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Poetry, Prophecy and the Angelic voice: Reflections on the Divine Word.

I yearn for my work, because it always helps me make sense of things. For never was a horror experienced without an angel stepping in from the opposite direction to witness it with me (Rainer Maria Rilke).¹

Before the rise of Islam Arabic was mainly a spoken language with an oral literature of elaborate poetry and, to a lesser extent, prose. Writing had not yet fully developed and memorization was the most common means of preserving the literature. The preeminent literary form was the *qaṣīda*, the 'formal mono-rhymed and mono-metered polythematic ode of praise, boast, invective, or elegy, as practiced by the warrior aristocracy of tribal Arabia and in the courts of the Arab client-kings to the Byzantine and Sasanian empires.'² As Walid Saleh writes, 'poetry was the medium for expressing the ideals of the social structure, the register of deeds and the bearer of glory. Eloquence, courage, generosity and fierceness were the standards one strived to attain, and poetry chronicled these traits for each tribe.'³ This was a time defined by the Arab traits of both forbearance and tribal haughtiness encapsulated in the term *jāhiliyyah*, or 'age of ignorance.' These odes were orally composed and transmitted as the pre modern Arabs lived in a culture where recitation and reading aloud were dominant forms of expression. Literature here does not refer to that which has been written but more to the narrower sense of texts, whether oral or written 'that do more, and are intended to do more, than instruct and inform, by being 'literary,' being cast in wording or style that are meant to please, entertain or evoke admiration.' As Van Gelder states, *adab* means 'literature as well as 'good manners' in modern Arabic but 'the term *adab* is often applied to literary output that is entertaining and edifying at the same time, based on the notion that ethics and aesthetics should go together.'⁴ Thus, both poetry and prose in the pre-Islamic era dealt with favourite subjects which included in the case of poetry, praise, eulogy (panegyric), defamation, and love, and in the case of prose, superstition, legends, parables, and wisdom tales. In extolling the virtues of the Arabs, Ibn Qutaybah writes:

Poetry is the Arabs'. No other nation has ever equalled the Arabs' meters, prosodies, and rhyme schemes, nor the Arabs' description of love, encampments, traces of bygone settlements, mountains, desert sands,

¹ Rilke's 'Letter to Marianne von Goldschmidt Rothschild' in Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows (eds). *A Year with Rilke*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009, 92.

² Suzanne Pinckney Stetkeyych, 'From Jāhiliyyah to Badī'iyyah: Orality, Literacy, and the Transformations of Rhetoric in Arabic Poetry,' in *Oral Tradition*, 25:1, 2010, 211-230.

³ Walid A. Saleh, 'The Arabian context of Muhammad's life,' in Jonathan E. Brockopp, (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 24.

⁴ Geert Jan Van Gelder, *Classical Arabic Literature*, New York University Press: New York, 2013, xiv

wastelands, night journeys or the stars...Poetry is the source of the Arabs' learning, the basis of their wisdom, the archive of their history, the repository of their battle lore. It is the wall built to protect the memory of their glories, the moat that safeguards their laurels. It is the truthful witness on the day of crisis.⁵

The etymology of the word *shā'ir* connotes the meaning of a man of inspirational knowledge, of unseen powers. Drawing on Al-Qurashi, El-Azma writes 'To the early Arabs poetry was *ṣihr ḥalāl* and the poet was a genius who had supernatural communications with the jinn or spirits, the muses who inspired him.'⁶ Each poet was seen to have inspiration which influenced his poetry but inspiration also accorded him huge influence in public life. The poet was not only a kind of spokesman of his people but he also defended their interests. Thus the emergence of a poet was always a cause to be celebrated because very often he embodied the status of a prophet and the chief of his tribe. It is argued that the soothsayers or *kāhins* had no hierarchy in the pre-Islamic period and their status was far behind that of the poets who embodied a kind of metaphorical refuge in times of trouble, 'the only spiritual force to whom the leaders of the *Jāhiliyyah* turned in order to shake off the new religion.'⁷

