

THE NIGHT JOURNEY AND ASCENSION OF MUHAMMAD IN *TAFSIR AL-TABARI*¹

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Abstract

This study conducts a literary analysis of the traditions and comments of al-Tabari with regards to Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension is undertaken within the context of al-Tabari's exegesis of Qur'ān, 17:1. The linguistic particularities of the verse reveal notions of divine agency in the Qur'ān of which the Night Journey is one instance; manifesting the hand of God in the life of Muhammad. The hadith traditions therein as presented by al-Tabari are examined both linguistically and thematically. It becomes apparent, in the case of al-Tabari the Night Journey and Ascension of Muhammad marked a key turning point in his status as a Prophet; requiring a fantastical opening of Muhammad's chest. Motifs of angelic surgery and the removal of "black spots" from the heart of Muhammad shed further light upon the dogmatic debates surrounding the question of infallibility (al-'ismah) or immunity from sin as an indicator of Muhammad's Prophethood. Al-Tabari also, presents traditions rich with imaginative apocalyptic and eschatological motifs which infuse the story of Muhammad's heavenly journey with

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extra-historical implications. Al-Tabari concludes his exposition with an insistence on the physicality of Muhammad's ascension, demonstrating the tension between literalism and symbolism in Qur'ānic exegesis and the hadith tradition.

Keywords: *Night Journey, Ascension, Prophet Muhammad and Tafsir al-Tabari.*

This study will attempt to carry out a literary analysis of the exegesis of the first verse of the Night Journey as explained by Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari. Al-Tabari's exegesis is important to Islamic traditions for several reasons. Al-Tabari goes out of his way to draw in the fantastical elements in the available traditions. This was done in order to praise and give dignity to the Prophet, while maintaining his humanity. Al-Tabari chooses an unusually extensive commentary related to the opening of *Surat al-Isra'* because the Ascension was one of the most definitive moments of the legacy of Muhammad's life. The (broad but judicious and even skeptical use of) *hadith* literature is, for al-Tabari, the key to understanding Qur'ānic passages that are in themselves cryptic yet tied to extra-Qur'ānic Islamic concerns, of which the Ascension is perhaps the best example.² Consequently, Tabari's account is formative, not just in establishing a dominant narrative about the Prophet's Ascension, but also in developing a clear doctrine of his prophecy, on its own terms and in comparison to other prophets. Perhaps as a result, al-Tabari's commentary went on to play an important role in religious polemics in the centuries that have followed.

The life of the Prophet Muhammad has been subject to constant analysis and commentary since his passing in 11 A.H./632 C.E.³ From the moment Muhammad died, his relatives and companions were keen on continuing his legacy, albeit in

² For more information on sources and traditions upon which al-Tabari relied see: Herbert Berg, *the development of exegesis in early islam* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), pp.124-129.

³ Martin Lings, *muhamamd: his life based on the earliest sources*, (Rochester: inner Traditions International, 1983), p.340.

various ways. Nevertheless Muhammad had left a significant mark on his fellow believers and tribesmen. Muslim scholars from as early as the second century attempted to present exposition on the life and times of their Prophet, once again although there existed differences in their respective accounts, whether it be the *Sira* of Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Hisham, or the voluminous *hadith* tradition that followed. But one of the most important aspects of the life of Muhammad for scholars of the past and present is his connection to the Qur'ān, for it was Muhammad who was the first human recipient of the revelation in the Islamic tradition.

A method by which early Muslim scholars could comment on the life of the Prophet was by means of Qur'ānic exegesis. By discussing the event of revelation, its context, and the events related to it the scholars were able to create a clear connection between Muhammad and the Qur'ān. By doing so they were able to elevate his status and, at the same time, shed light on the difficulties of the revealed text. The tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis is too vast a topic to permit an introduction here. Nevertheless, the early commentators would set the tone for later exegetes to come, so their position is one of wide influence in Islam and in the academic study of Islam. From amongst these exegetes, arguably none ranks as famous as Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d.310/922).⁴ Al-Tabari was a monumental scholar, who included all that was known to him of the traditions of Prophet when writing his *tafsir*.⁵ The exegesis of al-Tabari is not without faults just as any Qur'ānic commentary is not without faults, but nonetheless the sheer size and vast information contained in the commentary of 30 volumes cannot go unnoticed by any scholar who wishes to trace the development of core concerns in the study of the Qur'ān and Islamic theology.⁶ The first verse of *Surat al-Isra'* discusses this journey, and al-Tabari has written an extensive commentary with regards to it. Although the Night Journey is mentioned in

⁴ David Cook, *studies in muslim apocalyptic*, (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), p.286.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Also see: Herbet Berg, pp. 124-125.

⁶ For further discussion and analysis of al-Tabari's method of *hadith* selection and criticism see: al-Suyuti, *al-durr al-manthur fil tafsir b'il ma'thur* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya 2007).

Surat al-Najm (Q 53:1-18) as well, al-Tabari focused his exegesis of the Prophets ascension in *Surat al-Isra'*.⁷ It will be the aim of this study to conduct a literary analysis of al-Tabari's rendition of the Prophet's Night Journey. The commentary includes several important themes: the initial purification of the Prophet, the ascension itself, and foreshadowing the condition of the Prophets community, and a discussion on the function of the Prophet's eyes and heart. Thus al-Tabari has linked aspects of faith, punishment, eschatology, and mysticism in his commentary by means of *ahadith*. Therefore, the exegesis of the Night Journey was used to present a picture of the Prophet by means of numerous fantastical traditions dealing with several of the above mentioned topics.⁸ The use of vivid imagery and fantastical traditions is the focus of the present study.⁹

