Gabriel has identified Muḥammad and confirmed that he has been sent as a prophet, after which Muḥammad is welcomed by the guardian angel.

In one version, Mālik, the guardian of Hell in the lowest heaven, removes the lid of Hell, and the flames of Hell fire burst out for Muḥammad to see. There is no description of Hell itself in this version. In another version of the story in the *Sīra*, Muḥammad sees Adam reviewing his offspring. During this review, Muḥammad also sees how the sinners are being punished.

In the seven heavens, Mufammad meets

previous prophets and is welcomed by them – the story was obviously a legitimization of the Islamic prophet. He also is briefly shown Paradise in the seventh heaven.

The story climaxes with Mufammad meeting his Lord (*Sīra* II:17: “then he came to His Lord and He assigned to him and his nation fifty prayers in every day.”) Not much is told of this encounter and neither God nor His Throne is described. When returning from the presence of God, Muḥammad was stopped by Moses who advised him to ask God to reduce the number of prayers. This happened several times until the canonical number of five daily prayers was finally reached.

This early version is extremely brief. It contains only a skeletal description of the ascent, and it lacks several details which we are accustomed to see in ascent stories and apocalypses: the hostility of the guardian angels; the fear which overtakes the visionary; descriptions of the heavens, of God and His Throne; mysteries of the cosmos being explained; etc.³⁰ In fact, we might well call the *miʿrāj* an “empty” ascent, a story of an ascent with little inherent meaning, except for the fact that Mufammad did ascend to heaven – contrary to the spirit of Qur. 6:35.

The brevity of the story also betrays its literary character.³¹ Legitimation of the prophet and an aetiology for the five daily

²⁶ As Gruenwald points out (1980: 202), the visionary may be fetched by angels in apocalypses but not in *hekhalot* literature. In this, the *miʿrāj* comes closer to apocalypses. – Note that in some versions the ascent begins directly from Mekka.

²⁷ For a discussion of this, see al-Maqdisī, *Badʿ* IV:159; and Ibn Diḥya, *Ibtihāj*, pp. 14-19 and 68-73; the final verdict of Ibn Diḥya on the question is found on p. 73. The other great point of controversy was whether Muḥammad saw God and if he did, whether he saw him by eyesight or by heart only: see Ibn Diḥya, *Ibtihāj*, pp. 74-92.

²⁸ The same ladder (*miʿrāj*), as some other sources say, which people see when dying (al-Maqdisī, *Badʿ* IV:160;

Ibn Diḥya, *Ibtihāj*, p. 106: here described as being of green emerald) – here again the hero of the apocalypse or ascent story is a precursor of others.

²⁹ See in general Schäfer 1975.

³⁰ The idea of purification before the ascent is lacking in most versions, but in those where the ascent is connected with the purification of the heart (*sharḥ aṣ-ṣadr*), the purification is rather secondary.

³¹ The problem with earlier studies of the ascent (as well as the whole career) of Muḥammad (e.g. Porter 1975, esp. pp. 22-23) is the scholars’ inability to fully realize that the story was generated only after the death of Muḥammad and in a new context where the Muslims had come into close contact with other religious traditions whose

prayers of the community is the motivation for this story, and the total lack of any ecstatic descriptions makes it impossible to suggest an ecstatic background to the story. The story is written by someone who is outside the ascent tradition but knows of its existence and is able to use its themes.

In later versions, details were added and the story was developed into a longer narrative of a celestial journey. Perhaps the fullest version was the one translated into several European languages in the court of Alphonso X the Wise (El Sábio) which may have influenced the *Divina Commedia* of Dante, although it is unnecessary to go further in tracing its development.³²

Seeing the *mi'rāj* as the initiation of Muḥammad³³ is incorrect, as it is not possible to assume that the *mi'rāj* material goes back to Muḥammad himself. Finding "Shamanistic" features in the story obscures the fact that, besides being a literary creation, the *mi'rāj* was born after Islam had come into very close contact with the literary tradition of the other major religions of the Near East and especially the area of Iraq, ancient Mesopotamia, but before the intrusion of Turkic

peoples who brought Shamanistic features into Islam.³⁴ The Sufi ascents of the second millennium were, on the other hand, probably already influenced by the Central Asian Shamanistic tradition.

Traditionally, Qur. 17:1 has been taken as the link between the *mi'rāj* and the Qur'ān, but even a cursory look at the verse shows how insecure the link is, and as is now generally agreed, the story of the *mi'rāj* is a secondary development of a mysterious visit to Jerusalem – which itself is most probably post-Muḥammad. How Qur. 17:1 is to be understood in its original context on the Arabian Peninsula is still somewhat open.

The immediate context of the *mi'rāj* is not the Semitic religion of the Arabian Peninsula of the early seventh century, but the Jewish, Christian and Gnostic environment in Iraq, with all the residues of Mesopotamian culture that were still lingering on in the area.³⁵ The centuries before the Islamic conquest had been full of celestial ascents and apocalypses.³⁶

It seems that Jewish interest in heavenly ascents was particularly strong in Amoraic Babylonia³⁷ and that stories of them also

paradigms had by then become familiar to Muslims. Thus, Muslims knew what kind of ecstatic experiences their Prophet should have had, and they readily reused materials fitting the prophetic paradigm. The *mi'rāj* of Muḥammad resembles other ascent stories not because of any underlying psychological or religious experience but because the later story was formulated in accordance with the earlier ones.

³² The interest in ascent in Spain is also seen in the monograph of Ibn Dihya (Ibtihāj): the Spanish author died in 663/1236, less than a century before Dante (d. 1321). The Latin translation of the Halmahereig (p. 78 = *al-mi'rāj*) is conveniently available in *Le Livre de l'échelle de Mahomet*. The Classical discussion of the Dante connection was Asín Palacios 1919; there is nowadays a vast literature on this subject. For a relatively recent discussion, see Kennedy 1994.

³³ E.g. Porter 1975: 1-26, here p. 10.