The emergence of the Qur'ān was an oral and aural experience; the aesthetic experience of reciting and hearing the Qur'ān is often regarded as one of the main reasons behind conversion to Islam in the early days. The stirring magnificence of the poetry of the Qur'ān led to both accusations of magic and deception. Muḥammad was accused of trying to deceive through the most eloquent poetry, that his claims to prophecy were nothing but deception, not divine words but beautiful poetry. The Qur'ān challenges the Meccans to produce anything like the Qur'ānic suras if they are in doubt:

Say: "If all mankind and the jinn would come together to produce the like of this Quran, they could not produce its like even though they exerted all and their strength in aiding one another" (Q17:88)

Or do they say that he has invented it? Say (to them), "Bring ten invented chapters like it, and call (for help) on whomever you can besides God, if you are truthful"(Q11:13)

In the discussion on the relationship between the Qur'ān to early Arabic poetry and the Bedouins, the traditional scholarly view has been that the Qur'ān represented the language of the Quraysh, 'reputedly the most felicitous of all the Bedouin dialects.' Yet Michael Zwettler's meticulous study of diction and style, argues that the Qur'ān shared 'much more with the language of oral poetry than it did with any spoken dialect and that this would account for the Qur'ān's frequent denial that Muḥammad was a poet.' Zwettler premises

⁵ 151 James E. Montgomery and Peter Webb (eds.) *Ibn Qutaybah, The Excellence of the Arabs*, New York University Press: New York, 2017, 151.

⁶ Nazeer El-Azma, 'The Qur'ān and Poetry,' *Al-'Arabiyya*, 13:1/2, 1980, 65-79.

⁷ For more on this, see El-Azma, 'The Qur'ān.'

this argument on the basis that oral poetry preserved certain diction, traditional phrases and formulas that may no longer be used in current dialects that are spoken by the poet or his audience. Furthermore, the notion of *lingua sacra* 'suggests a special diction and style peculiar to scriptures and other texts, but not representative of the language spoken in everyday discourse.'⁸ The religious and social requirements of the Islamic community and the liturgical principle of oral recitation and prayer meant that the Qur'ān was using an oral-poetic medium for non poetic purposes. The Qur'ān insists in several places that the Prophet has neither been taught poetry nor is reciting poetry, 'We have not taught him poetry; it is not seemly for him. It is only a Remembrance and a clear Qur'ān' (Q36:69). And as Navid Kermani writes:

According to Muslim literature on the life of the Prophet, neither his arguments nor his sermons, his manner or his charisma alone were crucial factors for the conversions in the early period of Islam. As far as tradition informs us, in most cases, the Arabs converted when they heard the Qur'ān, whether recited or as part of ritual prayer, the *ṣalāt*.⁹

Conversion therefore was an aesthetic experience before a moral commitment. Navid Kermani emphasises that the literary and aesthetic quality of the Qur'ān are seen as a decisive factor in the spread of Islam by the faithful even if it is legitimate to question the authenticity of reports on the reception of the Qur'ān in early Islamic history. Yet as he claims, through all kinds of biographical and commentary literature, 'a past is constituted in which the linguistic composition of the Qur'ān becomes a principal element in the history of salvation: a past in which the Qur'ān's metaphysical beauty appears as a historic fact.'¹⁰

Yet the Prophet was not a poet. God's speech in its revealed form was not poetry even if it shared semantic and formulaic similarities with poetry, for it contained a spiritual supremacy that challenged the authority and eminence of the pre-Islamic poets and the poetry of the time. Despite Muḥammad facing challenges of sorcery and supernatural communication, revelation prevailed and the spiritual system of poetry collapsed. It is claimed that not until Umayyad rule did poetry regain a leading position in the Arab state.¹¹

Revelation in Islam is mediated through the spoken word; its oral and aural character continue to be important in ritual, prayer and liturgy. The prophetic role of Muḥammad was the transmission of the Qur'ān and his words and actions encompassing the sunna, are understood as part of the revelatory process. Muḥammad's status as prophet is one in whom most Muslims came to see the seal of prophecy as meaning the finality of

⁸ Richard Martin, 'Understanding the Qur'an in Text and Context,' *History of Religions*, 21:4, 1982, 361-384. Martin discusses Michael Zwettler's work, *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry: Its Character and Implications*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978.

