

Sources of Islamic Mysticism

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THE QUR'AN

INTRODUCTION

From the perspective of Sufism, it makes little sense to single out a few passages from the Qur'an as mystical; Sufis view their thought and way of life as Qur'anic in every sense. Examples below will show that even those Qur'anic passages that might seem resistant to mystical interpretation can be the occasion for powerful Sufi exegesis. Any passage in the Qur'an could be—and was—integrated into the Sufi view of life—or, conversely, the Sufi view of life was grounded in the Qur'an as a whole. Indeed, Sufi literature is woven around a core of Qur'anic language. As is common in many varieties of Islamic literature, in Sufi writings the Qur'an does not need to be formally “cited”—a simple Qur'anic phrase would be enough to generate a successful allusion to the verse or passage from which the phrase was taken.¹

On the other hand, there have been a number of passages of the Qur'an to which the early Sufis came back to time and time again. Below are English renditions of those passages.² Explanatory comments introduce various kinds of Qur'anic discourse, with the Qur'anic renditions following. The commentary at this point is meant to introduce the reader to these passages in their Qur'anic context, to allow Qur'anic passages to be appreciated in their own right. The specific role these passages play in Sufism will be highlighted throughout the later chapters of this volume.

The passages below focus on the following key moments: creation, prophetic inspiration, and the day of judgment or moment of truth. Each of

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these moments offers particularly close contact between the human and the divine. Each becomes a paradigm for Sufi thought and praxis. A number of other Qur'anic passages are particularly important to the Sufi tradition, from the passages on the central revelation of unity (tawḥīd) to the famous "Light Verse."³

One of the more beloved passages of the Qur'an is the first section of the Sura of the Compassionate, which repeatedly links human understanding to divine munificence in bestowing existence and well-being. This passage is one of the primary sources of Sufi thought. A series of rhetorical questions is addressed in the dual grammatical form to two unnamed listeners: "Which of his signs will you deny?" This grammatical dual form (ān) combines with other words that end naturally with the same sound to form an intense end-verse assonance throughout the sura. To give some indication of this, I have begun the sura by highlighting the first two end-words, al-Raḥmān (the Compassionate) and Qur'an, using English qualitative accent marks to show how an English version of the assonance might sound.

From the Sura of the Compassionate (al-Raḥmān): 55:1–34

The Raḥmān
Who taught the Qur'an
Who created humankind
And taught them the declaration
The sun and the moon in their reckoning
The star and the trees bowed low in prayer
Heaven he raised up and the balance set down
Do not oppress in the balance
Mark the proper weight and do not cheat in the balance
And the earth he placed down for humankind
In it are fruit and date palms with unfolding calyxes
And the kernel in the blade of grain and the fragrant herb
Which of the signs of your lord will the two of you deny?⁴

He created the human being from wet clay like that of a potter
And created the jinn from smokeless fire
Which of the signs of your lord will the two of you deny?⁵

Lord of the Easts and lord of the Wests
Which of the signs of your lord will the two of you deny?

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He brought the two seas together until they met
Between them a barrier never to be breached
Which of the signs of your lord will the two of you deny?

From it are taken pearl and coral
Which of the signs of your lord will the two of you deny?

His are ships set up upon the seas like landmarks
Which of the signs of your lord will the two of you deny?

Everything upon it passes away
Only the face of your lord endures, majestic and giving.
Which of the signs of your lord will the two of you deny?

Those in the heavens and the earth beseech him
In every day he is in a [different] condition
Which of the signs of your lord will the two of you deny?

We shall make time for you, O you two weighty ones!⁶
Which of the signs of your lord will the two of you deny?

O tribes of jinn and tribes of humankind,
if you are able to break through the regions of the
heavens and earth
then break through!
you will not break through without sovereign power!
Which of the signs of your lord will the two of you deny?

THE CREATION OF ADAM AND ADAM'S STATUS AS REGENT

In Islam, Adam, despite his weakness and fall, is considered a prophet (nabī). The Qur'anic accounts of the creation of Adam center on several key elements: Adam's being created as a khalīfa (caliph or regent) of Allah on earth; the molding of Adam out of clay and the divine's breathing into Adam of the spirit (rūḥ); the objection of the angels to the creation of a creature that would "corrupt the earth and spill blood."

In the following passage, Allah announces his intention to create Adam as a regent (khalīfa) on the earth. When the angels question the creation of a being who will "corrupt the earth and spill blood," the divine voice asks if

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they know “the names.” They reply that they know only what they have been told. After Adam teaches them the names, they are commanded to prostrate themselves, that is, assume the position of Islamic ritual prayer (*sajada*) before Adam. One of the heavenly company, Iblis, refuses and as a result is ultimately exiled from the divine presence and becomes known as Satan, *ash-shayṭān*.⁷

The exact nature of the special knowledge of Adam, the knowledge of the names, is a matter of rich speculation within Qur’anic commentary. Do the names represent the names of the angels? Or do they represent the names of all creatures?⁸ In Sufism, the names are often thought to represent the divine names, the various manifestations of the divine in the forms of predications used in the Qur’an (the all-hearing, the all-seeing, the compassionate, etc.). However the names might be interpreted, Adam is seen as containing, despite his human mortality and weakness, a special kind of knowledge or wisdom, which for some Sufis will become the archetype of mystical knowledge (*ma’rifa*). The angels’ objections to the creation of Adam and Iblis’s refusal to bow before Adam showed not only his pride but also his ignorance of Adam’s true qualities. Some other Sufis will offer a different evaluation of Adam and Iblis. They will view Iblis’s refusal to bow before Adam, at least in part, as an affirmation of pure monotheism, the refusal to bow to anything other than the one God, even at the risk of exile, torment, and separation from the divine beloved.

In the two passages on Adam’s creation that follow in this section, Iblis’s refusal to bow before Adam is woven into a direct reference to Adam’s special place in the cosmos because of his having been molded from clay by the “two hands” of God, and because of his having received the spirit (*rūḥ*) breathed into him by the deity. There are sudden shifts of grammatical person, typical of Qur’anic discourse, so that the deity is referred to at times in the third person singular, at times in the first person singular, and at times in the first person plural, “we.” In addition, the passages start out with a relative clause, “when,” which is never completed, another particularity of Qur’anic discourse.

The Creation and Regency of Adam, Sura 2:30–34:

When your lord said to the angels:
I am going to place a regent (*khalīfa*) on the earth,
and they said: Will you place one there
who will corrupt it and spill blood,
while we recite your praises and exalt you?

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He said: I know what you do not know.

Then he taught Adam all the names
and showed everything to the angels, saying:
tell me their names, if you are sincere.

They said: praise be to you,
we know only what you have taught us,
you are the all-knowing, the most wise.

He said: O Adam, tell them their names,
and when he had told them the names,
he said: did I not tell you that I know
what is hidden in the heavens and earth,
and know what you disclose and know what you hide?

Then we told the angels
to bow before Adam
and they did, except for Iblis,
who was scornful and acted proud,
and became an unbeliever.⁹

The Creation of Adam and the Pride of Iblis, Sura 38:71–75:

When your lord said to the angels,
I am going to create a person (*bashar*) from clay.

When I have shaped it
and breathed into it of my spirit,
fall bowing before it.

All the angels fell bowing together
Except Iblis who acted proud
and became an unbeliever.

He said: O Iblis
what has prevented you from bowing
before what I created with my two hands?
Are you too proud or are you too lofty?¹⁰

MARYAM, 'ISA (JESUS), AND THE SPIRIT (19:16–27)

Jesus, along with Muhammad, is singled out in the Qur'an for his special relationship to the spirit (rūḥ). Like Adam, he was brought to life directly through "inspiring," that is, the deity's breathing into him of the spirit. He can perform miracles, such as bringing a bird back to life, and is thereby

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associated also with the life-force itself. The passage selected below shows how Jesus' very conception was through the spirit. It also gives one of the more dramatic and beloved discussions of a female figure in the Qur'an, a figure who was to become a paradigm for female Sufi saints such as Rabi'a. In the passage, the spirit comes to Maryam in the form of a bashar (human being). Though the term bashar is not gender-specific, Maryam acts as if it were a male she was confronting.

And recall in the book Maryam,
when she withdrew from her people to a place facing the East

And veiled herself from them. We sent her our spirit which
took on the likeness of a fully formed human being.

She said: I take refuge in the Compassionate from you. Would
that your intentions were pure!

He said: I am only a messenger from your lord, sent to bestow
upon you a son without blemish.

She said: How can I have a son when no person has touched
me and I have not been unchaste?

He said: So it is! Your lord said: for me it is easy! We will
make it a sign for humankind and a mercy from us—and the
matter was decreed.

She conceived him and withdrew to a distant place.

The birth pangs drove her to the trunk of a date palm. She
said: I wish I were dead and forgotten!

A voice called to her from below: Don't grieve. Your lord has
placed a stream below you.

Sway the tree trunk toward you and ripe dates will shower
down around.

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Eat and drink and be comforted. If you meet any human, say:
I have consecrated a fast to the compassionate and cannot
speak today to any human being.

She carried him forth to her people. They said: Maryam, you have
brought forth a wonder!

THE PROPHETHOOD OF MUHAMMAD

Another key passage in the Qur'an for Sufism is the first section of the Sura of the Star (53:1–18), in which Muhammad's prophetic visions are depicted. The sura begins with the divine voice swearing by the setting star that "your companion" has not gone astray. The reference to "your companion" is clearly a reference to Muhammad as the receiver of the vision in question. This vision is also called an inspiration (waḥy) and is explicitly said not to be rooted in desire (hawā), which the Qur'an associates with the inspiration of the poets. The object of vision is never actually described. Instead, the text evokes the process of vision by tracing a movement along the highest horizon and then a descent and drawing near of what is seen at the distance of "two bows' lengths." The passage ends with an affirmation of the validity of the vision (the heart of the prophet "did not lie in what he saw"). This affirmation becomes a proof text for Sufism's claim that the locus of spiritual vision and mystical knowledge is the heart.

Sūrat an-Najm (The Sura of the Star) 53:1–12

By the star when it sets
Your companion has not gone astray nor is he deluded
He does not speak out of desire
It is nothing less than an inspiration inspired
Taught to him by one of great power
And strength that stretched out over
While on the highest horizon
Then drew near and descended
At a distance of two bows' lengths or nearer
He revealed in his servant what he revealed
The heart did not lie in what it saw
Will you then dispute with him on his vision?

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In a second passage that follows directly on the first, the divine voice, speaking of Muhammad again in the third person, describes another vision ("He saw it again a second time"). Here, "the lote tree of the furthest limit" (sidrat al-muntahā) is placed in or near the enigmatic "garden of sanctuary" (jannat al-ma'wā). We are told almost nothing about the tree, except that it was "enveloped" or "shrouded." Of key importance is the "gaze" of the Prophet, which neither "turns aside" (zāghā) nor "overreaches" (ṭaghā). This one verse was to become the paradigm for Sufi understanding of the mystical gaze and the proper state of the Sufi in contemplation.

When the Qur'an states "He saw it again a second time," the antecedent of the pronoun (hu, it/him) is unstated, and thus the referent of the "it" is not determinable from the passage. The identity of the referent becomes a matter of controversy within the tradition, with the debate centering on whether the deity can be seen in this world. Those for whom the vision of the divine can occur only in the afterlife tend to interpret the it/he as referring to the messenger-angel Gabriel. This key passage and the debate over vision of the deity in this life can always be heard beneath the highly complex Sufi discourse on the nature of Sufi witnessing (mushāhada) and vision (ru'ya).¹¹

Sūrat an-Najm, 53:13–18

He saw it descending another time
At the lote tree of the furthest limit
Therein was the garden of sanctuary
When there enveloped the tree what enveloped it
His gaze did not turn aside nor did it overreach
He had seen the signs of his lord, great signs.