³⁴ On the difference between ascent and shamanistic journeys, see Johnston 1997: 175-76. Leezenberg 1997: 156, n. 2, seems somewhat sceptical or at least cautious when writing that "several authors have suggested Central-Asian shamanistic influences on heterodox Shi'ite practices [...] but few traces of specifically shamanistic,

rather than more generally magical, practices [...] can be found among any present-day *ghulāt* group." Baldick 1989: 21-22, sees the shaman's flight as the ancestor of the ascent of the soul in Gnosticism but he totally overlooks Mesopotamia.

³⁵ It is interesting to note that all the different forms of "Mediterranean revelation" discussed by Johnston 1997: 167, are found in the Sira. Thus: "God or his messenger could descend to earth to speak to a chosen recipient [...]. Alternatively, the recipient could be snatched away by god or his messenger to otherworldly places ('rapture'), where he would see and hear with his own eyes and ears the marvels that demonstrated truths he was to carry home to the mortal world [...]. Revelation could also take place at an established oracular shrine [...], or by means of dreams or dream-like visions [...]." It seems as if the followers of Muḥammad had opted for all the possible options to make their point.

³⁶ See in general Himmelfarb 1993.

³⁷ Cf. Halperin 1980: 184: "[...] the evidence that rabbinic interest in ecstatic mysticism was localized in Amoraic Babylonia might imply that the *Hekhalot* were composed, at least in their present form, in Babylonia in Amoraic times or later." Cf. also Halperin 1980: 182, and

circulated among larger audience.³⁸ As the *mi'rāj* scarcely describes ecstatic experiences, we have to look for textual sources for it; the *mi'rāj* is not a report of an ecstatic experience, or a “mystical diary,” but a legend created by scholars who were to some extent familiar with patterns and paradigms into which they set the prophet Muḥammad.

The Christian apocalypses and the Jewish stories of celestial ascents are the obvious source of inspiration for the early Islamic scholars, some of whom were converts from Judaism and Christianity. One possible source which I would like to single out, is the *merkavah* mysticism.³⁹

Merkavah tradition was naturally partly an esoteric, and thus restricted, tradition, but *merkavah* stories also circulated as popular legends. After they had been attributed not only to Enoch but also to illustrious, near-contemporary rabbis, they came to be attributed to Muḥammad as well when seek-

ing legitimation of his prophecy was. It should be noted that, as against Scholem, the *merkavah* stories had already in their original, Jewish context, become by the seventh century more narratives than “mystical diaries.”⁴⁰

Yet, the Classical *mi'rāj* stories do not show any intimate knowledge of either Jewish or Christian stories of ascent, be it *merkavah* or apocalypses. The idea is the same, but the richness of details is missing. Even a superficial acquaintance with ascents could have produced the legend of the *mi'rāj*.

The closest parallel of the *mi'rāj* to *merkavah* mysticism comes from a late Shiite version in al-Majlisī's (d. 1699 or 1700) *Ḥayāt al-qulūb*, studied by Halperin 1995. Halperin has been able to show very convincingly that this particular 17th-century version owes much to Jewish models but what he has not been able to prove, is its early provenience; one can only hesitating-

Gruenwald 1980: 81-82, according to whom the *merkavah* tradition of Babylonia outlived that of Palestine (Eretz Yisrael).

Halperin 1980: 183, suggests that “[o]nly in Babylonia, it would seem, did certain rabbis understand *ma'aseh merkabah* to involve an ecstatic praxis as well as (or instead of?) a secret doctrine.”

³⁸ Cf. Halperin 1995: 269.

³⁹ The similarities between *merkavah* and the *mi'rāj* have been pointed out by Halperin 1980 and 1995. Halperin misses the point in that he believes that the story had already developed on the Peninsula, but otherwise he is right. Also his article on Ibn Ṣayyād (1976) suffers from his firm conviction that the material he uses is reliable evidence for early seventh-century Medina: speaking about the stories, he claims that (p. 216) “it becomes wholly inconceivable that they were fabricated by the Muslim traditionists. They are best taken as fragmentary but authentic reports of contacts between Muḥammad and a Jewish rival at Medinah.” The same mistake is made by Newby 1988: 59-63.

See also Idel 1997: 198, who states that the *hekhhalot* literature was earlier taken to be “the product of the alien influence [...], namely Islam” by many scholars. This viewpoint is, I believe, nowadays considered outdated by scholars of Jewish mysticism, but what has received too little attention is that, in a sense, the earlier scholars were close to the truth although we have to look at the situation the other way round; the *hekhhalot* and other related traditions may have had crucial influence on the *mi'rāj*.

The realization that the *mi'rāj* mirrors the ecstatic ascent in *merkavah* mysticism also means that it confirms the existence and strength of that tradition in late 7th-century Iraq. It also means that finding traces of *merkavah* mysticism in the Islamic lore is, after all, not too astonishing.—As an aside, I would like to point out the importance of the Islamic material in confirming the age of the Kabbalistic lore in general. The gap between Mesopotamian esoteric learning and the Kabbala in Spain and Provence one and a half millennia later is partly bridged by late 7th- and early 8th-century Islamic material.

The *merkavah* mysticism was connected with the Sinai revelation, during which the Law was revealed (see, e.g., Halperin 1980: 179-180, and elsewhere): this bipartite ascent is similar to the *isrā'*-cum-*mi'rāj* of Muḥammad.

⁴⁰ The story of the *mi'rāj* shares the literary character of the ascent apocalypses, of which Himmelfarb writes 1993: 5: “I argue that they are best understood not as mystical diaries, however reworked, but as literary creations.” It is easy to join ranks with her, Halperin and Schäfer (cf. Himmelfarb 1993: 109) in taking the *hekhhalot* texts primarily as texts to be read and perhaps repeated.

The *mi'rāj* also repeats the disappointment towards the earthly Jerusalem and its Temple (cf. Himmelfarb 1993: 13). Muḥammad would himself perhaps have been content to get his legitimization in Jerusalem, but his followers searched for a higher legitimacy in making heaven the destiny of his miraculous trip.

ly accept a first millennium date for this version, which shows strong Jewish influence.⁴¹ This line of study would need more attention if we were to clarify the relations between later Islamic ascent stories and Jewish mysticism.

