

The Message of The Quran: Appendices

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The Message of The Quran:

Appendices

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Appendix I Symbolism And Allegory In The Qur'an

WHEN studying the Qur'an, one frequently encounters what may be described as "key-phrases"

that is to say, statements which provide a clear, concise indication of the idea underlying

a particular passage or passages: for instance, the many references to the creation of man

"out of dust" and "out of a drop of sperm", pointing to the lowly biological origin of the

human species; or the statement in the ninety-ninth surah (Az-Zalzalah) that on Resurrection Day

"he who shall have done an atom's weight of good, shall behold it; and he who shall have done an

atom's weight of evil, shall behold it" - indicating the ineluctable{unavoidable} afterlife

consequences of, and the responsibility for, all that man consciously does in this world; or

the divine declaration (in 38:27), "We have not created heaven and earth and all that is between

them without meaning and purpose (batilan), as is the surmise of those who are
bert on denying

the truth."

Instances of such Qur'anic key-phrases can be quoted almost ad infinitum, and in many varying formulations. But there is one fundamental statement in the Qur'an which occurs only once, and which may be qualified as "the key-phrase of all its key-phrases": the statement in verse 7 of Al-'Imran to the effect that the Qur'an "contains messages that are clear in and by themselves (ayat muhkamat) as well as others that are allegorical (mutashabihat)". It is this verse which represents, in an absolute sense, a key to the understanding of the Qur'anic message and makes the whole of it accessible to "people who think" (Li-qawmin yatafakkarun).

In my notes on the above-mentioned verse of Al-'Imran I have tried to elucidate the meaning of the expression ayat muhkamat as well as the general purport of what is termed mutashabih ("allegorical" or "symbolic"). Without a proper grasp of what is implied by this latter term, much of the Qur'an is liable to be - and, in fact, has often been - grossly misunderstood both by believers and by such as refuse to believe in its divinely-inspired origin. However, an appreciation of what is meant by "allegory" or "symbolism" in the context of the Qur'an is, by itself, not enough to make one fully understand its world-view: in order to achieve this we must relate the Qur'anic use of these terms to a concept touched upon almost at the very beginning of the divine writ - namely, the existence of "a realm which is beyond the reach of human perception" (al-ghayb). It is this concept that constitutes the basic premise for an understanding of the call of the Qur'an, and, indeed, of the principle of religion - every religion - as such: for all truly religious cognition arises from and is based on the fact that only a small segment of reality is open to man's perception and imagination, and that by far the larger part of it escapes his comprehension altogether.

However, side by side with this clear-cut metaphysical concept we have a not less clear-cut finding of a psychological nature: namely, the finding that the human mind (in which term we comprise conscious thinking, imagination, dream-life, intuition, memory, etc.) can operate only on the basis of perceptions previously experienced by that very mind either in their

entirety or in some of their constituent elements: that is to say, it cannot visualize, or form an idea of, something that lies entirely outside the realm of previously realized experiences. Hence, whenever we arrive at a seemingly "new" mental image or idea, we find, on closer examination, that even if it is new as a composite entity, it is not really new as regards its component elements, for these are invariably derived from previous - and sometimes quite disparate - mental experiences which are now but brought together in a new combination or series of new combinations.

Now as soon as we realize that the human mind cannot operate otherwise than on the basis of previous experiences - that is to say, on the basis of apperceptions {conscious perception} and cognitions already recorded in that mind - we are faced by a weighty question: Since the metaphysical ideas of religion relate, by virtue of their nature, to a realm beyond the reach of human perception or experience - how can they be successfully conveyed to us? How can we be expected to grasp ideas which have no counterpart, not even a fractional one, in any of the apperceptions which we have arrived at empirically?

The answer is self-evident: By means of loan-images derived from our actual - physical or mental - experiences; or, as Zamakhshari phrases it in his commentary on 13:35, 'through a parabolic illustration, by means of something which we know from our experience, of something that is beyond the reach of our perception' (tamihilan li-ma ghaba 'anna bi-ma nushahid). And this is the innermost purport of the term and concept of al-mutashabihat as used in the Qur'an.

Thus, the Qur'an tells us clearly that many of its passages and expressions must be understood in an allegorical sense for the simple reason that, being intended for human understanding, they could not have been conveyed to us in any other way. It follows, therefore, that if we were to take every Qur'anic passage, statement or expression in its outward, literal sense and disregard the possibility of its being an allegory, a metaphor or a parable, we would be offending against the very spirit of the divine writ.

Consider, for instance, some of the Qur'anic references to God's Being - a Being indefinable, infinite in time and space, and utterly beyond any creature's comprehension. Far from being able to imagine Him, we can only realize what He is not: namely, not limited in either time or space, not definable in terms of comparison, and not to be comprised within any category of human thought. Hence only very generalized metaphors can convey to us, though most inadequately, the idea of His existence and activity.

And so, when the Qur'an speaks of Him as being "in the heavens" or "established on His throne (al-'arsh)", we cannot possibly take these phrases in their literal senses, since then they would imply, however vaguely, that God is limited in space: and since such a limitation would contradict the concept of an Infinite Being, we know immediately, without the least doubt, that the "heavens" and the "throne" and God's being "established" on it are but linguistic vehicles meant to convey an idea which is outside all human experience, namely, the idea of God's almightiness and absolute sway over all that exists. Similarly, whenever He is described as "all-seeing", "all-hearing" or "all-aware", we know that these descriptions have nothing to do with the phenomena of physical seeing or hearing but simply circumscribe, in terms understandable to man, the fact of God's eternal Presence in all that is or happens. And since "no human vision can encompass Him" (Qur'an 6:103), man is not expected to realize His existence otherwise than through observing the effects of His unceasing activity within and upon the universe created by Him.