⁹ Navid Kermani, 'The Aesthetic Reception of the Qur'ān as Reflected in Early Muslim History,' in Issa J. Boullata (ed.) *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān*, Curzon Press: Richmond, Surrey, 2000, 258-259.

¹⁰ Kermani, 'The Aesthetic,' 256.

¹¹ El-Azma, 'The Qur'ān,' 70.

prophecy. The relationship of God to the message and the messenger culminates in the *shahadah* itself, 'There is no god but God and Muḥammad is his messenger.' The Qur'ān identifies the human recipient of these divine messages as either a *rasūl* (pl. *rusul*), literally 'one sent with a message', or a *nabī* (pl. *nabiyyūn*, *anbiyā*), literally 'prophet' (cf. Hebrew *navî*). The word *rasūl* or messenger signifies a human agent sent by God to deliver a message to his people—usually in the form of a book—in a language that they understand.

The Qur'ānic message insists that Muḥammad is not bringing something new, that neither message nor mode are radical breaks from the past. Prophecy is not revolutionary, it is continuity. It is principally through Muḥammad and the Qur'ān that Muslims come to see God as a moral and eschatological reality. The Qur'ān is concerned with both individual prophets and the nature of prophecy in the dialectic between human reception and divine message. In that sense Muḥammad is the same as previous prophets. He can only speak of that which is part of God's plan and only reveal that which God wishes him to reveal. His task was to reveal the new truth but not to contest the old truths nor to distinguish between the messengers who preceded him.

What the Qur'ān conveys therefore, is the sense of an overriding continuity found in the repeated mention of the names of Old Testament prophets. The concept of prophecy is shared between Judaism, Christianity and Islam though each have accorded prophecy varying time, significance and purpose. Jewish tradition regarded prophecy as the gift of the holy spirit (*rūah nēbū'ā*). Moses was perhaps the first to define the phenomenon of a prophet as one who claims to speak with divine authority, although it can be traced much further back in the history of God's people. If a prophet was bringing the actual words of God to a people, to ignore the message was tantamount to ignoring God himself.¹² Prophecy confirmed God's presence with his people. After Malachi (c 400 BC) the voice of authoritative prophecy was stilled. In speaking of the end of prophecy Frederick Greenspahn wrote:

The pseudonymity of intertestamental apocalyptic suggests that claims of direct revelation were by that time no longer credible, and indeed the biblical canon includes no prophetic works ascribed to figures who lived later than Malachi. This conforms to the rabbinic tradition that the holy spirit withdrew from Israel after the death of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Several texts from the intertestamental period also allude to an absence of prophecy, occasioning various theories about the circumstances and causes of its coming to an end.¹³

¹² Graham Houston, *Prophecy Now*, Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1989, 30.

¹³ Frederick E. Greenspahn, 'Why Prophecy Ceased,' *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 108:1, 1989, 37-49.

The didactic function of these prophecy (*nubuwwa*) narratives means that they can be seen as 'homilies on religious history' and their function is not just to relate the past but to warn the believers of the future.¹⁴

By contrast in Christianity God no longer offers us a prophetic message pointing to an eschatological reality, but rather offers himself; the Incarnation. Revelation in Islam is tied to prophecy and even if prophecy is the ultimate accolade, it is only an instrument of God - in accepting the Qur'ānic message, a new believing community emerged but humanity was not transformed into a new creation. Revelation in Christianity is seen by some as an appreciation of Jesus as 'a movement of the human -- the human in its totality -- beyond itself, in such a way that the totality of human life was itself re-created.'¹⁵ God's word was not tied to a prophetic mission but to the life and death of Jesus himself.