In later Islamic tradition, celestial ascent is better attested. It goes without saying that the strict Sunni theology never encouraged the idea of ascent – except in the narrative of the *mi'rāj* – but the Sunni orthodoxy developed only in the late 8th century and even then it could not prevent ascents from becoming a topos within Sufism. The ascent was as well a part of Islam as it was a part of Judaism and Christianity. The misconception that it was not is caused by a certain restricted angle in studying Islam: apocalyptic and pseudepigraphic literature are taken as parts of Judaism and Christianity but scholars often turn a blind eye to sectarian Islam, leaving Sunni Islam to dominate the view.

In heresiographies, we find the theme of an ascent by early sectarian leaders, but the information given in the sources is very sparse and it is often difficult to tell whether the ascents derive from Jewish, Christian or even Manichaean models. Moreover, any direct Mesopotamian links are impossible to see; not that I am saying that they did not exist, but we are simply not well enough informed to be able to offer an opinion on the question. A well-known case is the ascent of Bayān ibn Sim'ān,⁴² about which we are told (pseudo-an-Nāshi' al-Akbar, Uṣūl,

§60) that:

Bayān claimed that he was taken to heaven by night (*usriya bihi*). God took him as his son (*tabannāhu*), made him sit on the throne (*al-'arsh*) and anointed (*masaha*)⁴³ his head and said: “My dear son (*yā bunayya*),⁴⁴ go forth and convey (*balligh*) my message.” ...

The passage hardly enables us to go deeper into the meaning and origin of this early Islamic ascent.

Although it takes us somewhat apart from our present theme, I want to also mention in this context the mysterious *Sidrat al-Muntahā* (Qur. 53:14), the Utmost Lote-Tree where one of the visions of the prophet Muḥammad took place. As is well known, the passage was later connected with the *mi'rāj*,⁴⁵ although in the Qur'ān this interpretation is unlikely. This interpretation was born later, most likely in Iraq and it reminds one of “God’s theophany on the Tree of Life”⁴⁶ – to use the words of Gruenwald 1980: 51 – in 2 Enoch. That this was not the Qur'ān’s original meaning, is not important. On the contrary, it shows how strongly the Near Eastern religious ideas were diffusing to Islam and finding textual testimonies to attach themselves to. The *Sidrat al-Muntahā* was identified with the Tree of Life as soon as the Muslims became familiar with the tree metaphors in the Fertile Crescent.⁴⁷

Thus, ascents were familiar to the Islamic tradition, but they do not have very intimate links with the Mesopotamian *Kulturgut*.

⁴¹ Halperin’s early dating for this version (Halperin 1995: 278-80) is based almost solely on the angelic name Ismā'īl in the earlier versions of the *mi'rāj*. In any case, the version of al-Majlisī does prove that Jewish ascent material documented in *hekhalot* literature found its way to *mi'rāj* lore.

⁴² See Tucker 1975.

⁴³ This seems to be the original meaning, although later readers may have understood this as “he stroked his head (with His hand).”

⁴⁴ I do not believe that we can take this very literally and

read any adoptionist doctrines into the thinking of Bayān.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Ibn Dihya, *Ibtihāj*, passim.

⁴⁶ See already Porter 1975: 17, for the identification of *Sidrat al-Muntahā* with the World Tree.

⁴⁷ The idea that during the *mi'rāj* God descended to meet Muḥammad, which found a textual testimony in the originally unrelated *qāba qawsayn* passage in the Qur'ān (Qur. 53:9), may also have been influenced by details of the Mosaic ascent. For the distance between God and Moses, see Gruenwald 1980: 93 (when on Sinai Moses ascended to ten handbreadth’s distance of God). Like-

One final question concerning ascents might be worth a brief discussion. Was the ascent ever *practised* in the early times of Islam? As for therapeutic magic, we are not in a position to answer to this, and we know very little of early Islamic magic – in the contemporary incantation bowls, therapeutic ascent is attested⁴⁸ – but when it comes to mystic, ecstatic ascents approved of by religion and practised by mystics, there does not seem to be any traces of a tradition before later periods. The ascent of the prophet was not a model to be imitated but a unique event which marked the establishing of Islam as a religion and was not to be emulated by later generations. The *mi'rāj* belongs to the *dalā'il an-nubūwa*, the proofs for the prophethood of Muḥammad and as such the ascent cannot be repeated any more than Sunni Islam can admit the possibility of a prophet after Muḥammad.⁴⁹

Only in Sufi tradition, especially in the second millennium, did the spiritual ascent come in vogue. This tradition is, though, already permeated by Central Asian Sha-

manistic influences, and it would need a very detailed study to distinguish between old Near Eastern elements and the newer Central Asian elements in the tradition.

The myth of descent is better attested in Islam. To find traces of a myth of descent we have again to look at the margins of Islam. In Sunni Islam, as well as in mainstream Shiism, God does not descend on earth and the cosmogony starts with the story of Genesis, in its Islamic garb. In a word, there is no Gnostic background story behind the creation of Adam, and the creation story is accepted as told in the Qur'ān – or in Genesis.⁵⁰

On the other hand, the philosophical forms of Islam, and especially Ismailism, borrowed the Neoplatonic or Gnostic idea of gradual emanations which led to the creation of the material world.⁵¹ Ismailism in its Classical form, as developed in the tenth century, was heavily influenced by Neoplatonism⁵² and later Ismaili doctrine is only secondarily dependent on Mesopotamian tradition, through Greek mediation.

wise, the idea that Gabriel could not follow Muḥammad into the last passage, finds its parallel in the angel Hadraniel who could accompany Moses only to the fire of Sandalphon, see Schäfer 1975: 131-32. All these details show how the *mi'rāj* used themes familiar from the Jewish ascent stories.

A parallel to the ultimate reason of the Mosaic ascension to Sinai is lacking from the *mi'rāj*, though. At the time of his ascent Muḥammad had already received his Book which had been sent down to him, through the mediation of Gabriel in the final version of the Islamic story, whereas Moses was ascending to Sinai to receive his. It seems as if the earliest layers of Islam, documented in the Qur'ān, had already fixed the idea of the Book descending to Muḥammad (cf. the occurrence of the root NZL throughout the Qur'ān), and the ascension theme remained, in a certain sense, superfluous. When the motif was then borrowed from the surrounding literature, whether the Mosaic ascension or Jewish and Christian apocalypses, there was no motivation for the ascension, other than the general recognition of Muḥammad's prophethood.