The passages on Muhammad's vision were collated by early Muslims with the Qur'anic verse (17:1) recalling the Prophet's night journey (isrā') from the sacred place of prayer (al-masjid al-ḥarām) to the furthest place of prayer (al-masjid al-aqṣā). The verse begins with a direct discourse in which the deity speaks of itself as the one who took his servant (Muhammad) on the night journey. Then the Qur'anic voice speaks of the divine in the first person plural ("we have blessed") and Muhammad in the third person singular ("in order to show him our signs"). At the end of the verse, however, it is the divine that is referred to in the third-person plural (he is the All-Hearing [as-samī'], the All-Perceiving [al-baṣīr]).

Although this rapid switch in voice can be confusing for the reader

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encountering the Qur'an for the first time, one soon becomes habituated to the way in which these person-changes occur. As mentioned above, some of the surprise and initial ambiguity can be cleared up by capitalizing pronouns referential of the divine, but such a procedure ultimately obscures the voice-and-person interplay that is at the heart of the Qur'an's sense of intimacy.

Glory to the one who took his servant on a night journey from the sacred place of prayer to the furthest place of prayer upon which we have sent down our blessing, that we might show him some of our signs. He is the all-hearing, the all-seeing.

This cryptic Qur'anic verse was elaborated on in the sayings (the hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad. According to these sayings, Muhammad was taken on a night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem on a divinely sent creature called Buraq, and from Jerusalem made his Mi'raj (ascent) in the company of Gabriel, through the seven heavens (and in some accounts down through the seven layers of hell). Through the association of the night journey verse with the vision passages, accounts of the Mi'raj will often locate the lote tree of the furthest boundary or the garden of sanctuary, either explicitly or through allusion, within the itinerary of the heavenly journey.¹²

Also associated with Muhammad's prophecy is the short, exquisite sūrat al-qadr (sura of destiny or power). In highly lyrical form, the night of the Prophet's revelation is evoked, with the spirit (rūḥ) coming down during that night or upon that night. Constructed around this sura is the beautiful ritual of the night of qadr, one of the last odd-numbered nights of the holy month of Ramadan. The festival of the night of qadr is often the time for a child's first attempt at fasting during Ramadan. It is also the occasion of a vigil during which the individual, family, or community will stay up throughout the night in order to be close to the revelation of the destiny for the following year. The night of qadr comes at the end of a month of celebration and fasting, during which the normal rhythms of day and night, eating and sleeping, are transformed. The observance of the night of qadr can involve a full evening and night of prayers and meditation. This night might be considered one of the more mystical moments of Islamic life, even among those who do not consider themselves Sufis. Its celebrants consider it a moment when the divine and the human are particularly close to one another, when the relationship between the two is particularly intimate.

Surat al-Qadr also contains within it an acute version of the gender dynamic found throughout the Qur'an, but most often lost in translation. In this sura, the phrase "night of fate" is grammatically feminine, and the re-

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sultant pronouns and feminine gendered verbal inflections are patterned throughout the sura in a delicate balance with masculine grammatical constructions. There is an undertone of implicit personification of the night as a woman, but that personification is never complete. Because the personification is not complete, translators do not feel justified in using the English feminine pronouns, but when the neuter is used, the gender balance—one of the most delicate aspects of both Qur'anic and Sufi discourse—is lost. Below are two translations, one that uses the standard “it” to translate the pronouns, and one that uses the masculine and feminine pronouns in order to show the gender dynamic. The sura is built around an end-verse assonance ending in r; in the first translation below, the original Arabic terms qadr and amr indicate this assonance and preserve the crucial ambiguities of the two key words. Qadr can mean either destiny or power, and its precise sense in the sura seems to lie in between these two English choices. Amr can mean “command” or it can be used in a much more general way to indicate any matter, situation, or state of affairs. In the second translation, English terms have been chosen in order to give a fluent reading in English.

The Sura of Destiny (al-Qadr, Sura 97)

The Sura of Qadr

VERSION 1, UNGENDERED:

1. We sent it down on the night of *qadr*
2. And what could let you know what the night of *qadr* is
3. The night of *qadr* is better than a thousand months
4. The angels and the spirit come down on it by leave of their lord from every *amr*
5. Peace it is until the rise of dawn

VERSION 2, GENDERED:

1. We sent him down on the night of destiny
2. And what could let you know what the night of destiny is
3. The night of destiny is better than a thousand months

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4. The angels and the spirit come down within her by leave of their lord from every command
5. Peace she is until the rise of dawn

MOSES AND JOSEPH

The story of Moses is scattered throughout forty-four passages of the Qur'an, in typically nonnarrative fashion. However, certain short pericopes concerning Moses have become central to the Sufi tradition. In the first example here, Moses becomes the disciple of an unnamed teacher who engages in a series of acts that baffle Moses. In later tradition, this teacher is known as Khidr or Khadir. Khidr becomes a key figure for Sufis, particularly when their activities might seem baffling from a more conventional point of view. Just as Khidr's actions were baffling even to so great a prophet as Moses, so the Sufi's actions might well seem, from the outside, puzzling or even outrageous. Khidr also becomes the teacher (shaykh) par excellence for any Sufi not attached to a particular teacher at the time.

The story begins with Moses seeking the "confluence of the two seas." There is a mysterious episode in which Moses and his squire (fatā) have forgotten a fish they were planning to eat. The fish has made its way back to the sea, and they retrace their steps to find it. This episode has been interpreted by some as a reference to the waters of immortality, the fish coming alive again in them and escaping to the sea.¹³ At any rate, when they retrace their steps, they come across a mysterious stranger that the divine voice (speaking through the first person plural) describes as "our servant." This servant has been singled out for a "special knowledge," or "knowledge of [the deity's] core being," (ilm ladunnī). Moses joins up with the mysterious teacher, who agrees to let Moses accompany him as long as he does not ask about his actions. He then proceeds to engage in three outrageous acts. When Moses asks him about each act in turn, the stranger finally leaves the prophet Moses behind. Before leaving him, however, he gives Moses the ta'wīl or inner interpretation of his actions. Like the theologians (mutakallimūn) and the Shi'ites, many Sufis practiced an inner interpretation that would explain texts and events beyond their apparent, plain-sense meaning. Khidr becomes a touchstone for this kind of interpretation.

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Moses (Musa) and Khidr 18:60–82

Then Musa said to his squire: I will not quit until I reach the confluence of the two seas, or else I will march on continually.

And when they reached the meeting of the seas, they found that they forgot to take their fish, which made its way to the sea through a hidden channel.

When they had proceeded further, he said to his squire: Bring us breakfast. What we have found in this journey of ours is exhaustion.

He replied: Did you notice that when we took refuge in the rock, I forgot the fish? It could only have been Satan that made me forget to remember it. In a marvelous fashion, it has made its way back to the sea.

He said: That is what we have been seeking! So they retraced their own tracks.

There they found one of our servants, to whom we had granted compassion and whom we had taught the special knowledge.

Musa said to him: May I follow you in order to learn the integrity of action you have been taught?

He replied: You will not be able to keep patience with me.

How can you be patient in what your experience has not encompassed?

He said: You will find me patient, God willing. I will not cross your command.

He replied: If you follow me, you must not ask me about anything until I mention the matter myself.

They set out. When they had boarded a ship, he gouged a hole in it. Musa said: You've gouged a hole in order to drown the passengers. You've committed a terrible crime!

He said: Did I not say you would not be able to keep patience with me?

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Musa answered: Do not hold me to account for my forgetfulness and do not be harsh with me.

They set out again until they met a young boy. He killed him. Musa said: You've killed a person who was innocent of any killing. You've committed an atrocity!

He said: Did I not say you would not be able to be patient with me?

[Musa] said: If I ask you about anything else, cut me off from your company. You will be excused on my part.

They set out until they came to a town and asked its people for food, but they refused them hospitality. They came upon a wall on the point of collapsing. He repaired it. Musa said: If you had wanted, you could have taken payment.

He said: This is the parting of our ways. Now I'll give you the inner interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of what you couldn't bear with patience. As for the ship, it belonged to the poor who worked the sea. I wanted to cripple it, because just behind them was a king who was seizing by force every ship.

As for the boy, his parents were believers (*muslim*). I had reason to fear that he would oppress them with abuse and disbelief.

We wanted their lord to substitute for him one who was more pure of heart and compassionate.

And as for the wall—there were a pair of orphans in town who had a treasure under it. Their father had been an upright man and your lord wished that they should retrieve the treasure upon reaching maturity, as a mercy from your lord. I did not act by my own command. This is the inner interpretation of what you could not bear with patience.

The second passage is the brief depiction of Moses' vision (or rather near vision) of the deity on Mount Sinai:

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Moses on Mount Sinai 7:142–143

7:142 We designated for Musa thirty nights and we completed them with ten more; the appointed time of his lord was thus complete at forty nights. Musa said to his brother Harun: “Govern in my place among my people and act in the best interest; do not follow the way of those who would cause corruption.”

7:143 When Moses arrived at our appointed time and his lord spoke to him, he said: “Lord, show me that I might gaze upon you.” He said: “You will not see me. Look instead at the mountain. If it stays in place, you will see me.” But when its lord manifested itself to the mountain, he caused it to shatter and Moses was struck down unconscious. When he awoke, he said: “Praise be to you! I have turned back to you in repentance and I am the first of the believers.”

In the third passage, the divine voice pronounces: “Indeed I, I am your lord.” Later exegetes interpreted this phrase in a manner similar to mystical interpretations of the biblical “I am that I am” (ehyeh asher ehyeh), that is, as a divine name that turns back on itself, affirming that its essence is its existence, that it transcends any quiddity, definition, or name in the referential sense:

Moses and the Fire: Sura 20:9–15

Has the account of Moses reached you? How he saw a fire and said to his people: “Stay behind, I make out a fire. Perhaps I can return from it with an ember or find at the fire some guidance. When he approached it, a voice called to him: “O Musa! Indeed I, I am your lord. Take off your sandals. You are in the sanctified valley of Ṭuwā. I am the one who selected you, so listen to what is revealed! I, I am Allah, there is no god but I. Worship me and perform the prayer in remembrance of me. The hour is coming. I almost hide it completely that each person might be requited for her labor.”¹⁴

JOSEPH AS MASTER OF TA’WĪL

Another exemplar of the ability to see into the interior or hidden meanings of things is the Qur’anic prophet Joseph, whose mastery of the art of ta’wīl led his brothers to throw him into a well. In the following passage, Joseph has a vision of the stars, sun, and moon bowing down to him in prayer, a

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vision his father Ya'qūb (Jacob) attributes to his knowledge of inner interpretation. The passage ends with Joseph, the interpreter of signs, becoming a sign for others who seek meaning. Verses 1–3, with their evocations of the mysterious letters alif, lām, ra', introduce the crucial topic of signs:

Alif Lam Ra: These are signs (or verses, *āyāt*) of the book that makes clear.

We sent down an Arabic Qur'an, that you might perhaps be heedful.

We recounted to you the best of stories, in our inspiring in you the Qur'an, even if before that you were heedless.

When Joseph said to his father: O Father, I saw eleven stars and the sun and moon, I saw them bowing to me in prayer!

He said: Do not tell your vision to your brothers or they will contrive a plot against you; Satan to humankind is an enemy most clear.

In this way your lord chooses to teach the interpretation of events. He completes his bestowal upon you, and upon the family of Ya'qub, as he completed it upon your ancestors in earlier times, upon Ibrahim and Ishaq.

APOCALYPSE AND MYSTICISM

Among the passages from the Qur'an that have been most admired—by Muslims and Western scholars alike—are the short, hymnic suras that evoke the yawm ad-dīn (the day of judgment, moment of truth). In addition to the often noted beauty and power of the imagery, these suras contain the kind of gender dynamic noted above in connection with sūrat al-qadr. From assonance, phonological parallelism, and play on grammatical gender, sound figures and gender figures are created.

