

## Sun, Stars, and Scent: A Representation of the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey By Özlem Yıldız

A small painting from eighteenth-century Mughal India now in the Free Library of Philadelphia's Rare Books Department depicts a night sky filled with stars and the rising sun [Fig. 1]. Against this backdrop, eleven angelic figures surround a horse-like creature with a human head and a peacock tail. The creature, harnessed with luxurious gear and beautifully ornamented textiles, carries on its back a golden teardrop-shaped flame. The shape of this flame is repeated in the smaller balls of light that the four angelic figures above are extending toward the center of the composition. Meanwhile, the two angels just below are holding what seems to be an incense burner and perfume bottle, gently sprinkling the contents of the latter onto the central figure, while the other angels open their palms in prayer.

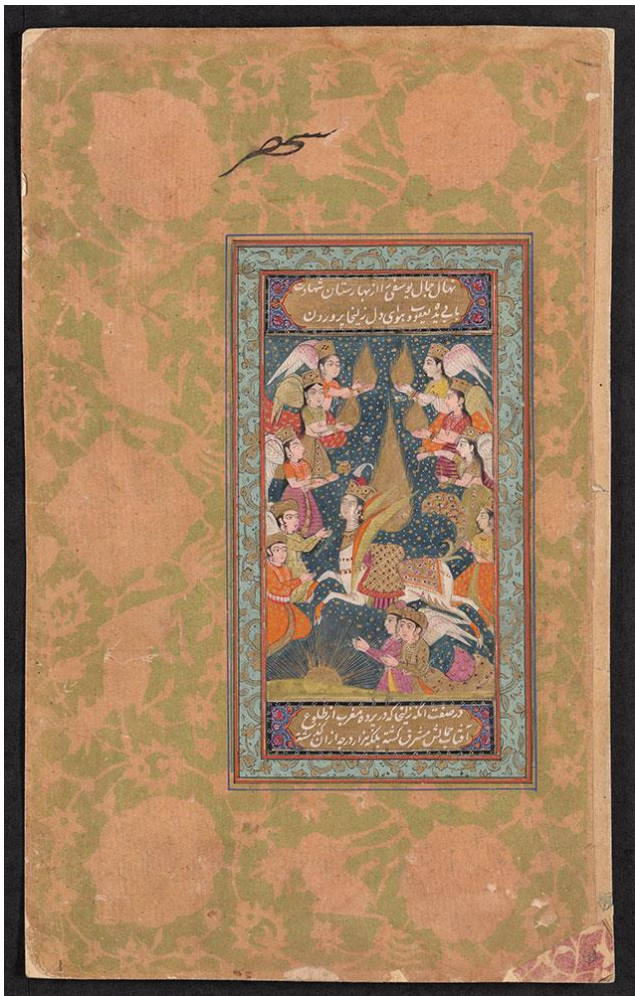


Figure 1. *Mi'raj*, or Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad. Leaf from *Yusuf and Zulaikha*. Late eighteenth century, Mughal Empire. Free Library of Philadelphia, Lewis M 464.

To an observer familiar with the story of the Prophet Muhammad's night journey (*mi'raj*), this painting will be recognizable as a common scene in Islamic art. The *mi'raj* is mentioned in the Qur'an, in the chapter called "Al-Isra," another term also meaning "night journey." The first verse of this chapter reads:

“Glory be to Him, who carried His servant [i.e., the Prophet Muhammad] by night from the Holy Mosque [i.e., the Masjid-i Haram in Mecca] to the Further Mosque [i.e., Masjid-i Aqsa in Jerusalem] the precincts of which We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs. He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing.” (17:1)

This journey is also recorded in *hadith*, which are collections of the sayings and deeds of the prophet, in more detail. According to these sources, a mystical creature called Buraq carries the prophet from his bed in Mecca to Jerusalem, then to the heavens to meet the former prophets, and finally to meet God (Bukhari 2009). In line with the oral and textual traditions, paintings depicting the prophet ascending to the heavens mounted on Buraq were often found in illustrated manuscripts from the fourteenth century onwards (Gruber 2019).

