MUḤAMMAD'S NIGHT JOURNEY TO HEAVEN: THE INITIATIC PATH TO A TEMPORAL AND SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP[1]

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Abstract: The journey into Heaven that Muḥammad made during the during the night of the 27-th day of Rajab month, 620 created for the Islamic culture, the possibility of using ancient Semitic symbols and Arabic symbols in order to legitimate the place that the charismatic leader has inside the Islamic community and to emphasize the authentic place that the Islamic community has near the other two monotheistic communities. As Geo Widengree concluded in his two studies The ascension of the Apostle and the Havenly Book and Muhammad, the Apostle of God and his Ascension, Muḥammad's Night Journey reflects a ritual of sovereignty which is specific to the Ancient Near East, in regards with the ascension of the king as a central event concerning his coronation. Muḥammad's Night Journey reflects also a ritual during which Muhammad sees God, and he is sacred as a prophet, being in direct contact with God and with the other monotheistic prophets (as the literature of the IX century in the Islamic milieu tries to describe). This initiatic path doesn't have as result the transformation of Muḥammad into a character with divine powers; it has as result the unification into Muḥammad's person of two different powers, the temporal and the spiritual one, and the confirmation of Muḥammad as a spiritual and temporal leader for a new community.

Keywords: initiation, sacred, kingship, ladder, Islamic community.

In many religious traditions, ascension into heavens is a specific way to become initiated into a new, sacred status. It is a journey which implies a dichotomy of plans: firstly the profane-sacred plan, secondly the telluric-celestial plan, both of them being transformed by the possibility of communication through transcendence. This possibility waives the dichotomy during the ascension and keeps an opening status between the elements of each dichotomy, after the ending of the ascension: the sacred will be opened to the profane, the celestial will be opened to the telluric. Muḥammad Night's Journey is an event which can be read in this key. However Muḥammad's Night Journey cannot be limited at this point of view. The event is more complex, as, we are dealing with an initiatic path to a temporal and a spiritual leadership.

In order to receive the message of his mission, Muḥammad will start a night journey described by the Qurʾan[2] and by Ibn Ishaq[3]. Using the first sura from the chapter 17th of the Quran, a devotional tradition will be developed starting with the late 7th century around the prophet's night journey, creating a story with a mythical foundation.

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[2] "Exalted is He who took His Servant by night from al-Masjid al-Haram to al-Masjid al- Aqsa, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing."(Koran: 17:1).
[3] Guillaume,A. (2004) *The Life of Muhammad, a translation of Ishaq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 103-109.

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The journey takes place in a critical period from Muḥammad's life, during the night of the 27-th day of Rajab month, 620. After his wife Khadīja and his oncle Abū Tālib, two of his most power supportters, died, the presure from the part of the Meccan's tribes, especialy Qurays reached it's up level. In this context, during this night, the Prophet was sleeping in the Umm Hānī's house, situated near the sanctuary of Kaʾba. In that moment, Muḥammad is awaken by the angel Gabriel who is taken him to a fabulous animal, *al Burāq*. This is the time when the nigh journey begins.

The night journey starts as a horizontal journey relating Mecca and Jerusalem and continues with a vertical journey, relating Jerusalem and the seventh skies. Concerning the first part of the journey, the terrestrial one, Muḥammad is acting as a mythical hero, connecting two sacred centers through Abraham, the common ancestor[4]. The presence of Abraham in Mecca is related with Kaaba, the sacred sanctuary built by Abraham through the divine commandment received by the agency of the divine revelation. In this way, Mecca becomes a center of spirituality equal to Jerusalem. By means of the night journey, Muhammad is preparing a change of paradigm concerning the Holy City. The sacred geography of Jerusalem will be transferred to the city of Mecca, which will become an *Axis Mundi*, a place where men and the divine can meet.

By connecting the two points, The Prophet is making a voyage into *illud tempus*, an anamnetic voyage during which he is recovering the abrahamic tradition, the pure tradition before Judaism, Christianity or politeism.

On the second part of the journey, Muḥammad appears as a prophet who is receiving his prophetic mission by ascending to heaven.