These hymnic suras are quite different from other passages in the Qur'an (usually associated with the later Meccan and Medinan periods) in which the sense of reward and punishment, enticement and threat, is more prominent. In these short passages, the time of this radical "tearing of the veil" in which each person will confront his or her true reality and final destiny is left unspecified. In each case, there is a cosmic inversion. What seems secure and enduring (the earth, the mountains, the heavens, the seas, the grave) crumbles, melts, or is torn away, and what seems intangible (a

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mote's weight of kindness, a mote's weight of meanness) is revealed as ontologically absolute.

From the beginning of Sufi literature, there was a growing tendency to bring the mystical encounter close to, even parallel to, the eschatological encounter—without ever collapsing the two. The reality revealed in the tearing of the veil lies from one point of view in the future, in the “after,” but in much of Sufism it also resides within or behind the present moment as an “eternal now.”

From the Sura of the Tearing (Sūrat al-Infiṭār 82:1–6)

When the sky is torn
When the stars are scattered
When the seas boil over
When the tombs burst open
Then a person will know what she has given and what she has held
back
O humankind, what has deluded you from your generous lord.

Sūrat al-qāri'a (the sura of the calamity, striking, or smiting) is composed within a pyramid structure. The sura begins in a hymnic mode, with repetition of words and of similar sound units. In the center it stretches out into longer verses and more elaborate images, with striking similes for the ontological inversion that occurs on the final day (a day on which humankind will be like scattered moths). The sura then evokes the scales of justice in which human deeds are weighed. The ending of the sura returns to the hymnic mode and introduces a strange term: hāwiya, a term that can mean abyss or a woman bereft of her child. The term is transformed into a sound and gender figure through its placement at the culmination of a series of feminine constructions that are metrically, syntactically, and phonologically stressed.¹⁵

The Sura of the Smiting (Sūrat al-Qāri'a)

The *qāri'a*
What is the *qāri'a*
What can let you know what the *qāri'a* is
A day humankind are like scattered moths
And mountains are like wool dyed and carded
Whoever's scales weigh heavy

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His is a life that is pleasing
Whoever's scales weigh light
His mother is *hāwiya*
What can let you know what she is
Raging fire.

In the famous Sura of the Quaking (al-zalzala or al-zilzāl), as opposed to the cosmic apocalypse where the sky is ripped apart, there is what might be called a chthonic apocalypse, with the earth opening up to yield her secrets. The bearing forth of these secrets is conveyed through a birth metaphor, with the earth (al-arḍ) in the feminine gender and governing a series of feminine grammatical constructions.

The Sura of the Quaking (Sūrat al-Zalzala)

When the earth is shaken, quaking
And she yields up her burdens
And someone says "What is with her"
At that time she will tell her news
[How] her lord inspired [in] her
At that time people will straggle forth
 in scattered groups to see their deeds
Whoever does a mote's weight good will see it
Whoever does a mote's weight wrong will see it.

TAWḤĪD

All of the themes discussed in connection with the three archetypal moments are integrated throughout the Qur'an with the affirmation of unity; the ground of Qur'anic revelation is the affirmation of divine unity. The Sufis engaged in a sophisticated meditation on the various meanings of such unity, using a variety of terms for unity: aḥadiyya, waḥdaniyya, waḥadiyya, all based on the Arabic root for "one": a(w)/ḥ/d. A related key term is tawḥīd, which refers to the activity of affirming divine unity.¹⁶ The most famous Qur'anic passage of tawḥīd is among the short suras of the Qur'an. In this passage, Allah is affirmed as one, as not begetting, and as not begotten, and as ṣamad, an enigmatic term in classical Arabic, with connotations of perdurance and indestructibility.¹⁷

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Sura 112: Sincerity (Sūrat al-Ikhlās or Tawḥīd)

Say he is Allahu *aḥad* (one)
Allahu the *ṣamad*
Not begetting, not begotten,
And having for an equal *aḥad* (no one)

Another Qur'anic phrase asserting that there is no God but God/Allah is so central to Qur'anic discourse that it has a name of its own, the tahlīl. To note the centrality of the phrase within Islam, it is sufficient to trace its complex embedding within the crucial ritual elements of Islam as a whole and Sufism in particular. For example, the tahlīl makes up the first section of the shahāda, the Islamic profession of faith: "There is no god but God and Muhammad is his Messenger." In turn, the shahāda makes up the central section of the call to prayer (idh'ān) that is chanted five times per day from the minarets around the world and that resonates across the cities, towns, and villages and through the lives of their Muslim inhabitants. The effectiveness of the tahlīl within the call-to-prayer chant is partially bound up with the rhythm and assonance of the phrase, a rhythm and assonance that capture in particularly condensed form the distinctive rhythmic and assonantal character of Qur'anic language:

	lā	ilāha	illa	llāh
(there is)	no	god	but	God

It is not surprising then that the tahlīl becomes the primary Sufi dhikr, a phrase repeated continually (aloud or mentally) as a form of devotion and meditation.

These are only a few Qur'anic texts that have been considered exemplars of Islamic spirituality and that are central to Sufi thought and writings. The spirituality of these passages extends far beyond the Sufi world, however, into every aspect of Islamic culture. These texts are presented in this section for appreciation on their own. The reader will encounter them anew in their Sufi context throughout the volume, and other key texts from the Qur'an will be presented in the following chapters when the texts allude to them.



THE MI'RAJ (SACRED COSMOLOGY AND MYSTICAL ORIENTATION)

INTRODUCTION

The Mi'raj, Muhammad's ascent through the seven heavens to the divine throne, was paradigmatic for Sufi understandings of their own mystical journeys.¹⁸ Even when Sufis are not alluding to the Mi'raj openly (as in the case of Abu Yazid's Mi'raj, Chapter 7 in this volume), Muhammad's ascent was a continual subtext, evoked by subtle allusions to inspiration, vision of the divine, and the gaze of the contemplator.

The Mi'raj is not depicted within any specificity in the Qur'an. The major Qur'anic proof-text for the tradition is the first verse of Sura 19:

The Night-Journey Verse (17:1)

Glory to the one who took his servant on a night journey from the sacred place of prayer to the furthest place of prayer upon which we have sent down our blessing, that we might show him some of our signs. He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing.

This verse was collated with the depiction of Muhammad's prophetic vision (53:1–18), and elements from that vision, such as the lote tree, were incorporated into the topography of the ascent. It was also collated with another famous passage of the Qur'an, the "opening of Muhammad's breast." The short Qur'anic sura cited below became the proof-text for the extraction of Muhammad's heart and its purification in the waters of zamzam (the waters opened up for Hagar at Mecca as she desperately searched for water for her dying son Isma'il).

Did We Not Open Your Breast (al-Inshirāḥ: Sura 94)

Did we not open your breast
And take from you your burden
Which was breaking your back

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Did we not raise high your name in remembrance
With every hardship there is ease
With every hardship there is ease
When you are free, stand tall
And turn to your lord in longing.

The depictions of the Mi'raj seem to expand as the Islamic tradition grows into a variety of areas, with more elaborate accounts of the levels of hell and the physical descriptions of the prophets residing in the seven heavens. The Sufis, who drew on the "lote tree" passage in a psychological examination of mystical experience, also appropriated the full Mi'raj cosmology as a paradigm for mystical ascent.

Presented here is the account of Muhammad's Mi'raj from the authoritative hadith collection known as the Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (the "Sound" Collection of Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj [d. 261/874]).¹⁹ The account of Muslim (the word "Muslim" here is a proper name) is one of the more extensive early accounts.

In the early hadith accounts, key elements of the Qur'anic passages (the lote tree of the furthest boundary, the shrouding of the lote tree, the inspiration of Muhammad, the opening of the prophet's breast) are found in various levels of the prophet's ascent through the seven heavens. The Mi'raj accounts incorporate these Qur'anic themes into other major topics not mentioned in the Qur'an. Muhammad is taken to Jerusalem by a magical beast named Burāq. In Jerusalem, Muhammad enters the sanctified house or house of sanctity (bayt al-muqaddas, bayt al-maqdis). From there he ascends through the seven heavens. At the culmination of his ascent, in the seventh heaven, he sees the "enlivened house" or "house of life" (al-bayt al-ma'mūr)—a celestial analogue to the "sacred house" (al-bayt al-ḥarām). These three bayts—abodes or temples—resonate down the long history of Islamic literature.

Either before or after the vision of the lote tree (depending on the account), Muhammad comes before the divine presence and is commanded to enjoin his community to perform the prescribed ritual prayer fifty times per day. At the instigation of Moses he engages in a series of negotiations, finally coming away with five prayers that will earn the benefit of fifty prayers.

The hadith accounts offer some fascinating variations on this larger theme. In one account, Muhammad is portrayed as ascending through the heavens immediately after the opening of his breast; in that account his night-journey to the masjid al-aqsā (furthest place of prayer) and the bayt al-

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muqaddas is ignored. The shrouding of the lote tree, one of the deeper, archetypal images in the Qur'anic account of Muhammad's prophetic vision, is given various depictions in the Mi'raj accounts. In one account, four rivers (the Nile, the Euphrates, and two rivers of paradise) stream forth from beneath the trunk of the lote tree.²⁰

At times the Mir'aj accounts need some commentary to guide the non-specialist reader; this commentary is placed in italics. Both the hadith (traditions of Muhammad's sayings) and the sīra accounts embed the phrase "he said" (qāla) within the narrative. In order to avoid sets of quotation marks, these references to the original narrator are placed in parentheses in the translations below. These "he said" phrases are a sign of something distinctive and critical in early Islamic literature: the performative voice of authoritative knowledge and blessing. The chain (isnād) of authorities is a feature not only of the hadith, but of the accounts of early Sufi sayings as well. The "he said" phrase serves as a constant reminder of this performative sense of language; it is as if the original voice of Muhammad were being made present and performed as it was channeled down through the chain of transmitters. To which person in the chain of authorities does the "he" refer? Clearly it refers to each of them, as the actual content of each saying of Muhammad (the matn) echoes down through to the last speaker. Though the English reader may not be familiar, as would the educated Muslim, with the lives and characters of the various named authorities, it is meaningful to preserve some sense of the full hadith form, with both isnād and matn. In the hadith, as in Sufi writings that model themselves on that genre, the act of transmitting and performing tradition is as important as the content of what is transmitted.

The Mi'raj in the Saḥīḥ-Muslim Hadith

Shaybān ibn Farrūkh informed us that Ḥammād ibn Salama informed us that Thābit Lubnanī related from Anas ibn Mālīk that the Envoy of God, blessings and peace on him, said:

I was brought Buraq, a tall, white beast, larger than a donkey and smaller than a mule. In each stride, he would place his hooves as far as his eyes could see.²¹ (He said:) I was mounted on him and he brought me to the house of sanctuary (*bayt al-maqdisi*). (He said:) I tied him on the tie-ring of the prophets. (He said:) Then I entered the place of prayer and there performed two *rak'as* of prayer. When I left, Jibril (Gabriel), peace on him, approached me with a vessel of wine and a vessel of milk. I chose the milk. Jibril, peace and blessings on him, said: You have chosen the innate character (*fiṭra*).²²

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Then he took us up (*‘araja binā*)²³ to [the first] heaven. Jibril requested admittance. He was asked: “Who are you?” He said “Jibril.” Jibril was asked: “Who is with you?” He replied, “Muhammad.” He was asked: “Was he sent for?” He replied: “He was sent for.” The heaven was opened before us, and there stood Adam! He received me warmly and invoked blessings for me.