The mediation of Gabriel is contrary to the Rabbinic endeavour "die Mittlerschaft der Engel bei der Gabe der Torah abzuwehren" (Schäfer 1975: 48). Schäfer states (loc.cit.) that "auch hier dokumentiert die Abwehr die

zugrundeliegende Neigung, die Rolle der Engel so sehr zu betonen, dass der Glaube an den einen und einzigen Gott in Gefahr geriet." Here Islam followed the model of popular Judaism more than the Rabbinic counter reaction, which may also have been the case in ascent stories.

⁴⁸ For attestations, see Morony 1984: 420. See also Abusch 1995 for the Mesopotamian material (Maqlū).

⁴⁹ Note that outside Sunni Islam, the finality of Muḥammad's prophethood was never quite accepted; see Hämeen-Anttila 2000.

⁵⁰ One major Sunni innovation to the story of the creation must be noted, though. When the position of the prophet was gradually heightened, the theory of a pre-eternal prophetic light was developed (see Rubin 1975), using Qur. 7:172 as a testimony for the pre-existence of souls. Yet this speculation was not followed very far.

⁵¹ For an analysis of some early Ismaili cosmogonical myths, see Halm 1978. The earlier layer of Ismaili cosmogonical myths seems to have been based on letter symbolism (especially the pair *Kūnī*, KWNY, and *Qadar*, QDR, and the myths attached to them). Even in this early form, the Ismaili cosmogony is definitely later than the cosmogony of Umm al-kitāb which is described below.

⁵² A good example of the mechanism of reinterpreting older Ismaili doctrines according to "modern" Neoplatonic concepts may be found in Walker 1999: 58.

Yet Ismailism was originally built on the so-called extremist Shiism (*ghulāt*), a common term for a group of sects which we can follow from the late 7th century until around AD 800, after which their impact started diminishing. Unfortunately, we know these sects mainly through later heresiographies, which means that the information on them is both biased and prone to errors.

There are, however, two important texts which have been preserved and dated in their original version to around 800 by the leading expert in the field, Heinz Halm.⁵³ One of these books is *Umm al-Kitāb*, which has been preserved in Persian translation among the Ismailis of the Hindukush/Pamir area. – The other important testimony of early Islamic Gnosis is the *Kitāb al-haft wa'l-aẓilla* (Halm 1982: 240-74) which has been preserved in the original Arabic among the Nuṣayris (modern 'Alawīs) of Syria, but as it contains little relevant material from the present point of view, it will be left out of the discussion here. Suffice it to say that it exhibits, in comparison to *Umm al-kitāb*, a more developed and Neoplatonically flavoured cosmogony which makes it of secondary importance from the point of view of direct Mesopotamian influence.

Umm al-Kitāb is a multilayered book which has grown during centuries, and widely differing opinions of its origin have been suggested. According to Halm 1982: 120, the

earliest layer of *Umm al-Kitāb* originated within the *ghulāt* sects of Iraq around the middle of the 8th century.

The earliest part of *Umm al-Kitāb* is the so-called Jābir Apocalypse (§§ 60-219)⁵⁴ which contains the cosmogonical myth and the story of the fall of 'Azāzī'il. This Jābir Apocalypse does not contain the story of the ascent of the soul, but it is implied in the Jābir Apocalypse and explicitly told in another part of *Umm al-Kitāb*, which may be somewhat more recent (§§ 240-48 = Halm 1982: 192-98).

The story of cosmogony starts (§ 81 = Halm 1982: 145) with the existence of a pre-cosmic, pre-eternal light which is of five colours, like the rainbow. The five lights are Muḥammad, 'Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, the Shiite holy family, and they circle around God who sits on his throne.

Before starting the lengthy tale of the Fall, the text describes the original state of this pre-cosmic light in terms which recall the Shi'ur Qomah texts, especially with its "provocative anthropomorphism"⁵⁵ – as both the Shi'ur Qomah texts and *Umm al-Kitāb* are equally difficult to date, I shall leave open the question of the relative age of the texts.⁵⁶ I also do not want to overstate my case: the text is not a Shi'ur Qomah text, and it does lack the exact numerical definitions typical of Shi'ur Qomah, but I would think there is a certain similarity between

⁵³ For the widely diverging views as to the age of the text, see the discussion in Halm 1982: 113-24.

⁵⁴ Analysis and partial translation in Halm 1982: 139-86.

⁵⁵ Cf. Scholem 1957: 68. The characterization of Shi'ur Qomah, given by Scholem 1977: 21, fits equally well the present text: "Dieses Ineinander des sinnlichen und des sprachlichen Anthropomorphismus, das ich für die *Schi'ur Koma*-Doktrin für charakteristisch halte (...)." Although the divine names in *Umm al-Kitāb* are no *nomina barbara*, one might point to the domination of Arabic names in this otherwise Persian text, as well as to the mixing of the two languages in terms like *rūh al-khīrad* § 89.

⁵⁶ For references to the early discussion of the possible Islamic origins of Shi'ur Qomah, see Scholem 1977: 22, and the notes thereto. Scholem is inevitably correct in seeing the Islamic discussions of *tashbīh*, anthropomorphism, as derivative from Jewish theology, if there is any connection between the two at all, but what he does not seem to have been aware of, is the sectarian speculation on the subject. If we wish to compare Shi'ur Qomah texts with Islamic theological speculation, we have to turn away from mainstream Islam to more marginal groups, the early Shiites, and later, the Ismailites. For some cognate Shiite texts, see also Amir-Moezzi 1994: 54.

this text and Shi'ur Qomah.⁵⁷ One might also mention that many Jewish texts having the same theme also lack the elaborate numerical speculation, like the passage of Zohar translated by Scholem 1977: 44-46,

where, like in the Jābir Apocalypse, the face of God receives most of the attention.