Even the motive of ascension is common to monotheistic traditions and seems to be inspired by the Hebrew and Christian religions or by the Iranian religious tradition as Zoroastrianism (for example Geo Widengren thinks that the islamic ascension follows the pattern of the Arda Viraf's ascension into heaven[5] relating it to the Iranian image of the ascension), Muhammad's ascension is an original tradition related with the arab imaginary as Culianu also states[6] as the circumstances, the developement and the objectives of the story are different.[7]

The journey to the seventh skies is offering the opportunity to communicate directly with the monotheistic prophets before Islam. We are assisting to a prophetic pyramid; a prophetic hierarchy related with the importance that each prophet has in the Islamic history. That is why, Adam is situated in the first sky, Jesus Christ in the second one, Joseph in the third one, Enoch in the fourth, Aaron in the fifth, Moses in the sixth, Abraham, who is sitting on a throne at the

[4] Both, the Quran and the Islamic tradition, show the presence of Abraham at Mecca. As a divine command, Abraham starts a journey to Mecca in order to built Kaʾba. Following the ida of Ali bin Abi Talib, Abraham received divine aid to descover the place where the sanctuary has to be built through a fantastic being, *Sakina* (Reuven Firestone (1992) "Abraham's Journey to Mecca in Islamic exegesis: A Form-Critical Study of a Tradition" [In] *Studia Islamica*, No.76, 12). The name of the fantastic being is hiding the divine presence as *sh-k-n* means „to hide the divine presence" (Reuven Firestone, *art.cit.*, n. 22). for Mujahid this journey to Mecca was made under the protection of ange Gabriel, on the back of a horse named *al Buraq*. In Mecca, the place where the sanctuary ha s to be built is reviled by a djinn. Once the sanctuary is bulit, Abraham regain Syria; Agar and Ismael remain in Mecca (Reuven Firestone, *art.cit*, 15-16). The version of Ibn Abbas follow the biblic Genesis in the purpose to relate Abraham to the ismael descendance in Mecca (Reuven Firestone, *art.cit*, 21)
The three versions have a commun idea: the built of the sanctuary in Mecca is related with the name of Abraham and is reveild by a divine command. Taking into consideration this situation, Mecca become a center of spirituality equal to Jerusalem.

[5] Geo Widengree (1955) *Muhammad, The Apostle of God, and His Ascension*, Uppsala, 204-216.

[6] Ioan Petru Culianu (1993) *Psychanodia I. A Survey of the Evidence Concerning the Ascension of the Soul and its Relevance*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 57.

[7] Claude-Claire Kappler (1987) "L'ascension de l'apôtre Paul et l'ascension de Muḥammad : démons et merveilles de l'au-delà" [In] *Démons et merveilles au Moyen Âge. Actes du Ive Colloque International*, Centre d'Études Médiévales, Nice : Université de Nice, 287.

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entrance into paradise, in the seventh. This is a fine example of reordering in an Islamic way, the prophetic pantheon common to the monotheistic religions. To complete the omissions related with the Ibn Ishaq's description, late traditions refers to a short dialog that Muḥammad had with each prophet. Muḥammad is greeted with "Be blest true brother and true prophet".[8] During the voyage to Jerusalem, Muḥammad is leading other prophets in prayer as *imām*. He is also the prophet who ascends to the highest level.[9]

Taking into consideration this aspects, we can see that Muḥammad's journey is presented as a ladder, relating the sky and the earth, each step helping him to understand God's will and his own universal mission between mean. The leader is the symbol revealing the initiation into the prophetic mission.[10] Muhammad becomes initiated into the secrets of life and death. The celestial ladder is under the angels observation and it is a symbol of death as only the souls of death humans can use it. The ladder is under Allāh's power as one of the names that Allāh is using in his quality of sovereign-judge is *dhū'l-ma'ārij* „the master of the ladder"(Quran LXX: 3-4). This ladder can be found in Jerusalem, which is designed with this occasion *Bayt al-Muqaddas* „temple, sanctuary, Holy House, Sacred Tent"[11] and has a beginning the stone that Jacob used as a pillow during the night when he had the vision of the ladder.[12]

Traditions state that Muḥammad was taken into the presence of God, from whom he receives the secrets of the otherworld. In order to receive them, Muḥammad will be aware, step by step, by passing from a sky to another, of the meaning of the world, of the unity and the multiplicity inside the creation, of the true of the revelation. On the last station, Muḥammad will see clear and will understand God's will and his own universal mission between mean. He will be designed as the first of the prophets, being the only prophet who saw God, will be close to God, and will be also sacred as a temporal leader for a new *umma.*