Then he took me up to the second heaven. Jibril requested admittance. He was asked: “Who are you?” He said “Jibril.” Jibril was asked: “Who is with you?” He replied, “Muhammad.” He was asked: “Was he sent for?” He replied: “He was sent for.” The heaven was opened before us, and there stood my maternal relatives Jesus, the son of Mary (‘Isā ibn Maryam), and John, the son of Zakaraya (Yaḥyā ibn Zakarayyā’), God’s blessings on them both. They received me warmly and invoked blessings for me.

Then he took me up to the third heaven. Jibril requested admittance. He was asked: “Who are you?” He said “Jibril.” Jibril was asked: “Who is with you?” He replied, “Muhammad.” He was asked: “Was he sent for?” He replied: “He was sent for.” The heaven was opened before us, and there, standing before me, was Joseph (Yusuf), endowed with half the world’s beauty. He received me warmly and invoked blessings for me.

Then Jibril took me up to the fourth heaven. Jibril requested admittance. He was asked: “Who are you?” He said “Jibril.” Jibril was asked: “Who is with you?” He replied, “Muhammad.” He was asked: “Was he sent for?” He replied: “He was sent for.” The heaven was opened before us, and there, standing before me, was Idris (Enoch).²⁴ He welcomed me and bid me well. Allah, Most High and Glorious, has said (19:57): “We took him up to a high station.”

Then he took us up to the fifth heaven. Jibril requested admittance. He was asked: “Who are you?” He said “Jibril.” Jibril was asked: “Who is with you?” He replied, “Muhammad.” He was asked: “Was he sent for?” He replied: “He was sent for.” The heaven was opened before us, and there, standing before me, was Aaron (Harun), peace and blessings on him. He received me warmly and invoked blessings for me.

Then he took us up to the sixth heaven. Jibril requested admittance. He was asked: “Who are you?” He said “Jibril.” Jibril was asked: “Who is with you?” He replied, “Muhammad.” He was asked: “Was he sent for?” He replied: “He was sent for.” The heaven was opened before us, and there, standing before me, was Moses (Musa), peace and blessings on him. He received me warmly and invoked blessings for me.

Then he took us up to the seventh heaven. Jibril requested admittance. He was asked: “Who are you?” He said “Jibril.” Jibril was asked: “Who is

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with you?" He replied, "Muhammad." He was asked: "Was he sent for?" He replied: "He was sent for." The heaven was opened before us, and there, before me, was Abraham, peace and blessings on him. He received me warmly and invoked blessings for me.

He was resting his back against the house of life (*al-bayt al-ma'mūr*) into which seventy thousand angels would disappear each day, not to return.

Then I was taken to the (53:14) "lote tree of the furthest boundary [*sidrat al-muntahā*]." Its leaves were like the ears of elephants and its fruits were as large as jugs of clay. (He said:) When by the command of its lord (53:16) "there enveloped the tree what enveloped it," it was transformed. None of the creatures of God could describe its beauty. (53:10) "Then Allah inspired in me what he inspired."

Allah gave me the obligation of fifty prayers every full day and night. When I descended to Musa (Moses), peace and blessings on him, he said: "What obligation did your lord place on your community (*umma*)?" I said: "Fifty prayers." He said: "Go back to your lord and ask him to lighten the burden. Your community is not capable of that. I myself tried the people of Israel (*banī isrā'īl*) and tested them." (He said:) So I went back up to my lord and said: "My lord, lighten the burden on my community." He took away five. I returned to Musa and said: "He took away five." He said: "Your community is still not capable of doing that. Go back up to your lord and ask him to lighten the burden."

(He said:) So I continued going back and forth between my lord, Most High and Blessed, and Musa, peace on him, until he said: "Muhammad, there are five prayers for every full day and night, and each prayer gains the credit of ten, making fifty. Whoever intends a good deed but does not perform it is credited with one good deed. For whoever performs it is credited with ten. Whoever intends an evil deed but does not perform it, receives no credit or discredit. Whoever performs it is discredited with one evil deed. (He said:) I descended again until I reached Musa, peace and blessings on him, and informed him of the issue. He said: "Return to your lord and ask him to lighten the burden." (The messenger of God, peace and blessings on him, said:) I replied: "I returned to my lord to the point that I am embarrassed."

In another version of the Mi'raj from Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, the ending is different, with the vision of the lote tree coming after the negotiations over the number of prayers.

Ḥarmala ibn Yahyā at-Tujībī related to me that Ibn Wahb informed us that Yunus informed him on the authority of Ibn Shihāb on the authority of Anas

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ibn Mālik that Abu Dharr related that the Envoy of God, God's blessings and peace on him, said:

When I was in Mecca, the roof of my house was split open. Jibril, God's blessings and peace on him, came down and split my breast. Then he cleansed it with the water of *zamzam*. Then he brought a gold basin filled with wisdom and faith, which he emptied into my breast. Then he closed up my breast, grasped me by the hand, and took me up to [the first] heaven.

[Omitted here is an account of rise through the heavens and, on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās and Abu Habba al-Anṣārī, of the negotiations over the number of prayers that is almost identical to the versions given above].²⁵

Moses said: "Return to your lord." I said: "I am embarrassed to return again." Then Jibril bore me off and took me to the lote tree of the furthest boundary. It was shrouded with colors that I could not recognize. (He said:) Then I was brought into the garden (*al-janna*). It has domes of pearl and earth of musk.²⁶

Yet another version in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim begins with the opening of Muḥammad's chest, moves directly to the Mi'raj (with no account of the journey to Jerusalem), and places the test of wine and milk after the Mi'raj.²⁷

Muḥammad ibn al-Muthannā reported to us that Ibn Abū 'Adī, on the authority of Sa'īd on the authority of Qatāda on the authority of Anas ibn Mālik who might have said, on the authority of Mālik ibn Ṣa'sa'a, a man of his tribe, that the Prophet of God, peace and blessing on him, said:

While I was in my house, in a state halfway between waking and sleep, I heard someone say: "One of the three between the other two." I was taken and carried off. I was brought to a basin of gold in which there was the water of *zamzam*. My breast was opened as far as that. (Qatāda said: "I asked the one with me what he meant by 'that.' He replied: 'To the lower part of his abdomen.'") My heart was taken out and washed in the water of *zamzam*. Then it was returned to its place and filled with faith and wisdom.

Then I was brought a white beast said to be Buraq. He was between a donkey and mule in size. In each stride, he would place his hooves as far as his eyes could see. I was mounted on him and borne away as far as the first heaven.

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*The account of the ascent through the seven heavens is substantially the same as the first account above. When the Prophet arrives before Abraham in the seventh heaven, the account continues:*²⁸

Then we sped off until we reached the seventh heaven and I was brought before Abraham. (The Prophet, peace and blessings on him, related in the hadith that) he saw four rivers flowing from beneath its trunk [i.e., the trunk of the lote tree],²⁹ two manifest rivers and two hidden rivers. I said to Jibril: "What rivers are these, Jibril?" He said: The two hidden rivers are two rivers of paradise. The two manifest rivers are the Nile and the Euphrates.

Then he was taken up to the house of life (*al-bayt al-ma'mūr*). I said: "Jibril, what is this?" He said: "This is the house of life. Every day seventy thousand angels enter it. When they go out from it they never return."³⁰

I was then brought two vessels, one of wine and the other of milk. They were shown to me and I chose the milk. I was told: "You have chosen well. Allah will choose your community through you, according to the innate disposition (*fiṭra*)."³¹ Then fifty prayers per day were given as a requirement to the community. And he continued relating the story until the end of the hadith.

The genre of literature known as the life of Muhammad (sīrat an-nabī, or simply, the sīra) contains other, significant versions of the night journey and Mi'raj. In one of the earliest and most widely accepted versions, that of Ibn Ishāq as retold by Ibn Hishām, the accounts of the Mi'raj are more detailed than those of the hadith of Muslim ibn Hajjāj, more directly related to the life of Muhammad, and present a clearer separation of the night journey from the Mi'raj. The miraculous mount Buraq, who carried Muhammad away, is presented in the Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim as male (or at least through the masculine grammatical constructions), and in Ibn Hishām as either male or female, depending on the account. In the Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Muhammad chooses between a vessel of wine and a vessel of milk; in the sīra of Ibn Hishām, two versions are given. In one version, the Prophet chooses between vessels of wine and milk; in the other he chooses between three vessels, one filled with wine, one with milk, and one with water.

Larger, theological issues also separate the two accounts. Ibn Hishām presents early debates over the validity and possibility of the night journey. He also represents the Prophet's wife A'isha's position that the night journey and Mi'raj were purely spiritual events, with A'isha testifying that she was with Muhammad the whole time and that his body did not move. Pre-

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sented below are those portions of the Ibn Hishām's account that are particularly important for Islamic mystical texts.

The Isrā' and Mi'raj

The Account of Ibn Ishāq as Recounted by Ibn Hishām in the Sira of the Rasūl Allāh (The Life of the Messenger of Allah)³¹

THE NIGHT JOURNEY (ISRĀ')

'Abdallah ibn Mas'ūd used to say—as it has come down to me—that Buraq was brought to the Envoy of God. She was a beast who used to carry prophets before his [Muhammad's] time. In each stride, she would place her hooves as far as her eyes could see. He was mounted on her. His companion³² went out with him to see the signs between the heavens and the earth, until he came at last to the house of the sanctified (*bayt al-muqaddas*). There he found Ibrāhīm and Musā and 'Isā in a group of prophets who had been assembled for him. After he performed the prayer with them, he was given three vessels; a vessel containing milk, a vessel containing wine, and a vessel containing water. (He said: So the Envoy of God, God's peace and blessings on him, said:) I heard a voice say, as these vessels were offered to me: "If he takes the water, he drowns and his community drowns. If he takes the wine, he goes astray and his community goes astray. If he takes the milk, he receives guidance and his community receives guidance." (He said:) So I took the vessel of milk and drank from it. Jibrīl then said to me: "You and your community have received guidance, Muhammad."

I have been told that al-Ḥasan said: The Envoy of God, God's peace and blessings on him, said: "While I was sleeping in the sanctuary (*hijr*), Jibrīl came to me and roused me with his foot. I sat up but saw nothing, so I went back to sleep. He came and roused me with his foot a second time and I sat up and, seeing nothing, went back to sleep. He came and roused me with his foot a third time. I sat up, he took my arm, and I rose with him. He took me out to the door of the place of prayer (*masjid*) and there was a white beast, part mule and part donkey. The beast had two wings for thighs with which he would propel his lower legs, placing his hooves as far as his eye could see. He mounted me on himself and took me out. He did not pass me and I did not pass him."³³

Al-Ḥasan said in his hadith: The Envoy of God, God's peace and blessings on him, went on, and with him Jibrīl, until he came at last to the house of the sanctified (*bayt al-muqaddas*) and found there Ibrahim, Musa, and 'Isa in a group of prophets. The Envoy of God, peace and blessings on him, led

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them in prayer and prayed with them. Then he was brought two vessels, in one of which was wine and in the other milk. (He said:) The Rasul Allah, God's peace and blessings on him, took the vessel of milk and drank from it, leaving aside the vessel of wine. (He said:) So Jibril said to him: "You have been given guidance through innate disposition (*fiṭra*) and your community has been given guidance, and wine has been forbidden to you."

At this point, Ibn Hishām recounts the skepticism of Muhammad's followers in Mecca and the controversy roused by his claim to have gone to the "house of sanctity" in Jerusalem in a single night's journey.³⁴ This particular account ends with the belief in the night journey interpreted as a test of the faith of the new community:

(Al-Ḥasan said:) "As for those who went back on Islam because of that [their skepticism about Muhammad's claim of a night journey], Allah sent down the verse (13:62): "We made the vision we showed you only as a test (*fitna*) for people and the cursed tree in the Qur'an and we frighten them but it only increases them in their most grievous error." This is the hadith of al-Ḥasan on the night journey of the Envoy of God, peace and blessings on him, with some additions by Qatāda.

