

THE ILKHANID BOOK
OF ASCENSION: A
PERSIAN-SUNNI
DEVOTIONAL TALE

Christiane Gruber

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The sixth wisdom is that the Prophet would see those servants and he would give news to the community. He would know that he sees in this community the quantity and greatness of the angels, and he would know that God, Who has such servants, would not neglect those servants who are as great as the angels.

The seventh wisdom is that the Prophet would see those great servants engaged in all those devotions so that when he orders the community to perform devotional acts, he would know that he is not ordering an imposition, but an act of kindness.

The eighth wisdom is that the heart of anyone who is praised by many is not saddened by a single critic. Anyone who is praised by the great is not distressed by the curse of the malicious. God most High knew that the disbelievers would curse the Prophet. So, on the night of the ascension, He showed Muhammad angels and the souls of all prophets, all of whom were praising him and offering him prayers, so that he would know that everyone—his friends from God's throne to the earth—praises him. If a few unbelievers curse him, **(f. 63r)** then what is the harm and what is the danger?

[The Author's Remarks]

It is reported in a Tradition that paradise is promised to the believers. The price of paradise is proclaiming faith, performing obeisance, and fighting with disbelievers and enemies. As God said, *'Verily, God has purchased of the believers their souls and their goods; for theirs (in return) is the garden (of paradise).'*¹⁵⁸ They narrate and claim that it was Muṣṭafā who had heard the description of paradise reported in the Qur'an, although he had not seen it. When those longing for paradise wanted a description from the voice of the Prophet, he spoke by report and spoke about what he had not seen.

God took him to see it, so that what he says about the conditions (*ṣifāt*) of paradise, he says both from what he has heard and what he has seen. So God took Muṣṭafā and he saw paradise, and God asked him, 'How did you find it?' Muhammad answered, 'How can I describe its beauty and excellence?' Again, a command from God most High arrived, 'O Muhammad, that which you saw, you saw exoterically (*bāṭin*); esoteric things (*ḥabīr*) remain which you have not seen. It is God Who is Hidden in all things. *I counted for My servants what no eye had seen, nor ear heard (f. 63v) and had not been imagined by the heart of any human being.*¹⁵⁹ I created such things for good servants that no eye has ever seen and no human heart has ever felt.'

Another Tradition reasons that one day Muṣṭafā came out and saw that the pavilion of Bū Jahl was arrayed. A high door was set up, a curtain of wool was hanging before it, and people of high rank were standing there. The leaders of the Quraysh, the disbelievers, and the idol-worshippers were wearing long robes and silk turbans wrapped [around their heads] as they were sitting on valuable horses. Servants and slaves were running back and forth between them. When they saw Muṣṭafā, they said, 'If what Muhammad is saying were true, then he would have many pavilions, gardens, beautiful robes, helpers, servants, and slaves.'

The Prophet was sitting dejected. Gabriel arrived and brought the verse, *'And do not strain your eyes in longing for the things We have given to pairs of them.'*¹⁶⁰ Gabriel said, 'O Muhammad, do not look at that pavilion and garden. Rise and come to see your own

- 101 Such disagreements include whether the Prophet's ascent happened only in a dream or with the soul (*nūh*), and al-Rāzī concludes that it must have occurred with the spirit (*nafīs*) and the body (*tan*) jointly (Abū'l-Futūḥ al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr-i Rawḥ al-Jinān wa Ruḥ al-Janān*, volume 7, 167).
- 102 Abū'l-Futūḥ al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr-i Rawḥ al-Jinān wa Ruḥ al-Janān*, volume 7, 170; and SK Ayasofya 3441, folios 14r–15v. These exempla originate with a hadith transmitted by Abū Hurayra, which is also included in the Persian version of al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*.
- 103 Abū'l-Futūḥ al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr-i Rawḥ al-Jinān wa Ruḥ al-Janān*, volume 7, 171–172; and SK Ayasofya 3441, folios 17r–18r.
- 104 Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: the Qur'an Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī* (London: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2007), xix.
- 105 For a discussion of this tripartite system, see Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics*, 19.
- 106 al-Maybudī, *Kashf al-Asrār wa 'Uddat al-Abrār*, volume 5, 482–483; and, for comparison, see SK Ayasofya 3441, folios 3v–5r.
- 107 al-Maybudī, *Kashf al-Asrār wa 'Uddat al-Abrār*, volume 5, 482–483.
- 108 al-Maybudī, *Kashf al-Asrār wa 'Uddat al-Abrār*, volume 5, 484. On the splitting of Muhammad's chest in the Ilkhanid *Mi'rājnāma*, see SK Ayasofya 3441, folios 6r–8v.
- 109 al-Maybudī, *Kashf al-Asrār wa 'Uddat al-Abrār*, volume 5, 500; and SK Ayasofya 3441, folio 60v.
- 110 See Walid Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur'an Commentary of al-Ṭabā'ibī (d. 427/1035)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 161–166.
- 111 An *a posteriori* note on SK Ayasofya 3441, folio 76r, is signed by a certain Khwāja Ishāq b. Najm al-Dīn al-Hāfiẓ and Yazdānbakhsh b. Khwāja Ishāq, most probably Khwāja Ishāq's son. These two names suggest that the manuscript was a possession passed down from one generation to the next. The name 'Yazdānbakhsh' also points to a family of Persian speakers.
- 112 I wish to thank my colleagues at Tehran University for discussing the colophon with me during a lecture delivered at Miras-e Maktoob in Tehran in December 2006, as well as Maria Subtelny for sharing her opinion about other possible readings of the colophon's date, which include 785, 805, and 985 AH.
- 113 The manuscript's script is close to the Persian *naskh* used in the Great Mongol *Shāhnāma* (Book of Kings) produced ca. 1330–60. For a discussion of Persian *naskh* during the Ilkhanid period, see Oleg Grabar and Sheila Blair, *Epic Images and Contemporary History: the Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shabnama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5–8; and Abolala Soudavar, *Art of the Persian Court: Selections from the Art and History Trust Collection* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 37. Although this orthographic practice continues into the Timurid period, it is applied to the newly emerging 'pendant' *nasta'liq* script rather than *naskh*.
- 114 On the use of these letter variants in other contemporaneous Persian texts, see Mahīndukht Šiddiqiyan, *Viẓḥāqīya-yi Nahvi-i Zabān-i Fārsī dar Nagr-i Qarn-i Panjum va Shishum-i Hijri / Syntactic Characteristics of Persian Prose Texts in the 12th and 13th Centuries AD* (Tehran: Iranian Academy of Persian Language and Literature, 1383/2004–5), 115–131.
- 115 Louis Gardet, 'Djamā'a,' in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. B. Lewis et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1991), volume 2, 411–412.
- 116 Other perhaps less noticeable details in the text—such as the stress on Abū Bakr's staunch belief in the Prophet's ascension, along with the omission of 'Alī beyond the seventh heaven and other Shi'ī figures in paradise—serve to underscore the Sunni community's righteousness. For a discussion of competing Sunni and Shi'ī details similar to these, see Colby, 'The Role of Early Imāmī Shī'ī narratives in the Construction of and Contestation over the Story of Muḥammad's Ascension.'
- 117 SK Ayasofya 3441, folio 4v. The term *manqif* is related to *ḥāl* in that it describes the Sufi's gradated path, or series of stations and states, toward intimate knowledge of God.
- 118 SK Ayasofya 3441, folio 60v; and see Q 102:5. The term *yaqīn* also appears singly in a