This painting, too, is on a page that was detached from a manuscript. We can understand that the page was formerly bound within a book because of two reasons: First, we can see two portions of text on the top and bottom of the page. Second, the painting is positioned closer to the right side of the paper’s edge, creating a smaller margin to the right when compared to the left. In manuscripts, the binding side of the margin was often smaller, keeping the blocks of texts on both pages of an open book closer to each other, and allowing ample space for marginal illuminations or notes on the outer edges.

While images of the Prophet Muhammad’s ascension to heaven is a commonly depicted scene throughout the history of Islamic painting, any viewer who happened to be unfamiliar with this tradition—from 18<sup>th</sup>-century South Asia to the present-day United States—may logically turn to the inscriptions both above and below this particular painting to decipher its subject matter. Contrary to what we might expect, the text on this page is not directly related to the painting itself. The inscriptions on this page originate from a famous romance narrative, *Yusuf and Zulaikha*, written by the poet Abd-al Rahman Jami in Persian in the fifteenth century. Although this long poem does include a section describing the prophet’s night journey, the text on this page does not come from that particular section, which raises questions about the placement of paintings within the text. Who decided that this scene should appear in a different chapter, and why? It is not possible to answer these questions without seeing the whole book. One thing we do know, however, is that *mi’raj* scenes were also illustrated in other copies of the same text. Another example of one of these scenes is a loose leaf also now in the Free Library collection, originally made in Safavid Iran during the sixteenth century [Fig. 2].



Figure 2. *Mi'raj*, or Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad. Leaf from *Yusuf and Zulaikha*. Late sixteenth century, Safavid Iran. Free Library of Philadelphia, Lewis P 40.

Going back to our eighteenth-century Mughal *mi'raj* scene [see Fig. 1], the two sections of text on the page belong to the chapters of the poem in which Yusuf interprets dreams, his father Yakub cries for his lost son, and Zulaikha falls in love with Yusuf. The lines below the painting include a description of Zulaikha's beauty, which "makes the west turn into east and surpass it by a thousand degrees with the rising of her sun-like face." While this text does not describe the *mi'raj* scene itself, the painting certainly refers to the surrounding inscription through subtle details.

The most direct connection between the painting and lines of poetry appears at the bottom left of the page. Right under the image of the rising sun, we read the word "*tulu'*," or sunrise. The theme of light is repeated throughout the painting, with the bright stars and the flaming balls of light. The Prophet Muhammad himself is represented as a large flaming halo on the horse-like creature called Buraq. While it is common in Islamic painting to see a flaming halo surrounding the head or whole body of the prophet, there are also examples in which his face is replaced by flames (Gruber 2019).

Two other *mi'raj* paintings in the Free Library collection depict the prophet with a flaming halo surrounding not only his figure but also that of Buraq. Lewis P 40 depicts the prophet in full figure, with a white veil covering his face and a flaming halo surrounding him and the

Buraq [see Fig. 2] In Lewis P 51, a lion is facing the prophet, who appears to be extending a ring towards it [Fig. 3]. Lion figures in paintings depicting the *mi'raj* refer to Muhammad's encounter with a lion-shaped angel and can be interpreted as a reference to the prophet's son-in-law Ali b. Abi Talib, who is popularly known by the sobriquet "lion of God" (Shani 2006, Gruber 2019). In this image, the lion figure is also surrounded by a flaming halo, thus including Ali in the sacred light of the prophet. Looking back to the *mir'aj* scene in M 464 [see Fig. 1], the painter chose to replace the body of the prophet entirely with a depiction of the figure's holy light, *nur Muhammad*, to denote his presence and stress the transcendental qualities of the prophet (Gruber 2009).