Ibn Ishāq said: One of the family of Abū Bakr reported to me that 'A'isha used to say: "The body of the Rasul Allah, God's peace and blessings on him, did not disappear, but Allah took his spirit away by night."

Ibn Ishāq said: Ya'qūb ibn 'Ataba ibn al-Mughīra ibn al-Akhnas reported to me that when Mu'āwiya ibn abī Sufyān was asked about the night journey of the Envoy of God, peace and blessings on him, he said: "It was a true dream/vision (*ru'yā*) from Allah. Their statements ['A'isha and Mu'āwiya's] do not contradict the saying of al-Ḥasan, for the following verse, a saying of Allah Most High and Exalted, came down about that (13:62): "We made the vision we showed you only as a *fitna* for people." Nor does it contradict the saying of Allah Most High and Exalted in the statement about Ibrahim, God's peace and blessings on him, when he said to his son (37:10), "O my son, I have seen in my dream/vision that I was slaughtering you," and then went on. I have realized that the inspiration from Allah comes to the prophets both awake and asleep."³⁵

THE MI'RAJ

The Hadith of Abū Sa'īd Al-Khudrī concerning the Mi'raj: Ibn Ishāq said: Someone about whom I have no doubts told me of Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī, God's peace and blessings on him, that he said: I heard the Envoy of Allah, God's peace and blessings on him, say:

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When I was no longer occupied with what had occurred in the *bayt al-muqaddas*, I was given a ladder (*mi'raj*) that was as fine as anything I have ever seen. It was the same as that ladder to which a dying person turns his eyes when his time is at hand. My friend (*ṣāhibī*) led me up it and brought me all the way to one of the doors of heaven, said to be the door of the Guardians. An angel, said to be Isma'il, was in charge of them. Under his command were twelve thousand angels, with twelve thousand more angels under each one of them. (Al-Khudrī said that the Prophet, as he would tell this hadith, would say: No one knows the troops of your lord except him.) When he brought me in, Isma'il said: Who is that, O Jibril? "Muhammad," he replied. "Has he been sent for?" Isma'il asked. "Yes," replied Jibril. Upon hearing that, Isma'il wished me well.³⁶

In the later chapters of this present volume, there will be continual allusions to the Mi'raj traditions, and an entire section (the Mi'raj of Abu Yazid al-Bistami) that is a direct appropriation of symbolic cosmos and quest of the original Mi'raj of Muhammad. When these allusions and direct references to Muhammad's Mi'raj occur, their role in Sufi spirituality will become more explicit. The Mi'raj accounts are presented here, at first, in their own right. As with the Qur'an, they contain a spirituality not limited to Sufi thought. The Mi'raj is a deeply ingrained aspect of Islamic popular culture, a continual theme or object of allusion in Islamic literature, and, in those periods and places where painting was encouraged, a central theme in art as well.

◆ ◆ ◆ THE BELOVED (POETIC DIMENSIONS OF ISLAMIC SPIRITUALITY)

INTRODUCTION

Islamic mysticism is indelibly marked with the poetic heritage of the Near East. Most important to the periods discussed in this book is the early Arabic poetry. The Sufis did not borrow the poetic themes of the lost beloved, the intoxication of wine, or the "perishing" out of love for the beloved to use

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as a vehicle for expressing ideas and sensibility developed independently from the poetry. Rather, the refinement of theme, mood, emotion, and diction within the poetry was from very early on in Sufism an integral aspect of the mystical sensibility.

It is frequently impossible to tell whether the anonymous verses on love and intoxication cited by writers such as Sarraj and Qushayri are originally part of the secular poetic tradition or were composed as part of a Sufi discourse. Or rather, notion of a purely secular poetry may be inappropriate within the Sufi context. Even the poems that are almost certainly of a pre-Islamic origin and that are viewed by many as the epitome of the *Jahiliyya* (age of ignorance) are more than tales of love, drinking, and tribal battle.

The way in which Sufis play on this tradition suggests that they are continuing and developing a poetic and lyrical tradition that has continued unbroken to the present day in most Islamic regions. The examples and discussion offered here are meant to offer a taste of that sensibility and a guide to how it is used throughout the Sufi passages in this volume.³⁷

Central to Islamic spirituality is the poetry that grew out of the pre-Islamic Arabic *naṣīb*, the first part of the classical Arabic ode or *Qasida*. The *naṣīb* begins with the remembrance of the lost beloved. Remembrance is incited in turn by certain key symbols: the ruins of the beloved's campsite (*aṭlāl*); the apparition (*khayāl*, *ṭayf*) of the lost beloved to the poet; the recalling of the secret (*sirr*) of the relationship between poet and beloved.

The *Mu'allāqa* ("hanging ode,") of the poet Labid begins with a poetic meditation on the ruins of the poet's beloved, *Nawār*, ruins that are found in places named *Mīnan*, *Ghawl*, and *Rijām*.³⁸ The tent ruins spark a poetic reverie in which the desert suddenly becomes a garden containing lush vegetation and animals at peace. The reverie begins with a reference to the months gone by, the months of war or profane (*ḥalāl*) months and the months of peace or sacred (*ḥarām*) months during which all warfare was prohibited and the various tribes would come together for fairs, poetry festivals, and pilgrimage. The tent marks and torrent marks of *Nawār*'s abandoned encampment appear, transform themselves into gardens, turn back to marks in the sand, and disappear. At the end of the reverie, the poet is once again faced with the barren stones at the desert campsite, asking them a question they cannot answer. The marks and rocks perdure, endlessly signifying something about the loss of the beloved, deferring all answers as to what precisely is signified.

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The tent marks in Mínan are worn away
where she encamped
and where she alighted,
Ghawl and Rijám now left to the wild,

And the torrent beds of Rayyán
naked tracings
worn thin, like inscriptions
carved in flattened stones.

Dung-stained ground
that tells the years passed
since human presence, months of peace
gone by, months of war,

Replenished by the rain stars
of spring and struck
by thunderclap downpour, or steady,
fine dropped, silken rains

From every kind of cloud
passing at night,
darkening the morning,
or rumbling in peals across the evening sky.

The white pondcress has shot upward,
and on the wadi slopes,
gazelles among their newborn,
and ostriches,

And the wide-of-eyes
silent above monthling fawns.
On the open terrain
yearlings cluster.

The rills and the runlets
uncovered marks like the script
of faded scrolls
restored with pens of reed,

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Or tracings of a tattoo woman
 beneath the indigo powder,
sifted in spirals,
 the form begins to reappear.

I stopped to question them.
How is one to question
 deaf, immutable,
inarticulate stones?³⁹

These verses began with a reference to where the beloved had camped (muqāmuhā) and where she had alighted (maḥalluhā). While the three campsites mentioned at the beginning of the poem are presented as the abandoned ruins or aṭṭal, at the end of the verses cited above they are viewed as part of a larger pattern: as stations (maqāmāt, manāzil) of the beloved as she moves away from the poet with the women of her tribe. The transition to the wider theme is the motif of the ẓa'n: the remembrance of the beloved's departure with the other women of the tribe, their disappearance into the elaborate camel litters or "howdahs," the most colorful part of Bedouin society. In the following verses, Labid moves from the meditation on the ruins to remembrance of the departure. The poetic gaze follows the beloved and the other departing women of the tribe, gradually moving back further and further until the camel train is no longer distinguishable from "tamarisks and boulders on the slopes of Bishah."

Stripped bare now,
 what once held all that tribe—
they left in the early morning
 leaving a trench and some thatch.

They stirred longing in you
as they packed up their howdahs,
 disappearing into lairs of cotton,
frames creaking,

Post-beams covered
 with twin-rodded curtains
of every kind of cloth brocade
 and a black, transparent, inner veil,

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Strung out along the route
in groups, like oryx does of Túdiḥ,
or Wáḡran gazelles, white fawns
below them, soft necks turning,

They faded into the distance
appearing in the shimmering haze
like tamarisks and boulders
on the slopes of Bíshah.⁴⁰

At this point, the poetic voice tries to break out of the remembrance, asking what use there is in recalling Nawár. As if pushed along by a deeper current, however, the remembrance continues, overflowing into imagination as the poet recounts the stations of the beloved that he cannot have seen:

But why recall Nawár?
She's gone.
Her ties and bonds to you
are broken.

The Murrite lady
has lodged in Fayd,
then joined up with the Hijázi clans.
Who are you to aspire to reach her,

On the eastern slopes
of Twin Mountains or Muhájjar?
Lone butte has taken her in,
then Marblehead,

Then Tinderlands
if she heads toward Yemen—
I imagine her there—or at Thrall Mountain
or in the valley of Tilkhám.⁴¹

Thus this famous opening section of Labid's Mu'allaqā begins and ends with references to the stations and stages of the beloved's journey. The opening references to the stations are references to them as a poetic analogue of the sacred enclosure (himma). In fact, the meditation at the abandoned campsite has been shown to have strong parallels with the practice of incubation at

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the shrine of a god or saint that was part of the Mediterranean world of late antiquity. A person who desired healing or inspiration would spend the night at the shrine of a god like Asclepius (the Hellenistic god of healing) or an early Christian saint like Thekla. Muhammad's vision and night-journey are related in early Arabic tradition to his vigil in the sacred enclosure in Mecca known as the ḥijr. The phantom of the god, goddess, or saint would appear to the pilgrim, often healing or revealing the secret of healing.⁴² In a similar way, the phantom of the beloved will appear explicitly or implicitly to the poet who meditates within hallowed boundaries of the abandoned camp.

At the end of the section from Labid cited above, the stations of the beloved's journey are recounted, one by one, with ritual solemnity. The Mu'allaqat and other pre-Islamic poems were recited at the festival of 'Ukāz, which itself was connected with the annual pre-Islamic pilgrimage or ḥajj. The language of ritually solemn recitation of stations is associated with Arabic pilgrimages, and this connection is continually evoked when referring to the stations of the beloved's departure—as if those stations were a kind of reverse pilgrimage, with the seeker remaining stationary and the object of devotion or desire moving in stages away from the seeker. The Sufis continually combined the two notions of stages, pilgrimage stages toward Mecca and the stages of the beloved in her journey away from the poet. The result is a kind of mystical bewilderment, as in the verses cited by Qushayri:

I continued to alight
in your affection,
a way-stop for which
hearts are bewildered.

In Labid's ode, there is no description of the beloved. The beloved is evoked, but the traces of the beloved's campsite lead the poetic voice into an idyll of imagined lush gardens and peaceful animals. A famous poem by Mukhabbal also moves to the idyll, but Mukhabbal does so more indirectly through the dissembling simile. The poem seems to be describing the beloved, but the similes dissemble; they create the expectation of a description of the beloved, but end up presenting a description of the beloved's symbolic analogue, the lost garden or meadow. As with Labid, while the beloved is evoked, what is actually depicted is an idyll of cool flowing water, lush vegetation, and wild animals at peace.

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Mukhabbal begins with the phantom of the beloved and a particularly desolate depiction of the ruins of her campsite, before moving on to the dissembling similes and the idyll:

He remembered Rabáb.
Her memory was sickness.
He was young again,
unaware.

When her phantom came round
my eye stung
along the tear lines
and began to water,

Like pearls
slipping
from a necklace
poorly strung.

I make out a dwelling there,
hers,
amid the pools of Sidán,
traces unfaded,

Ashes, cold,
banked and shielded
from the winds
by blackened hearthstones,

Ruins of a flood-break,
stone walls
around the base,
broken in,

As if what the side winds
and rains had left
there on the empty yards
were a tattoo.

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Doe-oryx pasture there,
following along toward water,
white-backs
and brown-backs mingling,

The fawns of oryx
and gazelle,
around her tracings there,
like kids and lambs.