J. R. Porter relates Muḥammad's ascension and the shamanist phenomenon. In his vision, this type of connection can explain, in a holistic way, the implications of this type of journey inside Islam. The author is trying to relate the ecstatic experience that Muḥammad is living with ecstatic experience of a shaman. The two images are not to be identified; it offers an explanation of the ascension to heaven as essential part of the prophetic vocation, vocation which seems to follow the plan of a shamanic initiation "transformed by the Muhammad's own experience and his personal genius."[13] In regards with this subject, we have to assert an important difference between the two types of journey. If the shamanic experience takes place spiritually, only the spirit having the capacity to sustain the ascension into heaven, in regards with Muḥammad's ascension Islamic tradition confess that it was a corporal journey. Al- Ṭabarī offers three

[8] Al Ghaiți (1962), *Story on the Night Journey and the Ascension*, translated by A. Jeffery, New York : A reader on Islam, 621-639.
[9] Frederick S. Colby (2002) "The Subtleties of the Ascension: al-Sulamī on the Mi'rāj of the Prophet Muhammad" [In] *Studia Islamica,* no. 94, 172.
[10] Angelo M. Piemontese (1987) "Le voyage de Mahomet au Paradis et en Enfer: une version persane du *mi'raj*" [In] Claude Kappler, *Apocalypses et voyages dans l'au-dela,* Paris : Les éditions du Cerf, 298.
[11] *Ibidem,* 297.
[12] In first century the apocryphal writing known under the name of *Jacob Ladder* we can find the description of the event (James L. Kugel (1994) *In Potiphar's House. The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 117-118) presenting the stone as the beginning of the ladder. The mythical implications of the stone are huge. This stone is considered as being in the same time the place from where God created the earth and where he left the print of his foot, the place where the Ascension of Jesus took place, event during which he left on the stone the print of his foot, the stone which sustain the Holy of Holies from the Temple, the place from where Muhammad started his ascension, leaving the print of his foot (Gordon Darnell Newby (1989) *The Making of the Last Prophet. A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 30, n. 89).
[13] J. R Porter (1974) "Muhammad's Journey to Heaven" [In] *Numen*, Vol. 21, Fasc. 1, 80.

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arguments to sustain this assertion. The first argumet is that the Prophet was found in an intermadiary stage, wakefully, when the journey takes place. The second argument which is the conclusion of the first one is that he is conscient on this event in every moment of the journey. The third argument, as an extenision of the first two, is that the corporal journey is a sign (*āya)*, an incontestable proof of his divine mission. For this three arguments Ṭabarī's is using as a base Koran XVII: 1 were we can find the mention that God allows to his servant to make the journey and not to the spirit of his sevant.[14] Even this oppinion is accepted by the majority of the scholars dealing with the problem of the Prophet's ascension, there are also different oppinions which are stating that the ascension was rather spiritual then corporal.[15] The conclusion is that, corporal or spiritual, Muḥammad's Night Journey reflects a ritual during which Muhammad sees God, and he is sacred as a prophet.

Ṭabarī's explanation prevous seen is considered as a part of the traditions without a istorical background, reather devotional than historical, his arguments can be used in order to create the prophet's image as a temporal and spiritual leader. By using the classical myth of the ascension, Islam will lay the foundation of his universalism, the first experiment of this universal vision being the comunity created at Medina

We find in this type of investigation a real fact that allows us to relate this episode to a general characteristic of the oriental world, referring to the investiture with a type of authority following initiatic rituals. Muḥammad's night journey can be is a part of a sovereignty ritual specific to the Ancient Near East concerning the king's ascension as a central event of his coronation[16], ritual which was maintained and transferred with this mythical heritage to the divine messenger, the chosen one, in conclusion, to the being who is overcoming the human condition, whoever, without being transformed into a divine character, a character with divine powers. In this context we have to keep in mind the difference that Eliade is making in regards with two types of overcoming the human condition. The first type is referring to the contact with the spiritual realities; contact which assures the participation to the condition of the spirits. The second one is referring to the transfiguration of the human condition into a being of divine order.[17] In the case of the Prophet's night journey, overcoming the human condition has as result the unification into Muḥammad's person of two different powers, the temporal and the spiritual one, and the confirmation of Muḥammad as a spiritual and temporal leader.

The fabulous animal which is used in order to make the journey from Mecca to Jerusalem is also a part of the Semitic symbol of kingship. The description made by Anas b. Māik, one of the prophet's companions, is showing that we are dealing with a white animal situated between donkey and mule.[18] Red in a Semitic key, this image could refer to the triumphal entrance of

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[14] Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad B. Jarīr al- Ṭabarī (1989) *Jāmiʾal-bayān ʾan ta' wīl āy al- Qur' ān (The Commentary on the Qur' ān),* translated by J. Cooper, vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 230.