The relevant passage in the Jābir Apocalypse reads (§§ 83-89 = Halm 1982: 145-47):⁵⁸

The Speaking Spirit (*rūh-i nāṭīqa*) sits in the middle, and He is the God of Reality (*khudāvand-i ḥaqīqat*). (...) He sits on this White Sea on the essence (*maghz*) of the believers and is of the colour of lightning, clouds and the Moon.

The outlook of the figure (*shakhṣ*) of God (His Majesty is lofty!) is like this: His right hand is that Spirit of Maintenance (*rūh al-ḥifẓ*) which takes and is of the colour of the Sun. His left hand is that Spirit of Thinking (*rūh al-fikr*) from which comes the fullness and extension (*dirāzī*) of all lights. "Nay! His hands are both outstretched: He bestows as He will." (Qur. 5:64). This Spirit is of the colour of a violet.

The head of God is the Most Sublime Spirit (*rūh al-a'zam*) which is of a thousand different colours [...]. His right eye is the Greatest Spirit (*rūh al-akbar*), of the colour of white crystal and His left eye is the Spirit of Reason (*rūh al-'aql*), of the colour of reddish (*ashqar*) and yellowish fire. [...].

His two ears are the Utmost Mixing (*mizāj-i ghāyatī*) and the Divine Shining (*tābish-i ilāhī*) which are of the colour of the Veil of Divinity (*ḥādūr-i ilāhīyat*) [...]. One of the nostrils⁵⁹ of God is the Spirit of Knowledge (*rūh al-'ilm*), of the colour of red carnelian [...] and the other nostril is the Spirit of Omnipotence (*rūh al-jabarūt*) which is of greenish colour [...].

His speaking tongue is the Holy Spirit (*rūh al-quds*) which is of the colour of red ruby [...]. God's (His Majesty is lofty!) heart is the Spirit of Belief (*rūh al-īmān*) whose name is Professor of the Unity (*Muwahhid*) and who is of the colour of the Dome of Moon [...].

The two feet of God are the Divine Epiphany (*zuhūr-i ilāhī*) and the Glance of the Believer (*nigāh-i mu'minī*) in this House of Speech (*khāna-i nuṭq*)⁶⁰ and from this house it is joined to the heart and the Spirit of Material Life (*rūh al-ḥayāt- jismī*) [...].

God's Throne (His Majesty is lofty!) is this Divine Reclining Place [...]

What one might point out in this passage is how the different parts of God are identified with both colours and divine faculties, an idea which is by now familiar from Assyrian mythology. Parpola 2000: 197-98 calls the divine powers (*me*), or garments, of Ištar "abstract psychic powers" and draws attention (*ibid.* 199) to the gods as colours.

It might also be pointed out, how close this idea comes to the "Assyrian mono-

theism" as outlined by Parpola 2000: 173-74, who says, speaking of the "great gods":

Like the names of Allah, each of them represented an aspect or "limb" of the invisible God; together, they constituted his manifest "body."

The different souls (*arwāḥ*) also constitute the body of the One God, yet like Mesopotamian gods or Jewish angels, they, too, have their own names and perhaps even

⁵⁷ For the connections between Shi'ur Qomah and Gnostic texts, see Scholem 1957: 70, and notes 89-90, and also Scholem 1977: 17-26.

⁵⁸ Halm 1982: 121 and 198, takes this passage to be a later interpolation of the "Schicht B" which he dates to

around AD 800 (pp. 122-23). I have abbreviated the translation by omitting, among others, most of the Qur'anic quotations.

⁵⁹ The text reads erroneously here: "the *two* nostrils...."

⁶⁰ No colour mentioned.

their own identities.

As an aside, I would like to emphasize the fluidity of the limit between monotheism and polytheism. In fact, one might as well do without the terms, as polytheistic systems tend to develop towards ultimate monotheism – I am thinking not only of the Assyrian system but also the Indian and Gnostic systems deriving ultimately all existence from a more or less unknown One God, through emanations and *avatars*. Likewise, monotheism has difficulties in remaining pure: one need only to think of the Trinity and the saints in Christianity, the angels in Judaism, as well as dualistic tendencies in both. Even in orthodox Islam, the pre-existence of Muḥammad causes problems for monotheism, as does the existence of Evil. It may be that using the terms causes more confusion than clarity.⁶¹

Although I do not want to draw any far-reaching conclusions from the fact, I would also like to draw attention to the tree metaphor which follows closely this anthropomorphic passage. The text continues in § 96-97 (= Halm 1982: 149):

Then Ja‘far-i Ju‘fī asked: “Oh my Lord, if you do not think it a burden, then enlighten and clarify to your servant the description, explanation and majesty of the divine spheres (*divān*) and of the lights which go through the *divāns*.”

Bāqir answered: “There is the Veil (*parda*) of the Utmost Limit of Eternity (*ghāyat al-azal*) which is above the White Sea and the figure (*shakhs*) of the King (He is exalted and His Majesty is lofty!). Muḥammad, ‘Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn are members (*jawāriḥ*) of this sphere [and Abū Ṭālib and ‘Abdallāh al-‘Ālī complete them.]⁶²

The five lights of these five angels are always in the White Sea, just like the trees of

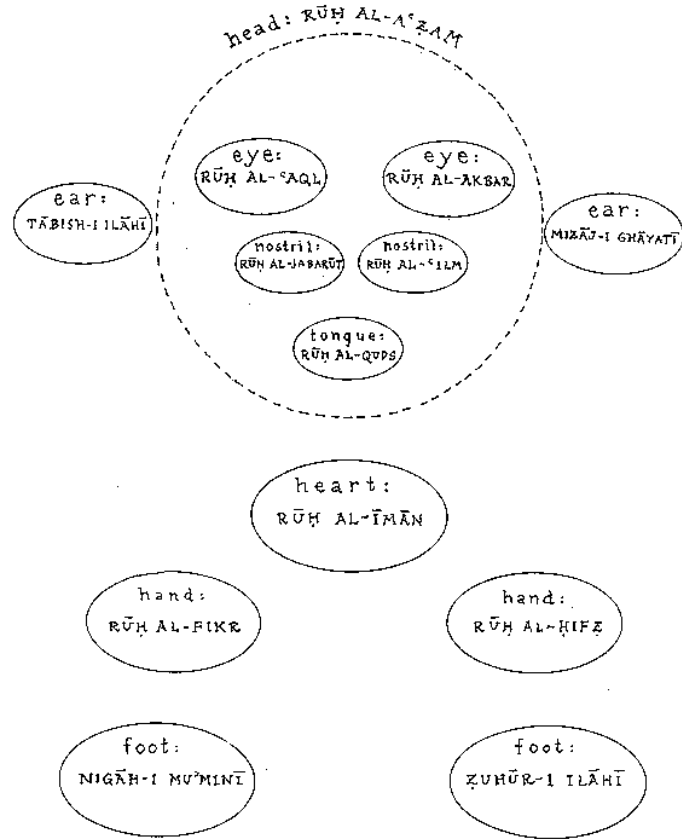


Fig. 1 God as described in the Jābir Apocalypse.

the Paradise. Their branches and their leaves are from the Divine Shining (*tābīsh-i ilāhī*) ...