From an early date in mainstream Christian theology, those who spoke of Jesus as 'a righteous man' and a prophet were definitely in the minority, and their views were pushed aside by the predominant Christology. Vincent Taylor argues that the term prophet in John and Acts must be regarded as a limited attempt at Christological interpretation but one which proved abortive. He concludes:

As in the use of the terms "Rabbi" and "Teacher" we have in the titles "Prophet" and "the Prophet," names which passed out of use because they were felt to be inadequate. Like the prophets of old, Jesus was seen to be filled with the Spirit and to speak the words of God, but unlike them, he left the abiding impression of possessing far more than the prophetic commission. In contrast with the formula, "Thus saith the Lord" there remained in the memory of the primitive community his majestic "But I say unto you."¹⁶

Thus, the signs that mark a true prophet had become the problem of bygone generations; Christians readily admitted the prophecy of Moses, although they saw it as an outdated issue. Therefore, for contemporary Jews the encounter with Christianity did not require that they should dwell on the proofs of prophecy. With the rise of Islam the scene changed drastically because God had now chosen Muḥammad as his next messenger.

¹⁴ Christopher Buck, 'Discovering' in Rippin, *Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, p.27.

¹⁵ <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=452&C=364>. Sally Mcfague, *Speaking in Parables*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, first published, 1975.

¹⁶ Vincent Taylor, *The Names of Jesus*, London: MacMillan and Co. Limited, 1953, 17.

Islamic thought has concerned itself with keeping the divine nature and the human nature separate. Yet the divine has to be heard and received by the human and so in the Qur'ān, the divine voice is expressed and subsequently interpreted in the human voice. In the Prophetic message, the transcendent becomes the immanent, the universal becomes particular and the perfect is transmitted through imperfect channels. Yet Muslims challenged Christians about how the finite could contain the infinite because they did not see prophecy as an aspect of divine nature whereas Jesus and the Christ event is.

Despite the huge veneration of Muḥammad in Islamic piety the Qur'ān speaks of Muḥammad as 'Muḥammad is only a messenger of God to later commands 'obey God and his messenger.' The changing commandment and the gradual transition from human prophet to the perfect man worthy of emulation has a long interpretative history with complex doctrines on the infallibility of prophecy and authenticity of the prophetic words. The cosmic legendary Prophet replaced the Muḥammad of history and the lines between divine word and prophetic word became blurred in popular piety and devotional writings. While Muḥammad was alive, prophecy and divine word were linked and both the words of the Qur'ān and the words of the Prophet were seen within the same transhistorical, sacred revelatory event. A divine message however resisted or rejected is an opportunity for salvation, it is not only a manifestation of God's concern for humanity but God's mercy for humanity. This is why prophethood is expected from God, 'We sent messengers as bringers of good tidings and warners so that mankind will not have arguments against God after the messengers. And God exalted is mighty and wise'(Q4:165). This is a remarkable right we have against God and divine culpability is implied if God had not sent messengers.

True prophethood is always sent by God because prophecy begins and is sustained through a relationship with the divine. But in Islam, revelation comes down only when God addresses men, not when men call out to God. The words of God are heavy as in 'We will cast upon you a heavy word,' (Q73:5). Kenneth Cragg writes that prophethood is an activity of God, and that 'Messengers do not send themselves. Only in *not* doing so are they authentic.'¹⁷ In comparing Jesus and Muhammad, Cragg argues that words and preaching were insufficient for both:

It is sobering to realize that the very same pregnant incompleteness of prophethood, that for the Qur'an led to the Hijrah to Medina, brought Hebraic thinking into that Messianic expectation which the New Testament identified in the ministry and suffering of Jesus... The words 'more than a Prophet' which Jesus applied to John the Baptist (Matthew 11:9) had even richer meaning in the Sonship of Jesus. It

¹⁷ Kenneth Cragg, *The Weight in the Word: Prophethood, Biblical and Qur'anic*, Brighton: sussexAcademic Press, 1999,117.

was in line with what would always be needed in the divine economy as the ultimate measure of all prophethood, divinely sent and divinely wrought.¹⁸

While prophecy and messengership represent the pinnacle of divine election in Islam, Muhammad's prophecy is itself mediated through Gibrīl (Gabriel). Gibril is one of the many angels mentioned in the Islamic tradition as angels are a fundamental part of Islamic belief:

The Islamic concept of creation, revelation, prophecy, the events that occur in the world, worship, the spiritual life, death, resurrection and the central position of man in the cosmos cannot be understood without reference to angels.¹⁹