Rabáb might have alighted there,
with an advance guard,
well-armed,
to ward off foes.

Graceful as a rush of papyrus,
beauty comes to her
before others,
and she matures more quickly.

She shows you a face
smooth as paper,
unwrinkled
and unblemished,

Like the pearl of pearls
distant Persians use
to light up the throne-hall
of a king,

Purchased at high price,
retrieved by a diver,
bone-thin,
like an arrow,

His chest smeared with oil,
bringing it out
from the billow-waved deep
of the swordfish.⁴³

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The dissembling nature of the beloved's image that Mukhabbal offers recurs in a famous poem by Ka'b ibn Zuhayr. Ka'b's poem is known as the Burda Qasida because the Prophet Muhammad is said to have given Ka'b his mantle (burda) upon hearing it. Ka'b begins with a bitter commentary on the shifting states (ahwal) of his beloved, Su'ad, comparing her to a ghul who changes guises in every moment. This complaint can actually be read as a comment on the nature of the description of the beloved in the Qasida. When Ka'b says: "What is Su'ad but . . ." the reader might ask the same question of the beloveds of all the classical Qasidas. The poetic voice entrances the reader with the impression that the beloved has been described, but if the reader tries to seize on what she actually is like, like the ghul she vanishes into a constantly changing series of images. With Ka'b for example, we start out with Su'ad, but end up with a draught of wine "Mixed with the hard cold of a winding, backsloped, / gorge-bottom stream, pure, / cooled in the morning by the north wind."

Su'ad is gone,
my heart stunned,
lost in her traces,
shackled, unransomed.

What was Su'ad
the morning they went away
but a faint song,
languor in the eyes, kohl,

Revealing as she smiled
side-teeth wet
as a first draught of wine
or a second,

Mixed with the hard cold
of a winding, backsloped,
gorge-bottom stream, pure,
cooled in the morning by the north wind,

Filtered through the winds,
then flooded
with rains of a night traveler,
flowing white and over.

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Misery she
who might have been a friend
had she kept her promise,
had a well-meant word been taken.

Some friend. In her blood
brew trouble and lies,
the withdrawal of vows,
the trade-in of lovers.

From form to form,
she turns and changes,
like a *ghūl*
slipping through her guises.

She makes a vow,
then holds it
like a linen sieve
holds water.

The theme of the beloved's constantly changing conditions or states (aḥwāl) contains an ironic tension. The poet blames the beloved for the changes and claims he is cutting his bonds with her, but never succeeds in abandoning the beloved or her memory; the more he claims he has forgotten her, the more he protests too much. The Qasida eventually moves on beyond the naṣīb into new sections of poetry, but the beloved comes back, often in haunting ways. Ultimately, when Ka'b compares his beloved Su'ad to a ghūl, he is evoking the theme of fate (dahr), often compared to a ghul, which continually changes form and shape, bewildering the human and wearing away all attempts at permanence.

The "blaming" of the beloved, which is actually a displaced blaming of fate, is connected with the accusation of the betrayal of the secret (sirr) held by lover and beloved. A pre-Islamic naṣīb by 'Alqama begins with a reference to the secret:

Is what you came to know,
given in trust,
kept secret? Is her bond to you
broken, now that she is far?

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Does a grown man weeping
tears without end for those he loved,
the dawn of parting,
receive his fair reward?

By the time I knew,
they had set their leave,
all the camel stallions
standing bridled before dawn.⁴⁴

The relationship of the Qur'an to classical poetry is complex. The Qur'an emphatically rejects the notion that it is sh'ir, formal poetry in the classical sense with a complex meter and inspired by jinn. The Qur'an is the word of the deity. In referring to the poets, the Qur'an says dryly, "Do you not see them in every dried out river-bed, wandering aimlessly?"⁴⁵ Yet the Prophet had his own circle of poets, one of whom composed an elegy upon the death of Muhammad that figures the remains of the Prophet's house and mosque in Medina as the ruins of the abandoned campsite of the beloved. Like the traces of Nawár's campsite in the Qasida of Labid, the traces of the Prophet's abode endure, even while everything else wastes away:

At Táyah there remain the Prophet's
relics and a luminous
Encounter place, while other relics fade
and waste away.

Indelible are the signs of that inviolate abode,
Where the Guide's pulpit stands on which he used to mount.

It stands so clear, the contours firm—and there
His precinct with a prayer-place and mosque.

There his chambers are, there
The lord's light found its repose,
to give him light and warmth—

Signs which will not be effaced as time goes by,
Finding renewal in each decay.

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There I recognized the Prophet's traces
and where I saw him last,
A grave in whose dust he, hidden, lies.⁴⁶

In the classical Qasida, the nasīb remembrance of the beloved eventually yields to the second major movement of the ode, the journey or quest, in which the poet/hero is depicted in solitary encounter with the desert heat, the darkness of the desert night, fate, and human mortality. After this rite of passage, the poet/hero returns to the community, and the poem ends with a boast (fakhr) in which the poet redefines his place within a new community. That new community is less idealistic than the original idyllic world of remembrance. The transition between the remembrance of the beloved and the journey, or between the journey and the boast, is frequently a wine song. It should be emphasized that the pre-Islamic wine song, although obviously extolling the virtues of wine, has a symbolic register far deeper than a simple drinking song. The wine is often viewed in a ritual fashion as in the following famous section from the ode of 'Alqama in which the wine is formally unveiled:

I could well see the drinkers,
among them a ringing lyre,
men laid low
by golden, foaming wine,

The drink of a potentate,
aged by tavernkeepers
for a special occasion.
It'll take you up and spin you around.

For the headache it's a cure.
A jolt of it won't harm you.
No dizziness from it
will mix in the brain,

A vintage of 'Anah, a slammer,
for a full year unexposed,
kept in a clay-stoppered jug
with a waxen seal,

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Glistening in its decanter,
while a foreign-born page,
mouth covered with a cotton band,
pours it,

Flagon like a gazelle
high on the cliff face,
neck and spout sealed
with a linen sieve.

Its keeper brings it out into the sun.
It flashes white,
ringed by branches of sweet basil,
fragrance brimming over.⁴⁷

Sufis continually play on the ambiguity of the wine song. Is this the earthly wine they are speaking of, or the allegorical wine of mystical intoxication? Such a question can be answered by referring to commentaries on Sufi verse or by appealing to biography. Yet more often the Sufi writer will deliberately subvert any either-or question and answer. Some verses found in Sufi texts are identical to verses attributed to Abu Nuwas, the poet and free-living gallant famous for his ribald verses on wine and love-making. And one Sufi, Ibn al-Farid, became recognized as a "friend of God" through his experiences of mystical ecstasy (wajd), which were themselves validated by the verses he would recite in his state of wajd—verses that stem directly from the classical poetic tradition and that could be read and were read by many as purely secular songs of love and wine.⁴⁸ In discussing the concept of wajd and the related notion of ecstatic existence (wujūd), in Chapter 3 in this volume, we will find the Sufi Qushayri quoting a wine song:

They rained down into the goblets
water from their pitchers
while pearls blossomed
in an earth of gold.

The folk praised what they saw
in wonder
a light from water
on fire in the grapes,

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A pure wine,
inherited by 'Ad from Iram,⁴⁹
the ancient treasure of Khusraw⁵⁰
from his father's father's father.

Following his typical method of returning to a concept introduced earlier (seemingly as an illustration), Qushayri then goes on to devote an entire section to the theme of drunkenness and sobriety, with liberal poetic citations.

Out of the pre-Islamic Qasida grew several forms of lyrical love poetry: the ghazal (literally "love talk") and, most important for Sufism, the poetry called 'Udhri (after a tribe known for its practitioners of this style). The most famous 'Udhri poet, Qays ibn al-Mulawwiḥ, became known by the epithet Majnūn Layla: "Mad for Layla." The term mad, majnūn, literally means jinned, taken over by the jinn or genies. The jinn were associated with poetic inspiration (they were the pre-Islamic equivalent of the Muses and were believed to speak through the poet), madness, and love. In 'Udhri poetry, the unattainability of the beloved that was central to the pre-Islamic nasīb becomes heightened even further as the poet is driven mad and "perishes" out of love for the beloved. Both the love-madness and the perishing became key Sufi motifs. The motifs were combined by Sufis with the bewilderment of reason on contact with ultimate reality, and the annihilation of the human in mystical union. Thus Sarraj—in his discussion of the ecstatic utterances of Bistami and the bewilderment of identity caused by the annihilation of the ego-self in mystical union—is led to quote the Majnūn tradition.⁵¹ Bistami's utterance "Glory to me" is understandable from the point of view of mystical union in which the deity hears, sees, walks, touches, and speaks through the emptied faculties of the Sufi whose ego-self has been annihilated. It is also understandable in terms of love-madness, when the beloved becomes the sole object of existence, as in the case of Majnūn and Layla:

In this way Majnūn of the Banī 'Amir would say, when looking at a wild animal, "Layla," when looking at the mountains, "Layla," and when looking at other people, "Layla," to the point that when he was asked his name and condition, he said "Layla"!

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In that regard he said:

I pass by the ruined abodes of Layla,
kissing this wall and that.
It is not love of the ruins that inflames my heart
but love of the one who inhabited the ruins.

Another said:

I search the secret of my heart for desire for you
but find only myself and that I am you⁵²
and the inner essence greater.
If she finds that I am found raptured in her
she speaks of herself when she speaks of me.

The lightning flash, in the classical Qasida, was sign of both the beloved's presence and absence. The ephemerality of the moment of union between lover and beloved, symbolized by the lightning, became the occasion for Sufi meditations on the ephemerality of the states (aḥwāl) of Sufi ecstatic experience. Qushayri first quotes Junayd, who explicitly grounds the Sufi meditation on the fleeting moment in the poetic tradition.⁵³

Sudden gleams of light
when they appear, apparitions,
revealing a secret,
telling of union.

Qushayri then dedicates a full section to various forms of ephemerality. On the "flash," he quotes an anonymous poet:

O lightning flashing
from which folds
of the sky
do you shine?

These few short passages from the poetic heritage offer a glimpse of a highly refined symbolic world with some key vocabulary: the ruins (aṭlāl) and traces (rusūm) that are effaced but somehow endure, that signify but cannot answer; the phantom or apparition (khayāl—a term that later comes to mean "imagination"); the stations (maqāmāt) and way-stops (maḥallāt) along the

pilgrimage; the constantly changing conditions or states (aḥwāl); remembrance (dhikr) of the beloved (al-mahbūb); the secret (sirr) entrusted from lover to beloved; the sacred or "prohibited" (ḥarām) and profane or "allowed" (ḥalāl); the lightning flash of an ephemeral union; the love-mad (majnūn) lover who experiences bewilderment (ḥayra) in the shifting conditions of the beloved and who ends in ruin (halāk). All this vocabulary becomes an essential part of the Sufi mystical lexicon.

This overview of the poetic heritage ends with the nasīb of a poem by Dhu al-Rumma, who lived in the first century of Islam. Once again we find what appears to be a description of the beloved yielding in fact to a metamorphosis. The similes dissemble. They seem to describe the beloved, Máyya, but in fact she is transformed into the symbolic analogue, the garden—in this case the oasis garden. The true beloved, in both the poetic and the Sufi traditions, can never be revealed—to reveal her would be to violate the secret.

Dhu ar-Rumma to the Encampments of Máyya

To the encampments of Máyya,
 both of you,
 a well-meant word
 and distant greeting:

 May the rain-star Arcturus
 be over you still . . .
 and the rains of the Pleiades,
 pouring down and spreading,

Though it was you
 who stirred a lover's
 disheartened desire,
 until the eye shed

 Tears, yes, that nearly,
 on knowing a campsite as Máyya's
 if not released,
 would have killed,

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Though I was already nearing thirty
and my friends had learned better
and good sense had begun
to weigh down folly.