Although the text speaks of trees in plural, it would be tempting to see here traces of the tree metaphor of the Sefirot, known both from Assyria and Jewish mysticism.

The text of the Jābir Apocalypse (§§ 99-112 = Halm 1982: 150-53) goes on by explaining the cosmology, starting with the

⁶¹ See also the discussion of Corbin 1981: 7-37.

⁶² This is a later addition: the original scheme of the

lights is pentadic, and the later sevenfold division is completed by adding the two later Shiite leaders.

White Dome and going forth in descending order through spheres (*divān*) and veils which are of different colours: the colour symbolism is very central to the terminology of this text.⁶³ The colours come, both here and later, in the following, descending order:

1. ruby, 2. fire, 3. carnelian, 4. green emerald, 5. violet, 6. sun, 7. moon, 8. and lapis lazuli – blue is the colour of the material world.

After this comes the story of ‘Azāzī’īl’s fall (§§ 119-202 = Halm 1982: 155ff) which causes the material creation. The One God who is Pure Light created further creatures of light – it should be noted that the idea of emanation belongs more to the refined versions of Ismailism, and these early texts are more in accordance with the Islamic idea of creation. The Islamic Gnostic cosmogony is, in general, more based on deliberate acts of creation than, e.g., Christian Gnosticism.

One of these creatures of light, ‘Azāzī’īl, starts creating his own creatures and forgets God. This leads to a series of falls, each distanced from the other by millennia. The final step is the creation of the material world.

If we consider this myth in connection with the Descent of Ištar, we note some striking parallels. As Simo Parpola 1997a: xxxii, has shown, “[t]he descent of Ištar is presented in terms of a stripping metaphor.” He also (loc.cit. and note 112) has drawn attention to the fact that the clothing of Ištar is a metaphor for her virtues and divine powers (*me*) and that it finds parallels in “the progressive weakening of the Cosmic

Soul” (note 112) in the Gnostic myth.⁶⁴

In the Jābir Apocalypse, the fall of ‘Azāzī’īl is, in each of the seven layers, caused by another creature of light (*Salmān al-quḍrat*) who strips ‘Azāzī’īl of one of his lights, starting with ruby red and ending with turquoise⁶⁵ until all his lights have been removed and he remains material (darkness) – the rainbow metaphor⁶⁶ is not explicitly mentioned but the connection cannot have gone unnoticed.⁶⁷

In the Jābir Apocalypse, the divine faculties of the One God are seen as colours, and in the fall of ‘Azāzī’īl, the same colours obviously symbolize the latter’s mental faculties which are stripped at each stage of the fall. It is obviously only a coincidence, but a very striking one, that these lights are sometimes referred to in the text as *libās* “clothing.”

In each case, the One God hides Himself behind the light which has been taken away from ‘Azāzī’īl and thus becomes gradually a *Deus absconditus*.

The ascent of the soul is missing from the Jābir Apocalypse, but it is found in a later layer of Umm al-Kitāb (§§ 239-47 = Halm 1982: 192-98), which seems to have been influenced by Ismailism and is thus not so directly dependent on 7th or 8th century Iraqi/Mesopotamian ideas.

The ascent of the soul parallels the fall of ‘Azāzī’īl, although the text gives much less attention to the details of the ascent than it had given to the fall of ‘Azāzī’īl. When the believer gains *maʿrifa*, redemptive knowledge brought by the Redeemer Imam, a spirit (*rūḥ*) descends to his soul from each

⁶³ For colour symbolism, see also Amir-Moezzi 1994: 49-51.

⁶⁴ See also Parpola 2000:197-98

⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the order of the lights does not fit with the system of the ziggurat of Dur-Sharruken and its parallels, see Parpola 1997a: xcii, note 114; Parpola: Monotheism in Ancient Assyria, p. 199.

⁶⁶ See Parpola 1997a: xci-xcii, Parpola 2000:199-200,

and Idel 1988: 227-28.

⁶⁷ Incidentally, what Parpola 2000:200, speculatively says about the coloured garments of Ištar (or the penitent soul) finds confirmation in the ‘Azāzī’īl myth: “Descent from its [the ziggurat, J.H-A] silver-colored top (the moon!) through the seven stages [...] would have symbolized undressing, while ascending it would have symbolized donning the colored garments.”

of the spheres. In all, he finally has ten souls, which is in accordance with the Neoplatonic idea of ten spheres, emanations from the *deus absconditus*, but in slight disaccordance with the fivefold or pentadic division of the older text. The spirits which descend and are affixed to the believer's soul, are of the following colours:

1. moon: *rūḥ-e roushanī*
2. sun: *rūḥ al-ḥifz*
3. violet: *rūḥ al-fīkr*
4. green emerald: *rūḥ al-jabarūt*
5. eight coloured *divān* (firmament): *rūḥ al-ʿilm*
6. fire: *rūḥ al-ʿaql*
7. ruby: *rūḥ al-quds*
8. the White Dome: *rūḥ al-akbar al-kullī*
9. the highest *divān*: *rūḥ al-aʿzam*

Here the spirits parallel the lights of 'Azāzī'il which had been taken from him during the fall.