The role of angels, specifically Gibrīl, remains central to the revelatory process. Angels are integral to both communication and process of the message even if they are 'incidental to the whole process of salvation history.'²⁰ Revelation as speech originates in God, as in those verses in which God speaks in the first person, 'I have sent down the Qur'ān' (Q2:41) or 'We have sent down the Qur'ān' (Q44:3). It is in Q2:97 that Gibrīl is introduced as the one who 'by the leave of God brought the Qur'ān down upon Muḥammad's heart.' Gibrīl acts only with God's permission in conveying this message. Despite the various philosophical perspectives on how one understands God's speech, in the case of Muḥammad, the prophetic status is confirmed when God makes Gibrīl the mediator between himself, his words and Muḥammad. The first words are a bold command, 'Recite in the name of your Lord who created, recite and your Lord is most generous, who taught by the pen, taught man that which he knew' (Q97:1-5). It is with these words that the Qur'ān's gradual descent begins. Josef Van Ess writes that 'Gabriel's function is thus ambiguous; he is a mere instrument in the hand of God, but he also serves as a means to separate God from man.'²¹

Gibrīl's mission to Muḥammad is a new awakening of prophethood rather than revelation as understood in the Christian sense. As Stefan Wild argues, 'neither the Qur'ān nor Muslim theology ever calls God's speaking to mankind a 'revelation.' Muslim theologians used the term *asbāb al-nuzūl* translated as 'reasons of revelation' to convey the concept of 'coming down' and 'sending down.' The word *nuzūl* is not Qur'ānic but the concepts of 'coming down' and 'sending down' are 'vital for a correct understanding of the Qur'ānic hermeneutics of God's speaking to man.' While *wahy* and *ilhām* are used in the Qur'ān to express God addressing individuals or communities, they have different connotations and only *tanzīl* and *inzāl* are reserved

¹⁸ Cragg, *The Weight*, 20.

¹⁹ S.Murata, 'The Angels' in S.H.Nasr (ed.); *Islamic Spiritualities: Foundations*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987, 324.

²⁰ S.R.Burge, *Angels in Islam*, Routledge: Oxford, 2012, 105.

²¹ Josef Van Ess, 'Verbal Inspiration' in Stefan Wild (ed.) *The Qur'ān as Text*, Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1996, 187.

for divine communication with man. Wild argues that the translation ‘revelation’ for *nuzūl* is problematic because the Christian term revelation is a metaphor denoting unveiling or becoming visible. In Christianity, God unveils himself to become visible to mankind but ‘this concept is foreign to the Qur’an and Islam.’²²

Despite the concern that God cannot be bound by time or space, the concepts of *tanzīl* and *nuzūl* denote a space where there is an above and a below. God sends a verse or the whole Qur’ān down because God is in heaven and human beings including prophets and messengers are all below. God sends down the truth but God himself is never the subject of *nuzūl*. God sends down a variety of blessings and sustenance for humankind, ‘and We sent down out of heaven water blessed’ (Q50:9). As Wild writes, ‘The connection between life giving water and life giving word is also constantly present in the Qur’ānic text. The heaven from which rain is sent down is the same as the one from which God’s word is sent down.’²³ Most importantly, ‘the fact that God’s word is sent down, its being God’s *tanzīl* or *inzāl*, is its protection.’ This is not the speech of a poet or a soothsayer which could also claim to be *tanzīl*.²⁴

God does not speak directly to Muḥammad but what Muḥammad in the name of God is from God. This particular understanding of the descent of divine speech led to a variety of philosophical views about how to understand the Qur’ān as God’s word. During the mid 8th century, the Mu’tazila, denied the status of the Qur’ān as uncreated and co-eternal with God. They argued that God did not even speak directly to Moses but from behind the burning bush/tree, ‘But when he came to the (Fire) a voice was heard from the right bank of the valley from a tree in hallowed ground, ‘O Moses! Indeed I am Allah the Lord of the worlds’ (Q28:30). Yet in Qur’ān 4:164, it is said that God spoke to Moses directly, *kallam takliman*. Nevertheless, the Mu’tazila held onto the view that what Gibrīl conveys is the word of God created in him by God. What we have on earth in the Qur’ān is never God’s word itself, but a ‘reproduction,’ a *ḥikāya* like indirect speech. For those who opposed this sense of createdness, such as Ibn Kullāb, God was eternal with his speech but what we hear on this earth is *ibāra*, an expression of God’s speech in its phonetical form whereas the contents remain eternal. There was a distinction between *qirā’a* and *maqrū’* ie what we read and recite and that which has been expressed by God.²⁵