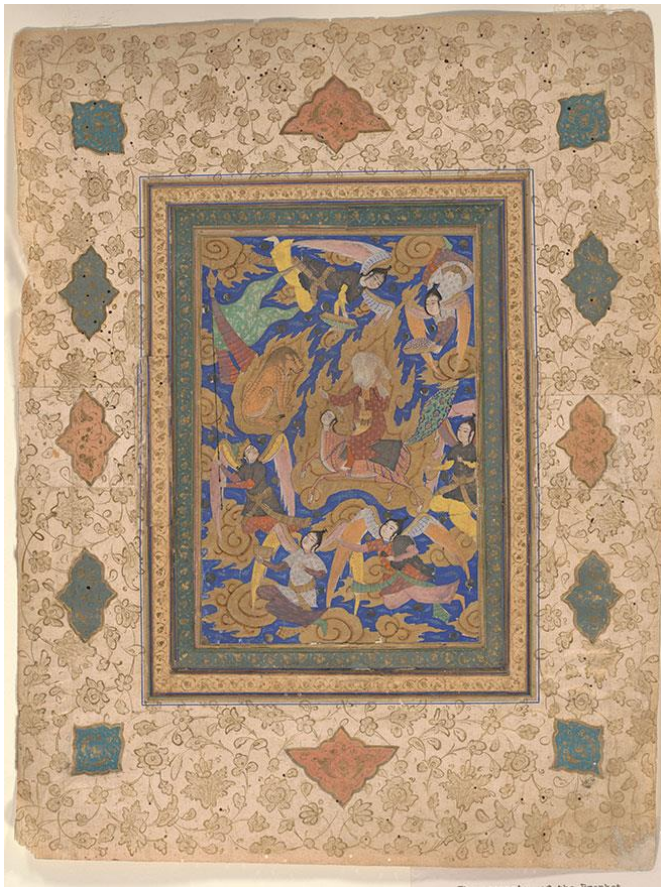


Figure 3. *Mi'raj*, or Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad. Early sixteenth century, Safavid Iran. Free Library of Philadelphia, Lewis P 51.

The sacred light of the Prophet Muhammad, conveyed through the sunrise and stars against the night sky in M 464, might also be a reference to the Mughal emperor and his piety. What one historian has described as "solar symbolism" was an important part of Mughal imperial ceremonies (Malecka 1999). One such ceremony was called the *jarokha-i darshan*, in which the Mughal emperors appeared at the window of the palace at sunrise, with the sunlight serving as a metaphor of the ruler's glory. In addition, according to an ancient Persian belief that was adopted by the Mughals, a divine light (*farr*) accompanied rightful and just rulers. [Mughal paintings often depicted the emperor with a sun-halo](#), visualizing this imperial radiance. While the painting under discussion is clearly portraying the prophet with his sacred

light, the depiction of a rising sun would also evoke the image of imperial haloes, associating the holy light of the prophet with the Mughal emperor's *farr*. While the dominant position of the flaming halo symbolizes the prophet's sanctity, the proximity of the rising sun would stress the religious devotion and just rule of the Mughal emperor.

The painting also engages other senses beyond the faculty of vision. Descriptions of the prophet commonly mention that Muhammad always smelled of roses, with the flower serving as a symbol of the prophet and divine beauty. In M 464, two angels on either side of Buraq are seen carrying small golden objects. The angel on the left appears to carry an incense burner, and the one on the right has a small bottle out of which she is sprinkling the golden flame representing the prophet with perfume. Both figures remind the viewer of his olfactory qualities.

By the late eighteenth century, this composition was an established way of depicting the prophet's night journey in Islamic manuscripts: Buraq in the center, with the prophet mounted above, and surrounded by angelic figures leading the way and accompanying his journey. We encounter similar compositions in other manuscripts, especially from sixteenth-century Safavid Iran, as illustrated in a manuscript of [Khamasa of Nizami in the British Library](#). As in the case of the three Free Library paintings, these folios are sometimes detached from their manuscripts. [A detached painting in Harvard Art Museums](#), and another [folio in the Seattle Art Museum](#) are other examples from sixteenth-century Persia.

M 464 in the Free Library includes all of these elements while also displaying less common features. The dark blue background dotted with stars separates the painting from its earlier Persian counterparts mentioned above. The symmetrical alignment of the angels takes the attention from the swerving angels in the other examples and places it more firmly on the central figures, namely the Buraq and the flaming halo representing the prophet. The rising sun in the bottom left corner of the scene acts as an element that ties the text and the painting together, while accentuating the notion of light associated with the prophet. This representation of the prophet's night journey demonstrates one of many ways that the prophet was represented in text and image.

## Further reading

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