Before moving to the exegesis itself, an examination of the semantics of the verse should be carried out. Verse 1 of *Surat al-Isra'* can be translated in the following way: "Glory to Him who made his servant travel by night from the sacred place of worship to the furthest place of worship, whose surroundings we have blessed, to show him some of Our signs He alone is the all Hearing, the all Seeing."¹⁰ The first verb used in the verse is '*asra*

⁷ Al-Tabari does not focus on the night journey and heavenly travel of the Prophet under the rubric of *Surat al-Najm*, rather his main focus is that of the lote tree and whether Muhammad saw his lord or not. Thus the references to the night journey and ascension as discussed in *Surat al-Isra'* are subtle if that and at most can serve as a subtext to the event and thus it will not be the focus of this present study. See: Josef Van Ess, "Vision and Ascension: *Surat al-Najm* and its Relation with Muhammad's *mi 'raj*" *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 1.1 (1999), pp. 47-53, also see: Michael Sells, "Ascension", *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* V.1 (2001), pp. 176-177.

⁸ What is meant here by fantastical is the genre of reports such that the extensive use of imagery leads one to determine its extraordinary nature.

⁹ For more information on the use of fantastical traditions or fictional narration in *hadith* literature see: Sebastian Gunther, "Fictional narration and imagination within an authoritative framework" in *Story-telling in the framework of non-fictional Arabic literature edited by Stefan Leder* (Berlin: Wiesbaden, 1998), pp. 434-463.

¹⁰ M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *the Qur'an: a new translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.175. The Arabic is as follows:

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلًا مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ الْأَقْصَى الَّذِي بَارَكْنَا حَوْلَهُ لِنُرِيَهُ

is of importance for it determines the context in which the rest of the verse can be understood. The verb, *'asra* is a fourth form perfect verb (*'af'ala*) which gives a sense of causation. As a result of this its usage here gives the notion of his night travel being an act of God. This is paramount for the reason that the verse is attempting to absolve Muhammad of a sense of independence from the will of God. It is for this reason that 'he was made to travel by night' and not out of his own desire or whim. Therefore both God and Muhammad were part of this journey according to this verse. To be more precise, the beginning of the *surah* illustrates this point more clearly in so far as the verb *'asra* (he made to travel) and its object being "his servant" denotes to *سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي* (Glorified is he...).¹¹ Muhammad becomes the subject of the intervention of God in history, thus rendering God as an active component when attempting to understand the actions of Muhammad. According to major lexicons such as *Lisan al-Arab*, *Mufaradat fi Gharib al-Qur'an*, and E.W. Lane's Arabic- English Lexicon the definition of *'asra* is to be carried or to transport someone by night.¹² The root of this word and its various forms has been used a total of eight times in the Qur'an.¹³

The term that follows *بِعَيْدِهِ* is *أَسْرَى* the use of this word is also important in understanding the verse. First of all, the preposition *bi* is used which creates a direct connection between the one who was made to travel by night and the servant. By using the *bi* a connection is made between the verb and the object. Therefore, God's servant was made to travel by night (ie. Muhammad). Another interesting point is that the verse uses the term "His servant" instead of using "His messenger" or "His prophet". This could have been done in order to stress Muhammad's piety and that Muhammad is not the agent of the miracle but rather the

مِنْ آيَاتِنَا إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ

¹¹ *Subhana* is a verbal nouns always used in construct (*idafah*) with a nominal word or pronoun denoting God such as glory be to him *subhanahu* or *subhana alladhi*. For more details see: Muhammad Abdel Haleem. *arabic-english dictionary of Qur'anic usage* (Leiden: Brill Publications, 2008), 417.

¹² AbdulManam Omar, *dictionary of the holy Qur'an* (Rheinfelden: Noor-Foundation International, 2005), p.258.

¹³ *Ibid*.

first recipient of its *karama*. Thus, God caused Muhammad to travel and he, Muhammad, did not choose on his own to travel because the servant only does as the master wishes, therefore an appropriate translation conveying a similar meaning would be: “Glorified is he who took his servant...” Another possible reason for using the term ‘his servant’ may be to point out that Muhammad is being mentioned not in his capacity as a Prophet but in his capacity as the servant of God, just as any other servant, since all believers should technically be the servants of God. The usage of servant (‘abd) in relation to Muhammad, denotes the Prophet’s humility and the omnipotence of God in this verse.

Once the Prophet was taken from the sacred mosque (Makkah) to the furthest mosque (Jerusalem), its surrounding area was blessed (الَّذِي بَارَكْنَا حَوْلَهُ) in order to show him some of our signs (لِنُرِيَهُ مِنْ آيَاتِنَا). The use of *li* connects the blessing of the surrounding of Jerusalem, which was done in order that Muhammad be illumined with the signs of God (آيَاتِنَا).¹⁴ It is made clear that the furthest mosque was blessed by God and this was blessing was done in order to illumine for Muhammad the majesty of his Lord by means of his signs, which can also be interpreted as illustrations of his glory.¹⁵ The verse ends, with ‘and Verily he is Seeing and Hearing’. This verse does give the sense that something great is occurring or has occurred as the signs of God are being illumined for Muhammad, hence the use of the proposition, *li*. The Night Journey and Ascension are not only a great moment of revelation for Muhammad, but it marked a watershed moment in his life, for the events to be discussed confirmed for him his Prophethood.

Before al-Tabari narrated the actual ascension he mentioned a few important points. The first of these points being the definition of the geographical limits of *al-Masjid al-Haram* and the disagreements therein.¹⁶ The difficulty that arose amongst

¹⁴ As a result of the use of *li*, *nuriyahu* is read in the *mansub* and not the *marfu*’.

¹⁵ Neal Robinson, *discovering the Qur’ān: a contemporary approach to a veiled text* (Washington: Georgetown University Press,1996), pp. 192.-193. Note: Neal Robinson suggests that since this area was blessed it is most probably The Promised Land (The Temple Mount in Jerusalem).

