

***The Night Journey and Ascension in Islam: The Reception of Religious Narrative in Sunnī, Shīʿī and Western Culture***, by R. P. Buckley (Library of Middle East History, 36) (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013), ix + 360 pp., ISBN: 978-1-84885-986-9, £59.50 (hb)

The book under review is a study of the discourses on the *isrāʾ* and the *miʿrāj*, Muḥammad's Night Journey to Jerusalem and his Ascension to heaven, in Sunnī and Shīʿī Islam as well as in the (non-Muslim) West. It does not deal with the historical development of the *isrāʾ* and *miʿrāj* narratives in the formative period of Islam, nor with the literary dimensions of the narratives of the nocturnal journeys. The author's goal is to draw up an inventory of the intellectual activity inspired by or centering on these narratives. The study covers early classical as well as modern Islam, and everything in between: present-day internet sources of sectarian groups such as the "Qurʾān-Only" Movement are quoted next to medieval Imāmī sources and early Khārijite and Muʿtazilite opinions – surely one of the strengths of the book. The reader should not, however, expect to find a comprehensive "history of ideas" (p. viii). Although the author systematically sketches the existence of ideas in pre-modern times (but not the formative period of Islam), there is limited attention for the dynamics of the transmission of ideas and the intellectual contexts in which they originated and blossomed. All in all, the book contributes more to our knowledge of Muslim thought in the medieval and especially the modern period than the centuries before.

The book is arranged according to the variegated questions and problems brought forth by the Night Journey and Ascension; within each subdivision, the material is presented mostly chronologically. In chapter one, the reader is introduced to the supposed references to the Journeys in the Qurʾān (Q 17:1 and Q 53:1-18) and the narratives as found in the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī, and the *Tafsīr* of ʿAlī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī, all of which are quoted in translation, and which obviously constitute only a small selection of the *isrāʾ* and *miʿrāj* narratives in Islamic literature. Chapter two is dedicated to the problems that these narratives entail in the eyes of Muslims with respect to the veracity of the described events. These include the scarcity of Qurʾānic proof, especially for the Ascension, and

the fact that the ḥadīth traditions could be apocryphal. Further problems ensue from the often contradictory nature of the accounts, the miraculousness of the events (which conflicts with reason), and the anthropomorphic elements and tangible, extra-Qurʾānic descriptions of such details as al-Burāq, the celestial mount.

The majority of Muslims, however, accept the veracity of the accounts, and the next three chapters discuss the problems that arise from this position, and the solutions that Muslim thinkers formulated to relieve some of the tension. Chapter three deals with the majority view that Muḥammad physically undertook (or underwent) the nocturnal journeys, and that the details as preserved in the trustworthy accounts should be taken literally. Chapter four zooms in on those *ʿulamāʾ* who contended that the *isrāʾ* and the *miʿrāj* are visions, dreams, or spiritual journeys, which the Prophet undertook with his heart, but not with his body. Chapter five addresses a third attitude towards these miraculous stories: that the *isrāʾ* and *miʿrāj* cannot be understood by humankind because they pertain to a transcendent, superhuman reality so different of the worldly reality, that reason falls short of interpreting it. While chapters two to five incorporate both Sunnī and Shīʿī thinkers, from past and present, chapter six is devoted exclusively to the Imāmī reception of the narratives, because Imāmism, unlike Sunnism, has been largely neglected in the West, and because the narratives “reflect the Imāmī worldview more comprehensively than they do that of Sunnī Muslims” (p. 139).

The author’s wide scope, which reaches beyond orthodox Sunnism to include also Shīʿism and Sufī thought, is an asset of this study. Chapters one through six are a commendable read for everyone interested not only in the *isrāʾ* and *miʿrāj* as such, but more generally in the intellectual traditions on the nature of prophethood in Islam, the role and limitations of reason in Islam, the authenticity of the ḥadīth, and anthropomorphism. The book constitutes a refreshing and remarkably accessible (i.e., non-technical) read on these issues, suitable for many audiences.

The seventh and last chapter, good for one third of the body of the book, is about Western perspectives on the Night Journey and the Ascension from the Middle Ages to modernity. It is a well-prepared case study of Christian anti-Islamic polemics, which often targeted the *isrāʾ* and *miʿrāj* specifically. These polemics were more often than not inspired by the West’s fear of the Islamic East, which was blessed

with rather more military (and other) success. They were an expression of the Christian understanding of “true faith” and were intended to discredit Muḥammad as a Prophet and Islam as a religion. As such, the chapter is about the Christian West – Muslim reactions to these polemics are left unconsidered – and its relation to the previous chapters, which deal with the Islamic East, is unclear. Since the book lacks both an introduction and a general conclusion, the reader looks in vain for an elucidation of the rationale for combining in one monograph these two research paths, which, ultimately, only have in common that they deal with the *isrāʾ* and *miʿrāj*. In the preface, it says that the Christian commentaries on the Night Journey form “an essential element within the Western response to Islam and its Prophet” – a valid point, but one that is far removed from the subject of the rest of the book.

The book contains a convenient general index, which includes also authors and titles, but the sixty pages of endnotes have not been indexed. The text suffers from some inaccuracies, mostly concerning the transcription of Arabic: on p. 2, read *nuriyahū* for *nuriyahu*; on p. 4 and p. 274 note 143, read *āyāt* and *al-āya* for *ayāt* and *al-ayāb*; on p. 46 and p. 273 n. 139, read *ṭabaqāt* for *ṭabāqāt* and *tabāqāt*; on p. 88, read *raʿābu* instead of *rābu*; on p. 89, read *ḍarūriyyāt* for *ḍurūriyyāt*; on p. 112, read *zindīq* for *zindiḡ*; on p. 164, p. 300 n. 84, and p. 333, read *al-aʿimma* for *al-āʿimma*; on p. 168, in the second line of the *adbān*, read *ashbadu an* for *ashbadu anna*; on p. 266 note 12 and p. 339, read *sabʿ* for *sabaʿ*; on p. 266 n. 15, p. 276 n. 24, and p. 324, read *Rifʿat* instead of *Rafʿat*; on p. 270 n. 74, read *baʿīd<sup>m</sup>* for *baʿīd<sup>n</sup>*; on p. 293 n. 23, read *kbulāṣat* for *kbulaṣat*. The publisher of Nūrsī’s *al-Miʿrāj al-nabawī* is “Sözler” instead of “Sozlar” (p. 338). The name of al-Baghawī is Ibn Masʿūd instead of al-Masʿūd, and he died in 516, not 561 (p. 87). The title of Ibn al-Qayyim’s work is conventionally read as *Zād al-maʿād fī hady kbayr al-ʿibād* instead of *budā kbayr al-ʿubbād* (p. 273 n. 124, p. 282 n. 24, and p. 333). In the tradition from al-Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ* translated on p. 5, it is probably Qatāda and possibly Anas who interposes a question to al-Jārūd, but definitely not Mālik ibn Ṣaʿṣaʿa, whom al-Jārūd never met.

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