It should be noted briefly that the spatial dimensions of Divine reality inspired different meanings in Islamic piety. For many Ṣūfīs, God’s creation is the result of God’s love and mercy but creation is also the result of God’s own desire to be known ie there is a revelation of sorts. Nowhere is this more explicit in Islam than in the famous *ḥadith qudsi*, ‘I was a hidden treasure then I desired to be known, so I created a creation to which

²² Stefan Wild, “‘We have sent down to thee the Book with the Truth...’ Spatial and temporal implications of the Qur’anic concepts of *nuzūl*, *tanzīl* and *inzāl*” in Stefan Wild (ed.), *The Qur’an as Text*, Brill: Leiden, 1996, 137.

²³ Wild, *The Qur’an*, 143.

²⁴ See John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies, Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford 1974, 59.

²⁵ Van Ess, ‘Verbal Inspiration,’ 182-188. An excellent summary of some of the key theological debates of the time..

I made myself known; then they knew me.’²⁶ The very purpose of creation is for God to reveal himself. For Sūfīs such as Ibn ‘Arabī and Hallāj this is not because God needs creation in any way to realize his fullness but because God’s creative love is so strong that it triggers the whole process of creation. Human beings may not be able to attribute a beginning or purpose to God’s love but he writes, ‘We came from love, we are created in love.’²⁷ William Chittick explains that for Ibn ‘Arabī, it is God’s radiance which we witness in this life and not his being or *wujūd*. Only God is the truly Real and the cosmos is ‘everything other than God’:

For Ibn ‘Arabī, human beings love God’s self disclosure in the form of the universe. We can say that the world is God’s glory made manifest. The world exists to draw everything into the contemplation of his beauty but in his essence God remains unknowable.²⁸

Gibrīl is central to three of the most poetically defining events in Islamic piety. Gibrīl’s mission to Muḥammad, the beginnings of Islam; the creation of Adam and the command to prostrate in front of Adam obeyed by all the angels except Iblīs and the subsequent expulsion of Iblīs and humankind from paradise; thirdly Muhammad’s night journey and ascension with Gibrīl, the *isrā’* and *mi’rāj* stories.

The *mi’rāj* or ascension of the Prophet is regarded as a foundational event in his life alluded to in a specific Qur’ānic verse, ‘Glory to be to God who took His Servant by night from al-Masjid al-Ḥaram to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing (Q17:1). The second set of verses are Q53:1-8 refer to Muḥammad being ‘in the highest part of the horizon, then he approached and descended.’ In his study of the *mi’rāj* narratives, Frederick Colby argues that the vocabulary regarding this celestial ascension is vague and although there is mention of a night journey (*isrā’*), the Qur’ān make no specific reference to the term *mi’rāj*. The latter gained momentum in *ḥadīths* and extra-Qur’ānic material.²⁹ The story of the *mi’rāj* went through a number of revisions in the course of the Middle Ages but it speaks of two main events. The first is the *isrā’* when Gibrīl lifts the Prophet on to a heavenly mount called Burāq to accompany Muḥammad on a journey from Mecca to Jerusalem (the distant shrine, al-masjid al-aqsā), where he led the prayer with the prophets (Abraham, Moses, and Jesus) on the Temple Mount. The second part is Muḥammad’s heavenly journey, described as climbing a heavenly ladder – *mir’āj*, his ascension in which he meets all the major prophets in the seven heavens, ending with Abraham right before

²⁶Badi’al-Zamān Foruzanfar, *Āḥādīth-Masnavi*, Reprint, Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1987, .29.

²⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Tarjuman al’Ashwaq: A Collection of Mystical Odes by Muhyiuddīn ibn al-‘Arabī*, edited and translated by R.A. Nicholson, London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1911, vol.2, 318. Ibn ‘Arabī defines God’s love for man as *al-hubb al-Ilāhī*.