¹⁶ Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, *jami’ al-bayan fi tafsir al-Qur’ān v.8* (Beirut: Dar

the companions was whether the sacred mosque as rendered in the verse refers only to the *Ka'bah* or to the surrounding area as well.¹⁷ But shortly thereafter, al-Tabari cites a tradition from the Prophet stating that he was sleeping in the house of 'Umm Hani' the daughter of Abu Talib on the night he was made to travel.¹⁸ Al-Tabari quotes a tradition from 'Umm Hani' herself in which she claims the Prophet was in her house sleeping.¹⁹ Therefore, according to al-Tabari the *masra'* (point of departure of the night journey) was from the house of 'Umm Hani'. Although al-Tabari makes no issue of any of this, a few points are worthy of mentioning. Firstly, the fact that Umm Hani' is explicitly mentioned demonstrates al-Tabari's exaltation of her status by transmitting this report in his exegesis. For a woman to be subject to such an honour of having the Prophet sleep in her home and pray with her is noteworthy.²⁰ Although Umm Hani' was a relative of the Prophet, she most probably was not *mahramah* (unmarriageable kin) to him, in the sense that she would have been eligible for marriage with the Prophet since marriage between cousins was permissible.²¹ This then leaves us with

al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya, 1999), p.4. Note: I have also consulted the 1954 edition of the *tafsir* edited by Mustafa Shakir and found no discrepancies between the two editions with regards to the commentary in question.

¹⁷ Uri Rubin, *the eye of the beholder* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995), p.65

¹⁸ al-Tabari, p. 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ It is commonly understood in both Twelver and *Jama'i* Sunni jurisprudence that one is permitted to marry one's cousins, as they are not included in the Qur'anic verse which lists the relatives that are not eligible for marriage with each other, as it would be considered incest. Any relative besides the mentioned ones in the Qur'anic verses could be eligible for marriage. The relatives who are eligible for marriage are considered non-*mahram* and thus are to be treated as strangers if they are of the opposite sex. Keeping the above legal issue in mind, debate remains as to whether the Prophet ever married his cousin, Umm Hani, the daughter of Abu Talib and the sister of the prominent companion, 'Ali b. Abi Talib. Some reports indicate that the Prophet proposed to her in marriage in Makkah but Abu Talib wed her to another man by the name of Hubayra b. Abi Wahhab. After the conquest of Mecca she apparently became a Muslim and as a result her marriage with Hubayra was voided due to him remaining a non-Muslim. The Prophet apparently proposed a second time to Umm Hani (*khatabaha*) but the never marriage never came to fruition

a few questions; was it strange for the Prophet to sleep in the home of a woman whom he could marry, and was it by chance that her home was the point of departure for the Night Journey?²² Al-Tabari does not make an issue of this and consequently he left it ambiguous. Nevertheless, 'Umm Hani' bint Abi Talib became part and parcel of one of the most celebrated events in Muslim history, the Night Journey and Ascension.

Before the Ascension to heaven al-Tabari included numerous traditions which marked the prelude to the Ascension.²³ This is perhaps one of the most unusual sections of the *tafsir*. But prior to this initiation, the Angel Gabriel came to the Prophet to push him along or to urge him. Al-Hassan b. Abi Hassan narrates the following from the Prophet: "Between my sleeping during the migration, Gabriel came to me and he urged me by his foot and I sat up but I did not see anything and thereafter I returned to my bed..."²⁴ This occurred three times, and on the third occasion

or was not consummated. For instance it alleged that she said to the Prophet upon his proposal " I loved you during the days of *jahliyya* (ignorance) now how can I not love you during the period of Islam". Therefore the relationship between the two is dubious according to the sources. See: Muhammad b. Sa'd. *al-tabaqat al-kubra' v.8.* (Beirut; Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1997), 120-121. Also see: Nabil 'Abd al-Qadir al-Zayn. *al-nisa' hawlu al-nabi* ('Amman: Dar Usama, 1998), 50-53. Interestingly, the third century A.H. Twelver Shi'ite tradionist al-Barqi in his biographical dictionary describes Umm Hani as *zawjatu l-nabi* (wife of the Prophet). See: Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Barqi (d.274 A.H.). *rijal al-barqi* (Tehran: The University of Tehran, 1963), 61.

²² The term Night Journey here refers to, *isra'* as in the journey from Makkah to Jerusalem, whereas the ascension refers to Muhammad's journey to the skies (*al-mi'raj*). The night journey can be understood to be linked to the horizontal movement of Muhammad where the ascension can be linked to the vertical movement of Muhammad. Al-Tabari includes both the horizontal and vertical movement under the rubric of *Surat al-Isra'*.

²³ The following two notes are in order: I have used the lower-case term "heavenly" or "heaven" as a symbolic synonym for skies (*al-samawat*), that is to say, to ascend to the skies is to ascend to the heavens figuratively speaking. Thus, I am using the terms as a figure of speech and not in the formal sense of Heaven or Paradise (*al-jannah*). Secondly, the function of time is difficult to grasp in this commentary, but it can be deduced that the events prior to the ascent to the heavens took place in its very initial stage in Makkah and then in Jerusalem just prior to the ascent.