When distance turns other lovers,
the first premonition
of loving Máyya
will still be with me.

Nearness to her
cannot impoverish desire
nor distance, wherever she might be,
run it dry.

The inner whisper
of memory,
reminiscence of Máyya
is enough to bruise your heart.

Desires have their way,
circulate freely,
but I can't see your share of my heart
given away.

Though in parting some love
is effaced and disappears,
yours in me is made over
and compounded.

You came to mind
when a doe ariel passed us,
right flank turned to the camel mounts,
neck lowered,

A doe of the sands, earth-hued,
with a white blaze on the forehead
and the afternoon sun
clear upon her back.

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She leaves her fawn
on a dune, a grassy dune
in Múshrif, the glance of her year
gleaming around him,

Gazing at us as if we intended harm
where we would meet him,
approaching us,
then backing away.

She is her like, in shoulder,
neck, and eye,
but Máyya is more radiant than she, still—
more beautiful.

After sleep she is languor.
The house exudes her fragrance.
She adorns it
when she appears in the morning,

Her anklets and ivory,
as if entwined around a caltrop
stopping the flow
in the bed of a wadi,

With buttocks like a soft dune
over which a rain shower falls
matting the sand
as it sprinkles down.

Her hair-fall
over the lower curve of her back,
soft as the moringa's gossamer flowers,
curled with pins and combed,

With long cheek hollows
where tears flow,
and a lengthened curve at the breast-sash
where it crosses and falls.

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You see her ear-pendant
along the exposed ridge of her neck,
swaying out,
dangling over the abyss.

With a red thornberry tooth-twig,
fragrant as musk and Indian ambergris
brought in in the morning,
she reveals

Petals of a camomile
cooled by the night
to which the dew has risen at evening
from Ráma oasis,

Wafting in from all sides
with the earth scent of the garden,
redolent as a musk pod
falling open.

The white gleam of her teeth,
her immoderate laugh,
almost to the unhearing
speak secrets.⁵⁴

As with the Qur'an and the Mi'raj, the translations are presented here without detailed discussion of their importance in Sufi literature. The tradition of love poetry in Islam is of fundamental importance to Islamic spirituality, in all its aspects, of which Sufism is only one. For that reason, these poems must be appreciated on their own, as poems, before they are seen in their later, Sufi context.

The poetic tradition is equally rich in Persian, Ottoman, Urdu, and other languages. It would require a full volume to give an introduction to all the poetic traditions of the Islamic world. Yet many of the central themes in most Islamic poetic traditions have already been covered in the Arabic examples, and these selections might also provide an introduction to the reader wishing to explore the intercultural world of poetry within Islam.

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or blessing is passed on through the official rites of transmission is introduced with evidence from an entire genre of literature discussing such *isnad baraka*.

6. A fourth writer deserves to be placed alongside Sarraj, Sulami, and Qushayri: Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996). Makki's "Food for the Hearts" (*Qūt al-Qulūb*) combines the perspective of Tustari and his disciples (known as the *Sālimiyya* after Tustari's disciple Muhammad ibn Sālim and his son), the moral and psychological rigor of Muhasibi, and the intellectual sweep of Sarraj with a careful and continual demonstration of not only the compatibility, but the essential grounding of Sufism within ritual Islam. However, because there is no critical edition and because the printed editions that exist are extremely difficult to use, I have not been able to translate any part of it for this volume. Makki's work was appropriated in part by the more famous Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) and became the basis for much of Ghazali's magnum opus, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*ihyā' 'ulūmi d-dīn*). How much of Ghazali's work is truly original is difficult to ascertain until a much more thorough study of Makki has been made.

7. Cf. Carl Ernst, "Mystical Language and the Teaching Context in the Early Lexicons of Sufism," in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. S. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 181–201.

8. Not all influential Sufis are represented; there are others that could have been included, such as al-Tirmidhi, whose writings were influential on later Sufi ideas of sainthood, and Abu Talib al-Makki, mentioned in note 6, above. I hope that these selections here may be of use to readers in investigating the rich and complex world of early Islamic spirituality, and may encourage others to edit, translate, and make accessible more of this heritage.

CHAPTER 1. SOURCES OF ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

1. The point is made by Michel Chodkiewicz in connection with the later mystic, Ibn 'Arabi (*Ocean without Shore* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1993]).

2. I need to say a word specifically about the problems of translating the Qur'an. According to Islamic belief, the Qur'an is an "inimitable" text, and that belief is applied to the Qur'an in its original Arabic form. Thus from the point of view of the doctrine of inimitability, the notion of a "translation" of the Qur'an is problematic, at the very least. From the point of view of this translator, there are other, more practical issues, that make translating the Qur'an a deeply problematic exercise. The particular Qur'anic phonological parallelism and Arabic "sound patterns" have never been successfully translated or recreated in other languages, and these sound patterns are intimately interwoven with the semantic patterns of the text. Though it is of course written down, the Qur'an is both an oral text and a performed text in Islamic cultures; it is heard before it is read, it is heard constantly, recited by those trained in bringing out and lingering over the interior sound patterns of the text. From this point of view, the emphasis in Qur'anic education on

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learning the sounds first, on memorizing the text with emphasis on exact pronunciation, *before* studying the grammar and vocabulary of classical Arabic is not—as it has so often been interpreted by Western writers and some modernist Muslim intellectuals—a form of mere “rote” learning. Rather, it is beginning with first things first. What is needed, ultimately—and new changes in the way we receive and communicate information will make this possible soon—is a presentation of the Qur’an, one that brings it across as performed recitation.

3. My interpolate commentary (in italics) is meant only to highlight a few themes. There is no way to do justice to these passages in an interpretive sense without exploring their multiple resonances with other passages throughout the Qur’an.

4. The Arabic dual construction demands the translation “two of you.” What the “two” are has been a matter of debate within the tradition of Qur’anic commentary; some suggest it refers to humans and jinn. I prefer to see it in the context of the notion of polarity signs (male and female, night and day, odd and even). The fact that the antecedent for “the two of you” is never specified places the hearer within that world of polarity signs, but without any fixed representation.

5. *Jinn* is the plural of *jinnī* (genie), a semi-spirit being of the desert that in pre-Islamic poetry was identified with poetic inspiration, love, and madness. The Qur’an affirms the existence of the jinn, but emphasizes that unlike poets, the Prophet Muhammad was not inspired by jinn, but rather was given the word of God. The notion that the jinn were made of fire was used by early Qur’anic commentators to contrast them to the angels, who were made of light. The notion of jinn prevalent in the West comes from the much later Arabian Nights tradition, with its urban and sea-trade contexts.

6. The precise meaning of the “two weighty ones” (*al-thaqalān*) has been a matter of debate within the exegetical tradition. Some commentators suggest the two weighty ones are the two major earth-beings, the humans and the jinn.

7. In pre-Islamic Arabia, satans were a group of semi-spirits related to jinn and ghouls. In the Qur’an, the focus is on a single individual, *the satan*. The term is cognate to the Hebrew for Satan and does appear to be used as a proper name, justifying the use of the upper-case S. In some Sufi texts the older understanding of shaytān appears, with references in both the singular and the plural. In those texts I use the expressions “the satan” and “satans.”

8. See the commentary on Qur’an 2:30–33 in Tabari: Abū Ja’far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr at-Ṭabarī, *The Commentary on the Qur’an*, abridged translation by W. F. Madelung and A. Jones, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

9. As mentioned in the introduction to this passage, the Qur’an suddenly shifts voices when referring to the deity. Some commentators try to explain the frequent use of the plural “we” for the divine speaker by saying it refers to the deity and the angels, but this passage, where the “we” voice speaks directly to the angels, seems to rule out that possibility. Other commentators suggest versions of the “royal we.” My own view is that the breakup of reference to the divine speaker into several

different voices resists any simple explanation and requires an investigation into the psychodynamics of Qur'anic discourse. One of the few recent examinations of this neglected topic is that of Andrew Rippin, "Celestial Stammering: 'Point of View' in Qur'anic Discourse" (paper presented at the American Oriental Society, Cambridge, Mass., March 30, 1992).

10. Cf. *Sura 15:28-31*:

When your lord said to the angels
I am going to create a person from hard-dried clay.
When I have shaped him
and have blown into him of my spirit
fall bowing before him.
All the angels fell bowing together
Except Iblis who disdained to bow.

11. See the selections from Junayd's *Book of Fanā'*, Chapter 8, below.

12. The lote tree is one of several important trees: the tree of life discussed in early Islamic sacred histories, the tree under which Maryam found nurture and comfort before giving birth to Jesus, the firmly rooted tree as an analogue for the true sign of reality, and the blessed olive tree, neither of the East nor of the West, that is at the center of the most famous mystical passage of the Qur'an, the verse of light. In much later literature, these trees overlap in a multivalent and multireferential tree-symbol.

13. See Norman K. Brown, "The Apocalypse of Islam," *Social Text* 3, no. 8 (1983-1984): 155-171, a rich and original reading of *Sura 18*.

14. The term for "person" here, *nafs*, is grammatically feminine. As I have argued in detail elsewhere, grammatical gender is not merely grammatical in the Qur'an. Thus, I have tried to more accurately reflect gender balance in the Qur'an, not by imposing feminine constructions, but by breaking with the tradition—which has no Qur'anic or linguistic justification—of repressing them. See M. Sells, "Sound, Spirit, and Gender in *Sūrat al-Qadr*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 2 (April-May 1991): 239-259.

15. The ways in which these feminine "sound figures" are stressed is demonstrated throughout Sells, "Sound, Spirit, and Gender in *Sūrat al-Qadr*," and "Sound and Meaning in *Sūrat al-Qāri'a*," *Arabica* 40, no. 3 (1993): 403-430.

16. For the various meanings and levels of meaning involved in *tawhīd*, see, for example, the discussion of Junayd, in Chapter 8, below.

17. For some of the issues surrounding this term, see Uri Rubin, "*Al-Ṣamad* and the High God: An Interpretation of *sūra CXII*," *Der Islam* 61 (1984): 217.

18. From this point, I will simply use the anglicized form, Mi'raj, without diacriticals.

19. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi Sharḥ an-Nawawī*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Al-Maṭba'a al-Miṣriyya, 1924), pp. 209-232.

20. Cf. Gn 2:10–15: “There was a river flowing from Eden to water the garden, and when it left the garden it branched into four streams. The name of the first is Pishon; that is the river which encircles all the land of Havilah, where the gold [or frankincense] is. The gold of that land is good; bdellium and cornelians are also to be found there. The name of the second river is Gihon; this is the one which encircles all the land of Cush. The name of the third is Tigris; this is the river which runs east of Asshur. The fourth river is the Euphrates.” (*The New English Bible* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1971], p. 2).

21. “As far as”: the Arabic term is *muntabā*, an apparent lexical allusion to the Qur’anic phrase “lote tree of the furthest limit” (*sidrat al-muntabā*).

22. The commentators have trouble explaining the precise meaning of this point, repeated throughout the Mi’raj accounts. Choosing “the innate character” or *fiṭra* could refer to Muhammad’s choosing the drink that accorded with his own innate disposition, or with a more universal innate religion, but the context does not seem to allow a definitive interpretation.

23. ‘*Araja* (he took me up)—the verb from which the verbal noun *mi’rāj* (rising, ascent) is derived.

24. In later Islamic literature, the Qur’anic prophet Idris is identified with the biblical Enoch, partially on the correlation of the Qur’anic verse 19:57 (*We took him up to a high station*) with Gn 5:24. Enoch’s death is never recounted; instead he departs the earth (or at least the scene) in a distinctive manner: “Enoch walked with God, and he was no more, for God took him.” In some philosophical and esoteric circles, Idris/Enoch was identified in turn with Hermes Trismegistus and the philosophical perspectives of the Hermetic Corpus, especially the Poimandres and Asclepius.

25. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, pp. 218–222. This account of the rise through the heavens contains the formulaic question and response between Jibril and the guardian (*khāzin*) of each heaven. Muhammad’s account seems to reflect the dazed condition of the Prophet: he remembers only the prophets Adam, Jesus, Idris, Moses, and Abraham, and cannot place them in their normal heavens. Indeed, he remembers only Adam in the first heaven and Abraham in the sixth.

26. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, pp. 222–223. The word translated as domes, *janābīdh*, is obscure in Arabic, and an-Nawawī offers some even more obscure possibilities. It may be an Arabized, broken plural form of the Persian word for dome, *gumbad*[h].

27. *Ibid.*, p. 223, lines 1–7.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 224–225.

29. The grammatically feminine pronoun *hā* is without a stated antecedent, unless we interpret the antecedent as the seventh heaven. But the commentators have no qualms whatsoever in identifying it as the lote tree. See *ibid.*, p. 224, gloss.

30. There follows here a phrase: “And when they leave, they don’t return *akharu mā ‘alayhim*” that even the inveterate commentator an-Nawawī admits is obscure (see *ibid.*, p. 225).

31. From *Kitāb Sirat Rasūl Allāh* (The Book of the Sira of the Messenger of God): *Das Leben Muhammed’s nach Muhammed Ibn Ishāk bearbeitet von Abd el-Malik*

Ibn Hishām, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (Göttingen, 1858) I: 263–271. I have translated those passages relevant for Islamic mysticism. I have omitted the original apology of Ibn Ishāq in which he lists his sources and defends the veracity of the incidents reported (Wüstenfeld 263) and other sections, as noted below, that are of little relevance to the Sufi tradition.

32. Interpreted by some as Gabriel.

33. There occurs here a report by Qatāda describing how Jibril calmed the refractory Buraq by telling him he should respect the Prophet of God, thus allowing Muhammad to mount him.

34. (He said:) Then the Envoy, peace and blessings on him, turned back to Mecca. When he approached the Quraysh the next morning and reported to them what had happened, most of the people said “By God, the matter is clear! A camel train takes a month to go to Sha’m [Syria] and a month to return. Does that Muhammad there go and return to Mecca in a single night?” (He said:) Many of those who had given themselves to Islam went back on it. The people went to Abu Bakr and said: “What do you make of your companion claiming that he went in a single night to the *bayt al-muqaddas*, performed the prayer there, and returned to Mecca?” (He said:) Abu Bakr said: “You’re lying about him!” They said: “To the contrary, there he is in the prayer enclosure telling people about it!” Abu Bakr replied: “By God, if he said it, it is true (*ṣadaqa*). What by God! are you so amazed about? By God, he has told me that a communication comes to him from Allah all the way from the heaven to the earth in a single hour of day or night and I believed him to be true—and that goes beyond what you find so amazing.”

Then he came forward all the way to the Envoy of God, peace and blessings on him, and said: “Prophet of God, you have told these that you went to the *bayt al-muqaddas* last night.” He answered “Yes.” He said: “Prophet of God, describe it for me, for I have been there.”

(Al-Ḥasan said:) The Envoy of God, peace and blessings on him—and I [Hasan] was lifted up so that I could see him as he spoke—began to describe it to Abu Bakr. Abu Bakr was saying “You have told the truth. I testify that you are the Rasūl Allah.” Every time he described anything for him, he would say “You have told the truth. I testify that you are the Envoy of God.” When he was finished, the Envoy of God, peace and blessings on him, said to Abu Bakr: “You, Abu Bakr, are the Ṣiddīq [the one who testified to the truth, *ṣaddaqa*]” and from then on he called him the Ṣiddīq (*Ibn Hishām, Kitāb Sirat Rasūl Allāh* 1: 265).

35. Here occurs a report by Sa’id al-Musayyab with some unusual details about the appearance of Moses (thin, curly-haired, hook nosed), Jesus (freckled and looking as if he had come from a bath) and looking like a certain ‘Urwa b. Mas’ūd. This report is followed by an extended report from Umm Hāni bint Abī Ṭalib (Hind) in which the Prophet describes various moments in his journey through Syria, the valleys he passed, the caravans he met, etc.

36. The text of Ibn Hishām continues with detailed depiction of the ascent through the seven heavens and the reception of the obligation of five prayers. The

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accounts are basically consistent with the hadith accounts, but much more elaborate, with an emphasis on reward and punishment, physical characteristics of the prophets, and other details that have relatively little relevance for the mystical texts that are presented in this volume.

37. More detailed discussions can be found in the following recent works: Suzanne Stetkevych, ed. *Reorientations: Studies in Arabic and Persian Poetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Naṣīb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Mustansir Mir, ed., *The Literary Heritage of Classical Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993); M. Sells, "Like the Arms of a Drowning Man: Simile and Symbol Worlds in the *Nāqa* Sections of Bashama's *Hajarta Umāma*," in *A Festschrift in Honor of Professor Ewald Wagner, 2 volumes*, ed. W. Heinrichs and G. Schoeler (Beirut/Istanbul: Beiruter Studien, 1994), pp. 18–41; idem, *Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes by 'Alqama, Shanfara, Labid, Antara, Al-A'sha, and Dhur-Rumma* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1993); idem, "Ibn 'Arabi's *Alā Yā Hamāmātī l-Arākātī wa l-Bānī*, A Modern Translation," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, 10 (1991): 1–11; and Emil Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Fāriḍ, His Verse and His Shrine* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994).

38. In translating place-names and personal names from poetry, I mark English accentual accents rather than the quantitative transliterations, in order to allow the rhythm of the poetic translations to come through.

39. From M. Sells, *Desert Tracings*, pp. 35–36.

40. Ibid., p. 36.

41. Ibid., pp. 36–37.

42. See John Seybold, "The Earliest Demon Lover: *The Ṭayfal-Khayāl* in *al-Mufaddaliyyāt*," in Stetkevych, ed., *Reorientations*, pp. 180–189.

43. From M. Sells, "Along the Edge of Mirage: The *Mufaddaliyya* of Mukhabbal as-Sa'dī, an Interpretation," in Mir, ed., *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam*, pp. 119–120. The water imagery in this poem, as in all the other *naṣībs*, brings together an eroticized world of sexual waters with a purified world of ablutionary waters. See M. Sells, "Guises of the Ghul: Dissembling Simile and Semantic Overflow in the Classical Arabic *Naṣīb*" in Stetkevych, ed., *Reorientations*, pp. 103–164.

44. Sells, *Desert Tracings*, p. 14.

45. Sura 26:225. Though often interpreted as a kind of Platonic criticism of poetry, the Qur'anic depiction here could also be viewed as simply stating what the poets themselves would freely admit.

46. From the elegy of Ḥassān ibn Thābit, translated by Stetkevych in *The Zephyrs of Najd*, p. 61.

47. Sells, *Desert Tracings*, p. 18.

48. See Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint*, pp. 33–54.

49. The people of 'Ad, the city of Iram: a fabled Arabian civilization whose destruction is recounted in the Qur'an as an example of the fate of those civilizations that reject their prophets.

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50. Name given to Sassanian Persian kings (derived from Caesar).
51. See the Sarraj passages on Bistami, below.
52. Reading *wa annī anti* for *wa annī 'anki*: the reading of K and A (in which this reading is written in above the text). The alternative reading would give: "I search my heart secret for desire for you/ but find only myself, that you are separate, and the inner essence greater."
53. See Qushayrī's "On the Interpretation of Expressions," below.
54. Sells, *Desert Tracings*, pp. 67–76. For the Arabic text of the passage cited here, see *Dhū al-Rumma, the Dīwān of Ghaylān ibn 'Uqba*, ed. Carlile Henry Hayes Macartney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919), pp. 80–83.

CHAPTER 2. EARLY SUFI QUR'AN INTERPRETATION

1. These translations of selected sections are based on the text of Paul Nwyia. See his, "Le Tafsīr Mystique Attribué à Ga'far Ṣādiq: Édition critique," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 43 (Beirut, 1968): pp. 181–230. Nwyia collected the various interpretations attributed to Ja'far (d. 148/765) from the *Ḥaqā'iq at-Tafsīr (Realities of Interpretation)* of Sulamī (d. 412/1021), basing the edition on three manuscripts from Istanbul. I have selected those passages that offer a distinctively Sufi interpretation, with special emphasis on the more extended sections of commentary. Nwyia discusses the thorny issue of whether the commentary is correctly attributed to Ja'far in his introduction (pp. 181–185).

Ja'far was born and lived his entire life in Medina and lived during the transition between the Umayyad Caliphate of Damascus and the Abbasid Caliphate that became centered in Baghdad.

2. See Paul Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique* (Beirut: Dar al-Machreq Editeurs, 1970), pp. 158–159. Nwyia lists two manuscripts: Bankipore, n. 1460, 232 fol. (v. Catalogue of the Arabic and Persian mss., t. XVIII, 2, pp. 143–144) and Istanbul, Nafiz Pasa 65, 154 fol. For a close discussion of Ja'far's Qur'anic exegesis, see pp. 156–208 of *Exégèse coranique*.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 159. The manuscript is listed as Yeni Cami 43.

4. Because the Yeni Cami manuscript is not available to me, I have translated this passage from Nwyia's French translation of it on p. 159 of *Exégèse coranique*, no. 3.

5. For an example of *du'ā* and *munājāt*, see Imam Zayn al-'Abidin, *The Psalms of Islam (Al-Sahifat al-Sajjadiyya)*, trans. William Chittick (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1988).

6. While Moses' encounter with the burning bush and his experience on Mount Sinai are distinct events in the narrative of Exodus, the Qur'an tends to give various versions of a single encounter that has elements analogous to each of the two Exodus episodes. Western polemicists have found such differences between Qur'anic and biblical accounts a way of portraying Muhammad as a copier of biblical

EARLY ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

SUFI, QUR'AN, MI`RAJ, POETIC AND THEOLOGICAL WRITINGS

TRANSLATED, EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
MICHAEL A. SELLS

PREFACE BY
CARL W. ERNST



PAULIST PRESS
NEW YORK • MAHWAH

Cover art: AIDA MUŠANOVIĆ, a graphic artist, was born in Bosnia and earned her B.F.A. degree at the Academy of Fine Arts at Sarajevo University. A survivor of the aggression in Bosnia, she came to the United States, where she co-organized the internationally shown project *Sarajevo '92*, the art/print portfolio created in the besieged Bosnian capital under war conditions. The image on the cover of this volume depicts the prayer niche (*miḥrāb*) from the "Colored Mosque" in Foča (pronounced Fó-cha), in southeast Bosnia-Herzegovina. The mosque, one of the masterworks of South Slavic architecture, was constructed in 1551 C.E. It was called the Colored Mosque (*Aladža džamiya*) because of its stunning colors both on the interior and exterior. The artwork shows the section of the *miḥrāb* known as *muqarnas*, the "stalactite" forms that connect the square to the curved areas of the mosque and are symbolic of the connections between heaven and earth. The mosque was destroyed by Serbian nationalists during the "ethnic cleansing" of Foča in the spring of 1993. It is to all such destroyed Bosnian monuments that the artist pays homage in her artwork.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Early Islamic mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, poetic and theological writings/translated, edited, and with an introduction by Michael A. Sells.

p. cm.—(The classics of Western spirituality; #86)

Includes bibliographical references () and index.

ISBN 0-8091-0477-6 (cloth: alk. paper).—ISBN 0-8091-3619-8 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Sufism—Early works to 1800. I. Sells, Michael Anthony. II. Series.

BP188.9.E2 1996

297'.4—dc20

95-52973

CIP

Published by Paulist Press
997 Macarthur Boulevard
Mahwah, New Jersey 07430

Printed and bound in the United States of America