²⁸ William C. Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi, Heir to the Prophets*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2005.17.

²⁹See Chapter 1, Frederick S. Colby, *Narrating Muhammad’s night journey: tracing the development of the Ibn ‘Abbas ascension discourse*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2009.

the gates of paradise.³⁰ The ladder (*mi'rāj*) in fact lends its name to the whole episode, and provides the central imagery of ascending. If God is within us, he is also above us. For the religious, God and infinity have always been imagined through the vertical dimension.

While there was discussion as to whether this was a real physical journey of the body or a dream or a vision, another interpretation was that God himself accompanied 'His servant' on this journey. The event is again mentioned in the Qur'ān when Muḥammad reaches the higher part of heaven, 'then he approached and descended, and was at a distance of two bow lengths or nearer, and he revealed to His Servant what he revealed (Q53:7-10). These verses taken together led to the creation of a vast body of devotional and poetic literature emphasising the Prophet's uniqueness amongst other prophets and most significantly whether he actually saw God. According to Ibn Abbās, Muḥammad did not just see the throne of God in this journey but he saw God himself because he said, 'I saw my Lord.' Others say that he saw God in his dream or that he saw only light. But one *ḥadīth* of which there are several variations states that the prophet's wife Aisha was asked whether he had seen God during the *mi'rāj* to which she replied:

My hair stands on end because of what you have said. Have you no idea of three things – whoever tells them to you is lying. [First,] whoever tells you that Muḥammad saw his Lord, is lying. She then recited, 'Vision comprehends Him not, but He comprehends all vision (Q6:103).³¹

Trying to encapsulate all these opinions, it is said:

On the whole, the scholars' interpretation of the Prophet's vision show that whether it took place in his dream or in a wakeful state, 'with the eyes of the heart' or 'with the eyes of the head,' does not change the fact that he saw Him in the real sense, as the Prophet's dream-vision or heart-vision is by far sharper, more accurate, and more real than the visions of ordinary people.³²

The *mi'rāj* also illustrates a particular distinction between the prophetic and the mystical journey explained so hauntingly in the fifth chapter of the famous Indo Pakistani poet and philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal's seminal work *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, where the Ṣūfī Abdul Quddus sighs longingly for what Muḥammad experienced. Muḥammad's return to earth is a sign of prophetic sobriety and responsibility,

³⁰For a good overall view see Steven J. McMichael, 'The Night Journey (*al-isrā'*) and Ascent (*al-mi'rāj*) of Muhammad in medieval Muslim and Christian perspectives, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 22:3 2011, 293–309.

³¹ Al-Sayyid Muhammad ibn Alawi al-Maliki, *The Prophets in Barzakh, the Hadith of Isra' and Mi'raj, The immense Merits of al-Sham, The Vision of Allah*, transl. Gibril Fouad Haddad, Michigan: As-Sunna Foundation of America, 1999, 144-145.

³²Al-Maliki, *The Prophets*, 140.

an obligation to fulfil God's commands here on earth. This contrasts with the words of those great Ṣūfīs where one detects a restless desire to do away with that which separates humankind from God in this life.

Muhammad of Arabia ascended the highest Heaven and returned. I swear by God that if I had reached that point, I should never have returned.

Basing his desire to be with God on the narrative of Muḥammad's ascension to heaven, this Ṣūfī saint questions the Prophet's return. The mystic longs for that vision which the Prophet has already experienced. The prophetic role is always guided by God towards the community and he has no alternative but to return to earth and his mission amongst his people. That is God's prophetic paradigm. The mystic has no such commitment or sobriety, for his focus and goal is God alone. The Prophet has returned whereas the mystic would find any other experience now meaningless.³³ Either way, after this journey, no one could see their existence in the same way again.