²⁴ al-Tabari, p. 5

the Prophet sat up and Gabriel grabbed him. Thereafter they left together towards the doors of the mosque.²⁵ The tradition goes on to say that then a white creature appeared before Gabriel and Muhammad, and the creature resembled a cross between a donkey and a mule. "He had wings on his two thighs that were urged (propelled) on by his two feet, he placed his hand in an extremity of his limb and he carried me (Muhammad) on him, then he left with me, he did not slip away from me and I did not slip away from him..."²⁶

The above excerpt is very important for several reasons. First of all, the notion of Gabriel coming to the Prophet while he was asleep is clearly reminiscent of the revelation (*al-wahy*) when Gabriel would descend upon the Prophet while he was in a state of slumber or sleep. Consequently, it gives the notion that Muhammad was taken by surprise. For al-Tabari presents the event in such a way that the Prophet was taken aback and abruptly awoken. This is clearly reminiscent of Muhammad's first experience with revelation, "Recite in the name of your Lord..."²⁷ The Prophet was overwhelmed and in a state of hesitation. He had to be commanded three times before he would recite.²⁸ The connection between these two events indicates that according to early Prophetic biographers and al-Tabari that Muhammad was in need of encouragement, thus the repeated use of *فهمني*. This also speaks volumes as to Muhammad's humanity and hesitance in grasping situations of divine intervention in his life. In addition to this Muhammad had to be taken hold of (*فأخذ بعضدي فقمتم معه*). Once again it shows the importance of absence of Muhammad's agency

²⁵ *Ibid.* Note: The mosque referred to is the sacred mosque of Makkah, once again ambiguity prevails as to whether this was after the Prophet's stay in the house of Umm' Hani as the tradition fails to mention anything. Or this entire event may have taken place in the house of Umm' Hani and thereafter the Prophet was grabbed and taken to the door of the sacred mosque.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Lings, p. 43 Note: The initial revelation is very important in understanding how Muhammad dealt with the angelic experience. Some traditional Muslim scholars are hesitant to believe that Muhammad would have feelings of hesitation and insecurity upon his initial interaction with the Angel. Sunnis and Shi'is hold differing views on this matter.

²⁸ Lings, pp.43-44.

in these traditions, in the sense that he was grabbed and made to do and see what he did. Therefore, there is clearly an emphasis on the event not being voluntary but rather compulsory.

Secondly, the mentioned report describes Muhammad's vehicle of travel to Jerusalem in detail. This white mount (دابة بيضاء) is difficult to translate but nevertheless this was some form of an animal sent to the Prophet.²⁹ The animal was described as a cross between a mule and a donkey. This creature, the *Buraq*, is presented almost as some wild beast with wings and strong hind legs.³⁰ The event is of a fantastical genre and presents the event with such imagery, as if Muhammad was flying through the sky at warp speed holding on for dear life to the *Buraq*. This description can also lead us to believe that in the eyes of Tabari and others who repeated these traditions, this was a real miraculous event and very physical.³¹ Furthermore, Tabari does not state that he had any doubt (*shakk*) in this report as he does with reports in his exegesis.

The next subject at hand is the initiation of the Prophet and his preparation for the heavenly ascent. Uri Rubin has pointed out that al-Tabari was among the earliest scholars and exegetes to include the initiation of the Prophet as a prelude to the Ascension.³² He goes further to state that the opening of Muhammad's breast and the subsequent operations performed on him in order to remove a black spot from his heart are never stated in the *musanaf* collections, or the six canonical books of the Sunnis.³³ Nevertheless, al-Tabari opted to include this event in his exegesis and provided a great amount of detail therein. Al-Tabari includes several traditions in his exegesis which attest to this. The difference between some of the traditions is that the Prophet is speaking about himself and in the other traditions the Prophet is being spoken about. Also, the shorter tradition

²⁹ J.R. Porters, "Muhammad's Journey to Heaven", *Fasc. 1* (1974), pp.64-65.

³⁰ *Ibid* pp.64-66. also see al-Tabari, p.5

³¹ The event of the journey from Makkah to Madina when the Prophet was on the *Buraq*.

³² Rubin, pp. 65-67

³³ This dirty spot or black spot was also described as the rancor and disbelief in the heart of the Prophet.

from Malik b. Sa'sa uses the verb فشرح which literally means to open. Whereas in the preceding traditions the verb فرغ is used, which literally means to empty or clean out with regards to his chest (*sadr*ah).³⁴ Also in the first tradition, the prophet speaks about his own chest, and in the following tradition, a companion speaks about the chest of the Prophet. Despite this the subject matter of both traditions is the same. The following is an excerpt from the longer and more detailed tradition on the subject of the Prophet's initiation:

"Shaykh b. Abi Numar who heard Anas say the following in relation to the night of the departure of the Prophet from the mosque of the ka'ba: ".They brought him to the stream of Zamzam, Gabriel then took him under his care from them, he made an incision between his throat and the upper part of his chest until he emptied his chest and inner part of his belly, and he cleansed him with the water of Zamzam until his inside was purified."³⁵ Then he approached with a golden basin in it flowing water filled with faith and wisdom and by it filled his (Muhammad's) belly, chest and glands (with wisdom and faith), then he closed him (he reassembled the Prophet's body)."³⁶

The above tradition has some important implications for the way in which the Prophet was viewed in the classical period in which al-Tabari wrote this exegesis. The idea that Muhammad was not pure enough for the journey or that he was in need of greater purification is of special interest. The Prophet who according to tradition had already been received revelation, and been made a messenger, but despite this he was apparently

³⁴ al-Tabari, pp. 4-5.

³⁵ In the tradition 22014 on p.4 a similar event is given except it is mentioned that the Prophet's heart was taken out and cleaned with *Zamzam*. The implications of this are important because, the noun (*'ism*), *qalb* is different to a degree from *sadr* in the sense that *qalb* literally refers to the heart and in extension to ones state of mind, where it is difficult to stretch the meaning of *sadr* to indicate ones state of mind.