It should be pointed out that Umm al-Kitāb lacks the idea of metempsychosis (*tanāsukh*) which is central to many Islamic Gnostic sects.⁶⁸ In fact, the gradual purification of the soul during the ascent or the regaining of originally forlorn lights/souls is in a certain sense contrary to the idea of metempsychosis which is based on gradual purification on earth. It goes without saying that there are ways to combine the two (the earthly purification may be seen as preparatory to the ascent where the purification continues) but one might suspect a separate genesis for the two ideas. As far as I know, there is no Mesopotamian origin for the metempsychosis which might mean that this part of Islamic Gnosis is a descendant of Neoplatonic ideas.

Even if the text as it now stands has been

remoulded to fit with Neoplatonic ideas, the oldest layer is in accordance with the Descent of Iṣṭar with its central stripping metaphor. Yet the fall of 'Azāzī'il differs in one very central aspect from the Descent of Iṣṭar. It is no redemptive descent, but a fall. In Gnostic myths, there is a clear discrepancy between Sophia's redemptive role and her fall but in the Islamic cosmology the redemption has been completely separated from the descent.

The redemptive role has been reserved for other creatures of light (or emanations in later Ismailism), especially the Imam, and it has been connected with the periodic incarnation of these entities as prophets and imams which seems to derive from another system, viz. the idea of a chain of prophets going through the *Heilsgeschichte*.⁶⁹ The origin of this system may be traced back to the Qur'ān where the succession of prophets is a central idea. As the role of the Imam was later very central in all forms of Ismailism and even Nuṣayri religion, the redemptive knowledge undoubtedly had to come through the Imam. This means then that the femininity of Iṣṭar and Sophia was lost to the Islamic sects, just as the Holy Spirit became more or less a man in Christian tradition (see Parpola 1997a: xxvi-xxviii and the notes thereto).

Yet the parallelism between the fall of 'Azāzī'il with its stripping metaphor and the ascent of the soul of the believer with its dressing metaphor is so clear that one cannot fail to notice the similarity with the descent and ascent of Iṣṭar, and as Parpola 1997a: xxxi, suggests, Iṣṭar represents in her descent the Holy Spirit and in her ascent the individual soul.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Cf. e.g. (pseudo)-an-Nāshī' al-Akbar, Uṣūl §§ 57-58.

⁶⁹ Within the Islamic theological system, we can follow the development from the chain of prophets to reincarnation. The Qur'ānic world history consists of a chain of prophets, which later lead to the idea of a prophetic light following the line of prophets from Adam to Muḥammad

and this, in turn, leads to the personification of this light as one prophetic soul which transmigrates through several bodies and through periodic reincarnation.

⁷⁰ See also Parpola 1997b: 55 "The ascending Iṣṭar is the penitent, reborn soul, which has been cleansed of its sins (...) and can start a gradual ascent towards heaven."

The structural equivalence of the ascent of human beings into heaven and the descent of a divine figure onto earth, has already been commented on by many,⁷¹ but I might here emphasize the close structural parallelism between a descent of a divine being (whether from the *pleroma* to the material world or, as an allegory, from the world into the Netherworld) and the ascent of the soul back to the *pleroma*, or the heaven. This parallelism was noticed by both Assyrian and Muslim Gnostics.

The sevenfold dressing or undressing is found also elsewhere in Near Eastern literature. For example, the sevenfold priestly investiture of Levi in the Testament of Levi⁷² resembles the ascent of Ištar, as does the ascent of the penitent soul, to her, or its, pristine purity. Likewise the “removal of prophylactic priestly” garments – I quote from Netton 1982: 87 – by Aaron at his death,⁷³ known both from Jewish and Islamic tradition, ultimately mirrors the “stripping metaphor.”

A word of caution, though. One has to remember that the number seven is self-generating – being part of the cosmology – and not too much emphasis should be put on the recurrence of the number; in many ascent apocalypses, the sevenfold heaven seems, in fact, later than a single heaven,⁷⁴ and one may suggest that the idea of a

sevenfold heaven had to generate sevenfold entrances, sevenfold investitures and other events in groups of seven.

Was there, then, an Ištar or a Sophia myth in 8th century *ghulāt* Islam as represented by the Jābir Apocalypse? I think there was, although it had already undergone a metamorphosis. The Descent of Ištar was a descent of the holy spirit while in the Jābir Apocalypse her place is taken by ‘Azāzī’īl who is the source of inequity and ignorance. Structurally, the ascent of the believer’s soul corresponds to the fall of ‘Azāzī’īl but it is nowhere implied in the text that the ascender is the reformed ‘Azāzī’īl and I would hesitate to read such ideas into the myth.

On the other hand, this myth remained restricted to small, esoteric groups in Iraq. That it secondarily diffused through Ismailism to the Hindukush/Pamir area is another thing. Mainline Islam did not receive the idea favourably, and there are few if any traces of it in Sunni Islam.

In fact, Sunni Islam is very reluctant to speak of any descents. One does have *ḥadīths* to the effect that God descends every night to the lowest heaven to listen to the prayers of the believers⁷⁵ but these remain scarce. In the eschatological *fitan* literature, there seem to be traces of God’s descent in the final days⁷⁶ as well as a singular but very remarkable *ḥadīth* according to which God’s

⁷¹ See Himmelfarb 1993: 71, following Alan Segal.

⁷² Cf. Himmelfarb 1993: 36.

⁷³ See Netton 1982: 86-87; Rasā’īl Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā IV:27-28; Ginzberg 1937 III:324-27.

⁷⁴ See Gruenwald 1980: 48; Himmelfarb 1993: 51.

⁷⁵ See Ibn Diḥya, *Ibtihāj*, p. 128 (and p. 93, note 1).

⁷⁶ These are mainly implied in the *ḥadīths* that stress that ad-Dajjāl, the Antichrist, is *not* God which obviously is an answer to the belief that the eschatological character who descends on earth in the final days would be God Himself. In the very interesting eschatological work of Ibn al-Munādī, *al-Malāḥim*, it is explicitly stated that ad-Dajjāl claims to be “the God on earth” (p. 101), in contradistinction to “the God in heaven” (cf. Qur. 43:84). The alter ego of ad-Dajjāl puts this even more clearly (p. 99): “I am the God who judges the inhabitants on earth on behalf of the God in heaven.”