The *mi'rāj* story captured the imagination of writers, poets mystics as well as ordinary Muslims. All kinds of fantastic images as well as poetic and rhetorical devices were used to portray the mystery of the ascension event. The brief allusion to the *mi'rāj* in the Qur'ān was enlarged and embellished in literature as a paradigmatic spiritual experience. As an example of a Ṣūfī poem illustrating the sequence of events in this mystical prophetology, Ann-Marie Schimmel cites 'Attar:

At night came Gabriel, and filled with joy
He called, "wake up, you leader of the world!
Get up, leave this dark place and travel now
To the eternal kingdom of the Lord!
Direct your foot to 'Where there is no place'
And knock there at the sanctuary's door.
The world is all excited for your sake,
The cherubs are tonight your lowly slaves,
And messengers and prophets stand in rows
To see your beauty in this blessed night
The gates of Paradise and skies are open-
To look at you, fills many hearts with joy!

³³Allama Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore: Ashraf Press, 1960, 124.

You ask from Him tonight what you intend
For without doubt you will behold the Lord!³⁴

The stories of angels and prophets have fuelled the imagination of religious devotees and poets, of mystics, of profane and sacred love poetry in the Islamic world throughout the centuries. But they have also allowed western poets to get their own inspiration from an orient so often neglected in western ideals of poetry and the imagination. I conclude with the opening lines of the *Duino Elegies* by the Prague born poet, Rainer Maria Rilke:

Who if I cried out would hear me among the angelic orders? And even if one of them suddenly pressed me to his heart, I'd be consumed in his stronger existence. ³⁵

In her analysis of Rilke's references to the angels of Islam, Karen Campbell writes that the *Duino Elegies* mark a major comeback for Rilke and that 'Along with his Sonnets to Orpheus, also completed in 1922, this late work is widely considered Rilke's masterpiece, if not in fact the supreme accomplishment of twentieth-century German lyric poetry as a whole.' It is worth reading the full circumstances surrounding their inception. Rilke was staying at Duino Castle, the residence of Princess Marie.³⁶ He had received a troubling letter and went out to the cliffs by the sea:

Rilke paced back and forth, deep in thought, since the reply to the letter so concerned him. Then, all at once, in the midst of his brooding, he halted suddenly, for it seemed to him that in the raging of the storm a voice had called to him: "Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic orders?" He took out his notebook, which he always carried with him, and wrote down these words, together with a few lines that formed themselves without his intervention ... Very calmly he climbed back up to his room, set his notebook aside, and replied to the difficult letter. By that evening the entire elegy had been written. ³⁷

³⁴ Annmarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985, 166. Schimmel has a very useful chapter on the ascension story. For a more detailed account of the *mi`rāj*, see Mona Siddiqui, *Hospitality and Islam*, London: Yale University Press, 2015.

³⁵ I have taken this account from Karen J. Campbell's detailed analysis, 'Rilke's Duino Angels and the Angels of Islam,' *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 23, 2003, 191-211.

³⁶ Stephen Spender writes that Rilke 'was fortunate in finding Princesses and Countesses with castles and mansions who gave him hospitality,' in Stephen Spender, 'Rilke and the Angels, Eliot and the Shrines,' *The Sewanee Review*, 61:4, 1953 557-581.

³⁷ Campbell, 'Rilke's Duino,' 192.

The *Elegies* were completed in 10 years in 1922. It is said that Rilke told his Polish translator that the angel in the *Elegies* had nothing to do with Christian heavenly angels. Rather in Rilke's angelology, the angels he is referring were the angelic figures of Islam. Much has been written about Rilke's sympathies to Islam but the *Elegies* speak of the beginnings of Islam as a metaphor for what Rilke experienced himself. For Rilke, angels reconciled the inner and outer worlds of our existence as he writes, 'the angel is the creature in whom the transformation of the visible into the invisible we are performing is already complete.' Spender writes:

There is something terrifying about the concept of the isolated poet, acting as substitute-spiritual-institution, projecting in to the world the idea of the angels, in whom the individual is made impersonal, isolated vision made objective. Rilke himself is terrified.³⁸

Both the poet and the prophet feel the terror of the divine voice. Rilke's angel is not a messenger but a sign, a symbol of words descending into the heart, a breakthrough with the divine. In their own ways, the poet and the prophet are awakened by the angel to their respective religious callings.

³⁸ Spender, 'Rilke and the Angels,' 571.