³⁶ al-Tabari, p.5

not pure enough for heavenly travel. This could imply that the Prophet went through successive stages of purification until he was sufficiently, totally, pure. This could also call into question his infallibility or immunity from sin in the sense that, if he was already bestowed with *'isma* then why was he initiated and forced to have his heart removed for cleaning or his chest opened so that it could be purified? This could very well indicate that in al-Tabari's case, by including the aforementioned reports it is implied that the Prophet received revelation even though he was not completely spiritually purified, thus requiring further spiritual purification prior to the Ascension. Also, it is of course worthy of mentioning that the well of *Zamzam* in Makkah is subject to great mystical discourse as it was a well created by God for Hagar, the wife of Abraham so she could quench the thirst of her child, Ishmael.³⁷ Thus, the well of *Zamzam* is viewed as God's divine favour to the family of Abraham and in turn all those who have the opportunity to drink or bathe with it will benefit from its divine origins. Furthermore, in another tradition³⁸, the following is stated: "Gabriel made an incision by his stomach and cleaned it three times and (the angel), Mika'il brought to him (angel Gabriel) three basins of *Zamzam*, and then, expanded his chest (Muhammad's chest) and he extracted what was evil (hidden spite, resentment, or rancor)... and the Prophethood (*al-nabuwwah*) was sealed between his shoulder blades".³⁹ Therefore, not only was Muhammad not pure enough, but he had evil elements inside of him which had to be removed. This variation of the initiatory reports is seldom found in the six canonical books of *hadith*, as well as the *Sirah* of Ibn Ishaq.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the tradition in the *sahih* of Muslim discusses the removal of an evil spot from the Prophet's body, but this event is said to have taken place during his childhood and not as a prelude to the Ascension. As for the stamping or sealing of the Prophethood on Muhammad, it is clearly there to give a sense

³⁷ Lings, p. 2.

³⁸ al-Tabari, p.7, The report is from Abu Hurayra and others, but Tabari had a doubt about this tradition.

³⁹ al-Tabari, pp.7-8.

⁴⁰ Rubin, pp.67-69.

of completeness, that after all the purification and operations, Muhammad was sealed with the Seal of Prophethood. Tabari does not go on to say, why this was stamped between his shoulder blades, but it could have some relation to the famous birthmark the Prophet is said to have had on his back, but this is conjecture.⁴¹⁴²

The physical description of the angelic surgery performed on Muhammad is representative of the need to see and understand abstract acts in tangible form. Thus this tradition could be understood in a symbolic form or in a literalistic form, or perhaps even both. But even so, it speaks to the fantastical nature of Muhammad's experience even before he was ascended to heaven. Thus to insinuate or interpret it in a metaphorical (*majazi*) fashion would amount to *dirayah*, which in this case aims to explain a seemingly 'irrational' tradition due to its supernatural or theologically problematic contents, where on the other hand a literal interpretation would be to rely exclusively on the apparent wording of the *riwayah*.⁴³ J.R. Porter had an interesting analysis of the initiation of the Prophet, which is that this genre of traditions are clearly representative of a belief which postulates that believers constantly go through a process of purification and re-purification of their souls and in this case even the Prophet was not exempt from the life-long process of spiritual refinement and progression.⁴⁴ He goes further to state that angelic operation and dismemberment of the Prophet's body can be compared to aspects of Shaman rituals of spiritual purification.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Rubin, *Ibid*.

⁴² al-Tabari in this case as with others does not provide much comment as to the theological implications of the traditions he transmits. The absence of any objection is perhaps indicative of a tacit approval of the *matn* (textual content).

⁴³ Scholars often refer to the narration or *khbar* being based on the *zahiri* (exoteric) and its interpretation or subsequent explanation as being *diraya* with regards to it being a metaphor or its possessing *batini* (esoteric) meaning.

⁴⁴ See: Anne Marrie Schimmel, *mystical dimensions of islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), pp.3-5.

⁴⁵ Porter, p.73.

Following the Prophet's initiation, he was ascended to the heaven with Gabriel. In this section of the *tafsir*, al-Tabari presents a more or less traditional account with regards to the Ascension through the heavens and Muhammad meeting various Prophets along the way, namely Idris, Harun, Yusuf, Adam, Abraham, Musa, and 'Isa.⁴⁶ All of the Prophets have been mentioned either in passing or directly. Thus after Gabriel closed up the Prophet, the Ascension began.⁴⁷ Let us keep in mind that this occurred after the *Buraq* had taken Muhammad from Makkah to Jerusalem and the Prophet is said to have prayed in front of the Prophets and Messengers in Jerusalem prior to the ascension to heaven.⁴⁸

This section follows a repeated pattern in which Gabriel would knock on the door of heaven and then he would be asked who he was and who he was with. He would then respond, "This is Gabriel", and he said (in response to whom he was with), "[This is] Muhammad."⁴⁹ This occurred at every level of heaven that Muhammad was taken to. At certain levels there is no interaction or discussion, but the report says: "They said to him likewise (the same thing)."⁵⁰ At every level of heaven they (Muhammad and Gabriel) are unknown and unexpected, but they are welcomed.

Once they reached the first level of heaven, Gabriel made an important statement: "The people of heaven do not know except (are not informed) except by what Allah desires with regards to the people of Earth until God informs them of it (the people of Heaven)."⁵¹ This statement contextualizes the apparent lack of awareness of the people of Heaven with respect to their visitors (Gabriel and Muhammad). The statement gives indication that these people had to be formally introduced to Muhammad. The theory of Muhammad's pre-existential being as a luminous entity and confirmation in the world of atoms (*`alim al-mithaq*) was either unknown or not considered relevant by al-Tabari when he

⁴⁶ See al-Tabari, pp. 5-7.