Based on Qur. 2:210, it is also said that God Himself will descend on earth (see Ibn al-Munādī, *Malāḥim*, p. 335) but this is very rarely made explicit in the *ḥadīths*. Likewise, He is said to judge people during the resurrection, sitting on His Throne which is settled upon four mountains (Nu’aym, *Fitan*, p. 338) and thus implicitly on earth. He even shouts loudly (*Malāḥim*, p. 302): “Come to Me, O my friends, come to Me, O My beloveds. I am the One who created and made even, I am the One who determined and guided. I am your uppermost Lord!” (cf. also p. 360, and Nu’aym, *Fitan*, pp. 326-27).

In Nu’aym, *Fitan*, pp. 328-29, there is a charming detail. Ad-Dajjāl first rules righteously two years in Iraq before he one day claims to be God (“your Lord”). This obviously depicts the situation in many extremist movements, the leaders of which finally gave up their “*Mesiasgeheimniss*” and claimed divinity for themselves.

weapons are put in storage in the fourth heaven, ready to be used during the eschatological battle,⁷⁷ but neither of these cases has anything to do with cosmogonical myths.

This leads us to the question of the *Sitz im Leben* of the myth in the Jābir Apocalypse. Islamic orthodoxy developed in the new centres of Islam, the large cities of Iraq founded by the conquering Muslims (Basra, Kufa, Wasit, etc. – in Syria, the conquerors made better use of the ancient cities like Damascus). The Muslims of these cities were in contact with learned Jews and Christians, as shown by the early development of Islam which is much indebted to Christian and Jewish theology.

In contrast, the *ghulāt* movements probably developed in smaller towns, populated by natives, not the newcomers. Halm 1982: 36, 69–70, has drawn attention to the role of al-Madā'in (ancient Ctesiphon) in diffusing Gnostic ideas, and the importance of Harran has been demonstrated by Green 1992. I would suggest that the origin of the Jābir Apocalypse has to be sought in these marginal centres, not perhaps from Kufa, where Halm 1982: 123, locates the text. The text, as we now have it, is too general for us to be able to point to some specific area but it is obvious that it comes from somewhere in Iraq.

Who were the people who transmitted this myth to the author(s) of the Jābir Apocalypse? First of all, there does not seem to be any possibility of assuming a written origin, which would have been translated into Arabic (and thence into Persian). There are no close parallels in the known literature, the text has undergone a clear although somewhat superficial Islamization and it bears the marks of an oral tradition.

Moreover, there is no evidence that esoteric texts, if such existed, were transmitted among the indigenous population of Iraq or were translated into Arabic.⁷⁸ As far as I can see, there are no definite links to any particular work in the Jābir Apocalypse, although I admit that a specialist in Judaism might see something more in the text.

The general Gnostic structure of the text is obvious and it might derive from one of the pre-Islamic Gnostic or semi-Gnostic groups which flourished in the centuries before Islam and about whom we know little; I am thinking of groups like the Mandaeans or Harranians although there is no reason to link the text to either of these two particular groups.

It is rather useless to further speculate but in general it is very probable that many groups, like the Harranians, had retained Mesopotamian religious elements since the fall of the Assyrian empire. The Empire was demolished, but not every village or every town was Hellenized nor converted to the main religions in the Near East. After all, we are speaking of the very areas where the Mesopotamian empires had had a history of some three millennia. This tradition did not disappear, it only “went underground” when the establishment and its literary culture was first Hellenized, then became partly Christian, partly Jewish, and finally converted to Islam.

“Paganism” – to use the conceptual framework of those who described these late remnants of Mesopotamian religion – had perhaps better chances to survive in the Sasanian empire, as there was no general policy of converting the subject peoples, even though pagans were now and then per-

⁷⁷ See ad-Dānī, Sunan, p. 1117. For God's eschatological weapons, see also Ibn al-Munādī, *Malāḥim*, p. 147 (“Then God, He is mighty and noble, will become angry and strike with His sword and thrust with His spear”).

⁷⁸ The highly interesting preface in Ibn Waḥshīya's *al-Filāḥa an-Nabaṭīya*, which I intend to study in another

article, is obviously legendary and the translations of Ibn Waḥshīya are at least partly products of his own imagination – which does not mean that the text would not contain much material, the provenience of which should be sought in Mesopotamian oral tradition.

secuted by the Zoroastrian nobility.⁷⁹

We do, moreover, have plenty of evidence for the survival of “paganism.” This evidence is conveniently collected in Morony 1984: 384-430. There is no need to cover the field once again, so I only quote Morony’s words (p. 400):

Paganism survived directly among people who continued to be pagans and who venerated the old gods and demons and sacrificed to them. Chaldeans in particular preserved a well-developed, literate, magical, and astrological tradition. Pagan practices also survived in folklore and in popular custom.

The same survival of an Assyrian national spirit was also noted by Brock who wrote 1982: 16, speaking of Arbela and Karka d-Beth Slokh (modern Erbil and Kirkuk):

Here there was evidently some continuing awareness of the past Assyrian empire, and the terms *Athor*, *Athorāyē* (Assyria, Assyrians) are sometimes used [...]. The semi-legendary fourth-century martyr Kardagh, for example, is said to be ‘of the stock of the kingdom of the Assyrians,’ his mother’s side going back to Sennacherib [...].

The term *Athōrāyē* is also used (Brock 1982: 17) in the documents of the synod of 585, thus bringing us almost to the Islamic period. – Brock 1982: 17 mentions that nothing similar was found in Babylonia: it was the Christians of Assyria who most cherished the remembrance of the Assyrian empire.

This association seems to have been prevalent among Christians, although one has to note that pagans have not left many documents. This might well imply that there were many who were proud of their Assyrian origin and who were thus prone to transmit texts or oral knowledge from one generation to the next, and when the members of the family ultimately converted to Islam, they had an age old, direct, but fragmented, tradition with them which was ready to surface in the form of esoteric books, like *Umm al-Kitāb*. The modern Assyrians may be the inheritors of the Assyrian national identity, but Assyrian religion also left deep traces in esoteric Islam.

⁷⁹ See Morony 1984: 394.

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