[15] Helmut Gatje (1976) *The Qur'an and its Exegesis,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 74-77.

[16] Geo Widengree (1950) T*he ascension of the Apostle and the Havenly Book,* Uppsala, 81 cf. Geo Widengree, *The Apostle of God...*, 95.

[17] Mircea Eliade (1998) *Mituri, vise şi mistere*, traducere de Maria Ivănescu şi Cezar Ivănescu, Bucureşti: Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 109 cf. Mircea Eliade (1956) "Symbolisme du „Vol magique„" [In] *Numen,* vol. 3, Fasc 1, 3.

[18] Muslim (1978), *Ṣaḥiḥ*, I (*Kitāb al-imān*), LXXV, 309, rendered into English by Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, Vol. 1, (*Kitab Bhavan)*, New Delhi, 101.
The name of the fantastic beast seem to be related with *barq* (lightning) an alusion to his speed. In the Ibn Abbas' version this beast is described as having a human head and a hors body (Ibn Abbass (1995), *Al Isra' wa al Miʾraj (Le voyage et l'ascension nocturnes du prophète)* traduit de l'Arabe par Ali Druart, Beyrouth-Liban : Les éditions Al-Bouraq, 12). A hadīth mentioned by Mālik ibn Saʾsaʾah states that only one leg of this creature could cover a great distance. Ibn Saʾad using Wāqidī's information,

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Solomon in Jerusalem to become king and to the triumphal entrance of Jesus Christ in the same city, described in the New Testament. The beast is introduced into a ritual of prophetic initiation because on his back traveled Adam and Abraham[19] and on the Resurrection Day Muhammad will appear on his back. In this way *Al Burāq* is becoming the symbol of the relation with the ancient prophets[20], Muhammad using the same practices and customs. In this way Muhammad is placed in the holy tradition of the divine revelation.

Taking into consideration these elements, we can notice four implications of Muhammad's ascension and for his nocturnal journey. These implications are influencing the way in which the Prophet will relate himself to his umma, his community, and his community to the prophetic experience. The first implication is the spiritual implication resumed in the ecstatic experience and in the vision of God. The second implication, the religious one, emphasizes the importance of Jerusalem as the third city of Islam. The third implication, the theological one, asserts the unity of Revelation inside the prophetic pluralism and the priority of the prophet into what we can call a prophetic pyramid; in this context, the ascension is a guaranty of the authenticity of the divine promises.[21] The fourth implication, the ritualistic one, refers to the institutionalizing of the five daily prayers implication. Analyzing these four images, we can aver that both the ascension and the journey to Jerusalem are producing mutations in the perception of the prophetic phenomenon and the understating of sacred. For example, the night journey to Jerusalem and then to the seventh sky, is inserting Jerusalem into a sacred and political Islamic heritage. That is why, Jerusalem appears as the first direction for the daily prayer and, when Omar conquers the city in 638, he is building a cultic house on the same place from where the Islamic tradition is telling that Muhammad started his ascension, the Hebrew tradition mentions that Isaac's sacrifice took place, and Solomon and Herod's temples were built.

In conclusion, Muhammad's night journey to heaven is exploring the mythical capacity of the Arab imaginary to develop a story which is a metaphor of the metahistory. Following the path of the ancient ascensions, Muhammad will find at the end of his journey the authenticity and the authority of his mission, and he will be sacred in the same time as a spiritual and a temporal leader. Each dialogue that he has with the ancient prophets is in the same time recognition of his prophetic status and recognition of the place that the Islamic umma has among the monotheistic community. The final purpose of the journey is in the same time the legitimacy of Muhammad as a new leader and the legitimacy of his community as being the greatest and the more perfect community of mankind, the reflection of his leader's initiatic path into temporal and spiritual.

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describe this creature as having two wings (ʾAbd-Allāh Hajjāj (1995) *L'isrā et le mʾirāj. Le voyage et l'ascension nocturnes du prophète,* Paris : ed. Essalam, 33).

[19] Ibn Abbass, *op.cit.*, 13.

[20] Brooke Olson Vuckovic (2005) *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns. The Legacy of the Mi'raj in the Formation of Islam,* New York & London: Routledge, 49.

[21] Angelo M. Piemontese, *art.cit.*, 294.

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