⁴⁷ al-Tabari, p.5

⁴⁸ al-Tabari, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ al-Tabari *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

selected the reports to use in his exegesis.⁵²

One of the most eye-catching sections of this report is the mention of water and its relation to heavenly jewels. Upon reaching the second heaven Muhammad saw two bodies of water, and both of them were flowing, and he asked Gabriel, "What are these two rivers?, The angel Gabriel replies, "This is the Nile and the Euphrates which are two sources". Then he was ascended to the third heaven, where he saw on a river castles made of pearls, crystallites, sapphires and other besides that of which nobody knows except God. Then he went and smelt the soil, and it possessed a strong odour. He said to Gabriel, "What is this, Gabriel responds, "This is al-Kawthar"⁵³ First of all it is quite clear that these traditions have a pre-occupation with water, whether it be the well of *Zamzam*, the Nile, The Euphrates, or the heavenly river *al-Kawthar*. There exists the idea of spiritual purification by means of water from the early Islamic period. Water, especially from a jurisprudential point of view is seen as a purifier, and the Qur'ān attests to this in several verses, one of them being in *Surat al-Ma'ida* verse 6.⁵⁴ The practice of ablution as a ritual to be performed prior to the ritual prayer is set in the above verse. It would be naive to think the preoccupation with water and purity in the Qur'ān and the *Sunna* is not in any related to the way in which water is presented in al-Tabari's exegesis. Water is seen as a sign of God's glory and majesty in the second chapter of the Qur'an:

"People, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, so that you may be mindful [of him] who spread out the earth for you, and built the sky; who sent water down from it

⁵² See: Fredericks Colby, "The Subtleties of ascension: al-Sulami on the Mi'raj of the Prophet Muhammad", *Studia Islamica* (2002), p.174. Note: The theory of Muhammad's pre-existential being is common among many mystical groups and especially popular in Early Imami reports which were written about the same time as al-Tabari's exegesis of the Qur'ān. These reports are also prevalent in Jama'i Sunni sources. It is also probable that these ideas were not in circulation or not accepted as authentic by al-Tabari.

⁵³ al-Tabari, p.5.

⁵⁴ Haleem, p.68.

and with that water producing things for your sustenance(2:21)... “[Prophet] give those who believe and do good the news that they will have Gardens graces with flowing streams. Whenever they are given sustenance from the fruits of these trees Gardens..(2:25)”⁵⁵

These verses and those similar to them, demonstrate the importance water plays in the Islamic tradition, and among the scholars, jurists, and mystics of Islam. Therefore, it is not surprising to see its renewed emphasis here in the heavenly journey. Secondly, the presentation of this material in the mentioned *khobar* lends support to the important role imagery plays in the narration of the *mi'raj*. It also lends support to the *akhbar* belonging at times to what we might call the 'fantastical' genre. By describing rivers full of jewels and castles it further elevated the illumination Muhammad was experiencing, and it leaves a mysterious unknown element by stating that there are other things floating on that river, but only God knows of them (و غير ذلك ما لا يعلمه إلا الله). The *hadith* once again describes God as being an active participant in the journey of Muhammad, the language gives a sense of exclusivity to God as the being the primary mover. The following tradition further cements what has been discussed: “Some of the people of knowledge (scholars) have said...He (Muhammad) saw what God wanted him to see from amongst the wonders of God’s command, his honour, and his grand power.”⁵⁶

Another, famous incident presented in the commentary is the offering of milk and wine to the Prophet. This incident is widely narrated within al-Tabari’s exegesis of this verse, as well as in other early sources such as Sirah of Ibn Ishaq.⁵⁷ The implications of this event are important to how Muhammad was

⁵⁵ Haleem, p.6.

⁵⁶ al-Tabari, p.6.Note: A similar tradition is found on p.15 on the authority of Qutada, but instead of using the term wonders, 'his signs' (*ayatihi*) is used.

Note: A Similar statement follows it in the same report instead of the Prophet seeing, it uses the term *awha*, meaning inspired or revealed.

⁵⁷ Porter, p.65.

viewed in al-Tabari's exegesis. The event goes as follows: Gabriel comes to the Prophet, thereafter; two cups were presented to him, a cup of wine and a cup of milk. The messenger of God took the cup of milk.

Thereafter Gabriel said to him: "You were guided by the *fitra* (primordial instinct). If you had taken the cup of wine, your community would have gone astray."⁵⁸ This incident is clearly influenced both by juridical and theological undertones. The report is attempting to condemn wine drinking by the example of the Prophet, and most importantly having it mentioned in the story of *al-mi'raj* lends it greater significance. Secondly, and also most importantly, it mentions the idea of *fitra*. This comes back to the belief that Muhammad was not the primary agent in this case. The question posed to him by the Angel was rhetorical because the Angel knew the answer already. Stating that Muhammad was guided by his primordial instinct meant he had no choice because his nature predisposed him to choose the cup of milk and not the wine. In addition to this, it would not be in the *muhhadith's* interest to present a wine drinking Prophet who at the same time is granted with the blessing of ascent to the divine. The event does not correspond to logic, if by logic we mean something like the desire to see rational choice behind virtuous action.⁵⁹

I will now present a series of unusual and extraordinary traditions found in al-Tabari's exegesis of the opening of *Surat al-'Isra'*. These traditions contribute significantly to the imagery of Muhammad's divine experience and the fantastical components of this *tafsir*. What is meant here by unusual is that these traditions describe events that are far enough from the mundane

⁵⁸ al-Tabari, p.7

⁵⁹ The controversy over understanding the *hadith* tradition by means of logic and opinion was a contentious one at the time of al-Tabari and the debates would rage on well past his time. The people of *hadith* and the people of opinion would continue to trade accusations, and to an extent they continue to do so today. For further discussion on this issue see: Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi, *Hadith Literature*, (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), and Binyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionism and Rationalism*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

reality of the reader that they seem to invite incredulousness and require special explanations. The alternative, often a last resort, is to strip these unusual events of whatever is literally fantastic and to explain them metaphorically, in order to be able to explain them at all. Many of these traditions have significant eschatological undertones, which not only contribute to the vivid imagery of the *tafsir* but to the broader importance al-Tabari places on narrative foreshadowing.⁶⁰ The first of these fantastical events that I will deal with was narrated by Anas b. Malik, occurs during the flight of Muhammad, Gabriel, and the *Buraq* together:

The Buraq is being urged on (as a rider would while on his horse). Thereafter, the Prophet begins to travel with Buraq until they encounter a woman at a distance on the side of the road...a decrepit woman, but they escaped. The tradition then returns to the same subject Gabriel says to the Prophet: "As for the woman that you saw on the side of the path, the world will only last as long as she does."⁶¹

The above tradition is a paradigm of the fantastical in this exegesis. First of all, the imagery presented involves both the extraordinary (the *Buraq*) and the eschatological (the decrepit woman, or *`ajuz*). The picture of the Prophet riding along with this beast like creature along a path and all of a sudden they come across a decrepit woman on the side of the path. Muhammad initially asked, Gabriel as to who she was, but Gabriel just commanded him to keep traveling.⁶² Thus, al-Tabari has left us without any context for this incident or any explanation. Traditions such as these can be prime material for speculative

⁶⁰ What is meant here by eschatological is those traditions which allude to or speak of the end of time, the day of judgment, and the situation of the community of Muhammad in the hereafter. I use the term "foreshadowing" in *hadith* to be indicative of any tradition which alludes to future events, or the future condition of the Prophets community. I must emphasize that I am using the term in a literary sense and not to indicate any religious truth per say.

⁶¹ al-Tabari, p.7

⁶² *Ibid.*

interpretation of *hadith* literature. In this tradition the term نائية used, its meaning and implication is very important. The term can mean insufficient, raw, or even decrepit. This term was used to describe the old woman ('ajuz) Muhammad and the *Buraq* came across. Further yet for an unknown reason the Prophet then proceeded to escaped from this old woman. More than likely, this decrepit woman represents a tool of misguidance and evil, but the Prophet was not swayed by this. When viewed symbolically, the Prophet is described as the pious man who escaped a seductive (not necessarily in a physical sense) yet decrepit old woman; the Prophet, an individual with a purified heart, is someone who sees the seductions of the *dunya* (worldly life) for what they are: decrepit imitations that ought to inspire disgust, not desire. Furthermore, Gabriel's answer to Muhammad's previous question is even more peculiar. According to Gabriel this woman's life is the measure of the time remaining for the world. The use of a woman as the symbol of the *dunya* is typical of early Muslim literature in the sense that it is clear from the language of the report that this strange woman is representing the symbol of seduction and satanic temptation. To further reiterate this motif, many traditions create a direct correlation between female leadership as one of the causes of the rampant misguidance and woes of the Muslim community after the death of Muhammad and with an added apocalyptic motif, several *hadith* traditions draw a connection between disobedient women as potent sign of the world moral regression and as a prelude to the end of the world.⁶³ Thus, a woman was used to lure the Prophet from his path during the Night Journey. As for whether this event took place in the heavens, between the heavens, or on Earth is unclear. Al-Tabari has left this ambiguous. Clearly this tradition has eschatological undertones from the point of view that, it discusses the existence of the world and its measure of time being the life of an old woman. The report also seems to be warning the community of the Prophet of the dangers of women.

⁶³ See: Khaled Abou El Fadl, *speaking in gods name: islamic law, authority and women* (London: Oneworld, 2001), 209-250. Also see the magisterial study on Muslim apocalyptic traditions and beliefs: Cook, 14-15 who cites the *Kitab al-Fitan* of Ibn Nu'aym.

The tradition is no doubt of a misogynistic genre.⁶⁴

The next tradition is also representative of the fantastical genre found in the exegesis. This event is also reported to have taken place during flight, and once again Gabriel, *Buraq*, and Muhammad were present. The tradition is as follows:

*"...and he traveled and traveled with him Gabriel, and he came across a group of people who farm (plant crops) and harvest in a day (they plant and harvest in one day). And when they harvest it returns just as it was before. Thereafter, The Prophet asked Gabriel, Oh Gabriel what is this? Gabriel said: These are the ones who strive in the way of Allah. Allah multiplies for them the reward seven hundred times."*⁶⁵

The above tradition once again adds to the fantastical aspect of this exegesis. In this case the language is straight forward. But the report has important theological and esoteric undertones to it. The use of analogy in this report is helpful in communicating its point. The analogy of coming across people on a farm, also adds to the imagery and experience of Muhammad. The analogy is attempting to point out that those who strive in the way of God receive a great reward. The most appealing part of this report

⁶⁴ For a further discussion on the connection between misogynistic attitudes, hegemony, and the *hadith* tradition see numerous traditions cited by El Fad describes this genre of tradition as "determinations demeaning to women", which in his view are traditions which run counter to the spirit of gender equality and dignity in the Qur'ān and confirmed Prophetic *sunnah*. One such example found in Ibn Hajar's *Fath al-Bari* alleges that Abu Hurayrah heard the Prophet say the following: "A woman is like a rib. If you try to straighten her, you will break her. If you accept her the way she is, you will enjoy [your life with her], but she will remain crooked" Or in another report Abu Hurayrah is claimed to have heard the Prophet state that the majority of the inhabitants of hell will be women due to the frequency in which they slander, curse, and are ungrateful to the (male) companions (*ashab*). See: Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, *fath al-bari bi sharh sahih al-bukhari* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1993), 1:483, and Abu Zakariya al-Nawawi, *sharh sahih muslim* (Beirut: Dar al-Mar'rifah, 1996), 1/2:253-256 as cited in el-Fadl, 252-253.

⁶⁵ al-Tabari, p.8, also see Muhammad b. Ahmed al-Tha'labi, *al-kashf wal-bayan 'an tafsir al-Qur'ān v.6* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya, 2002), p.57.

is the notion of planting and harvesting in the same day. By mentioning the work and its reward in the same time period could lend us to assume that these *mujahidun* are those who literally fight in the way of God in a war. For how could someone realize the reward of their actions before their death, unless the reward is to be bestowed upon them during their lifetime? The more likely case is that this report is attempting to show the merits of those who took part in battles with Muhammad or those who would engage in *jihad* in the future. For the analogy of planting and reaping rewards within a short period of time or instantly can only come about with death, providing these rewards are not material. The imagery and analogical construction of the report as provided by al-Tabari were used in enhancing the illuminating experience of Muhammad.

The next topic of discussion will be the problematic issue of whether the fantastical experience of Muhammad was physical or not according to al-Tabari. Now of course, the discussion over whether the Night Journey was physical or spiritual or both is not the main topic of this literary analysis, nevertheless, al-Tabari mentions traditions which are of paramount importance with regards to this discussion. I will only mention a few excerpts from this corpus that are vital to the topic at hand.

The first tradition is from a part of a larger report that has already been mentioned, "Anas informed us with regards to the Night Journey of the Messenger of God... The Prophet...his eyes were sleeping and his heart was not sleeping. Furthermore the eyes of the Prophets were sleeping and their hearts were not asleep..."⁶⁶

With respect to al-Tabari's own *sawab* or concluding opinion, he lists two major problems with the view that the '*isra*' was (strictly) by means of the soul of the Prophet. Al-Tabari asserts that had the Night Journey been by the means of his soul (بروحه) alone then this would not serve as a proof for his Prophethood (*al-nabuwwah*) and the message (*al-risalah*), in turn, rendering it to be of lesser dogmatic importance.

⁶⁶ al-Tabari, p. 5

The second deficiency in an exclusively spiritual journey lies in the assertion that is that if the 'isra' was by means of the Prophet's soul, then the *Buraq* becomes superfluous. The reason for this is because the *Buraq* is not needed to transport a soul, but to transport a body. So, even in the case of the *Buraq*, al-Tabari sees no exegetical room for an esoteric or symbolic interpretation for the reason that in his view, the traditions describing the journey as physical nature originate from the Prophet himself and there is no reason to believe that the *Buraq* was anything but how Muhammad described it, that is in terms of explicit physicality. Put differently, in al-Tabari's view to interpret the *Buraq* traditions as anything but physical would constitute a form of illicit arbitrary opinion (*ra'yi*) and thus intentionally misconstrue the otherwise linguistically unambiguous words of Muhammad. In light of these arguments, al-Tabari condemns those who hold the view that the Prophet's Ascension and Night Journey did not occur by means of his body (جسده).⁶⁷ Therefore, it becomes clear at the closing of his exegesis that any tradition that implies directly or indirectly that the Night Journey and Ascension of Muhammad was exclusively spiritual is not acceptable. Al-Tabari clearly favoured the use of traditions for the purposes of his commentary, rather than commentary by means of opinion. His interest was not what may be logical or not, but if the traditions speaking of Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension were authentic then they must be accepted without question. From such a perspective, fantastical elements in the reports did not argue against their validity or usefulness in interpretation.

It can be concluded that al-Tabari selected the traditions that he did for the purpose of presenting his version of the Ascension. Al-Tabari clearly chose traditions of a fantastical genre while keeping in mind the debate as to whether the Prophet experienced all these events with his own two eyes. For that reason, this exegesis clearly attempts to exalt the life of Muhammad by presenting his Ascension with such grandeur and imagery. While exalting the life of Muhammad, al-Tabari

⁶⁷ al-Tabari, p.16

also made sure to emphasize his humanity by presenting the traditions of initiation as a prelude to the Ascension.

By presenting the exegesis the way al-Tabari did, he attempted to illustrate this magnificent event of revelation. Thus, the author used this event to put forward eschatological, legal, and theological aspects deemed important to him. Most importantly as has been stated throughout this analysis from the Qur'ānic verse itself to the exegesis, there is a constant pre-occupation with the idea that Muhammad was but an agent in the process of Ascension, for he was the servant of God and thus he saw what God wished him to see and nothing else. This lack of free-will whether it be by God's direct intervention in Muhammad's movement or by means of the primordial instinct are meant to communicate a specific message. Furthermore, the importance of water as source of purification and mercy is presented throughout the *tafsir*. This clearly conveyed the position water holds in the Islamic tradition. Also, by means of the event of the Ascension al-Tabari conveyed fantastical traditions coupled with eschatological undertones and foreshadowing. The use of such traditions contributed to the cryptic nature of the Ascension. The inclusion of traditions with regards to the state of the heart, and eyes is important to recognize for the very fact that al-Tabari felt this was an important issue of the 4th century. The debate over the precise function of the eyes and heart of the Prophet during his Ascension was paramount in understanding the divine experience he underwent. Some Muslim scholars have mentioned that the Ascension is a symbolic narrative describing the various plains of existence. Also, it is of paramount importance to recognize the lack of chronology in the exegesis, or lack of emphasis on it. A lack of chronology avoids implicating al-Tabari in the complicated negotiation of (extra-Qur'ānic) space and time concepts as they apply to revelation. The fact that this area was fraught with interpretive difficulty and speculative danger must have been apparent to the al-Tabari and even some of his reporters, given the variety of ambiguous and contradictory opinions al-Tabari relates. Perhaps counter intuitively to some readers, the fantastical *Buraq* story, rather than requiring an anti-*jismani* metaphorical interpretation of

the *'isra'*, actually presented compelling evidence to al-Tabari of the need for the body's inclusion in his account. The event of the Ascension marked a watershed in the life of Muhammad; rhetorically and dogmatically, al-Tabari presented the event by means of fantastical traditions for this very reason.