But whereas our belief in God's existence does not - and, indeed, could not depend on our grasping the unfathomable "how" of His Being, the same is not the case with problems connected with man's own existence, and, in particular, with the idea of a life in the hereafter: for, man's psyche is so constituted that it cannot accept any proposition relating to himself without being given a clear exposition of its purport.

The Qur'an tells us that man's life in this world is but the first stage - a very short stage - of a life that continues beyond the hiatus called "death"; and the same Qur'an stresses again and again the principle of man's moral responsibility for all his conscious actions and his behaviour, and of the continuation

of this responsibility, in the shape of inescapable consequences, good or bad, in a person's life in the hereafter. But how could man be made to understand the nature of these consequences and, thus, of the quality of the life that awaits him? - for, obviously, inasmuch as man's resurrection will be the result of what the Qur'an describes as "a new act of creation", the life that will follow upon it must be entirely different from anything that man can and does experience in this world.

This being so, it is not enough for man to be told. "If you behave righteously in this world, you will attain to happiness in the life to come", or, alternatively, "If you do wrong in this world, you will suffer for it in the hereafter". Such statements would be far too general and abstract to appeal to man's imagination and, thus, to influence his behaviour. What is needed is a more direct appeal to the intellect, resulting in a kind of "visualization" of the consequences of one's conscious acts and omissions: and such an appeal can be effectively produced by means of metaphors, allegories and parables, each of them stressing, on the one hand, the absolute dissimilarity of all that man will experience after resurrection from whatever he did or could experience in this world; and, on the other hand, establishing means of comparison between these two categories of experience.

Thus, explaining the reference to the bliss of paradise in 32:17, the Prophet indicated the essential difference between man's life in this world and in the hereafter in these words: "God says, 'I have readied for My righteous servants what no eye has ever seen, and no ear has ever heard, and no heart of man has ever conceived'" (Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi). On the other hand, in 2:25 the Qur'an speaks thus of the blessed in paradise: "Whenever they are granted fruits therefrom as their appointed sustenance, they will say, 'It is this that in days of yore was granted to us as our sustenance' - for they shall be given something which will recall that [past]": and so we have the image of gardens through which running waters flow, blissful shade, spouses of indescribable beauty, and many other delights infinitely varied and unending, and yet somehow comparable to what may be conceived of as most delightful in this world.

However, this possibility of an intellectual comparison between the two stages

of human existence is to a large extent limited by the fact that all our thinking and imagining is indissolubly connected with the concepts of finite time and finite space: in other words, we cannot imagine infinity in either time or space - and therefore cannot imagine a state of existence independent of time and space - or, as the Qur'an phrases it with reference to a state of happiness in afterlife, "a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth" (3:133): which expression is the Qur'anic synonym for the entire created universe. On the other hand, we know that every Qur'anic statement is directed to man's reason and must, therefore, be comprehensible either in its literal sense (as in the case of the ayat muhkamat) or allegorically (as in the ayat mutashabihat); and since, owing to the constitution of the human mind, neither infinity nor eternity are comprehensible to us, it follows that the reference to the infinite "vastness" of paradise cannot relate to anything but the intensity of sensation which it will offer to the blest.

By obvious analogy, the principle of a "comparison through allegory" applied in the Qur'an to all references to paradise - i.e., a state of unimaginable happiness in afterlife - must be extended to all descriptions of otherworldly suffering - i.e., hell - in respect of its utter dissimilarity from all earthly experiences as well as its unmeasurable intensity. In both cases the descriptive method of the Qur'an is the same. We are told, as it were: "Imagine the most joyous sensations, bodily as well as emotional, accessible to man: indescribable beauty, love physical and spiritual, consciousness of fulfilment, perfect peace and harmony; and imagine these sensations intensified beyond anything imaginable in this world - and at the same time entirely different from anything imaginable: and you have an inkling, however vague, of what is meant by 'paradise'." And, on the other hand: "Imagine the greatest suffering, bodily as well as spiritual, which man may experience: burning by fire, utter loneliness and bitter desolation, the torment of unceasing frustration, a condition of neither living nor dying; and imagine this pain, this darkness and this despair intensified beyond anything imaginable in this world - and at the same time entirely different from anything imaginable: and you will know, however vaguely, what is meant by 'hell'."

Side by side with these allegories relating to man's life after death we find in the Qur'an many symbolical expressions referring to the evidence of God's activity. Owing to the limitations of human language - which, in their turn, arise from the inborn limitations of the human mind - this activity can only be circumscribed and never really described. Just as it is impossible for us to imagine or define God's Being, so the true nature of His creativeness - and, therefore, of His plan of creation - must remain beyond our grasp. But since the Qur'an aims at conveying to us an ethical teaching based, precisely, on the concept of God's purposeful creativeness, the latter must be, as it were, "translated" into categories of thought accessible to man. Hence the use of expressions which at first sight have an almost anthropomorphic hue, for instance, God's "wrath" (ghadab) or "condemnation"; His "pleasure" at good deeds or "love" for His creatures; or His being "oblivious" of a sinner who was oblivious of Him; or "asking" a wrongdoer on Resurrection Day about his wrongdoing; and so forth. All such verbal "translations" of God's activity into human terminology are unavoidable as long as we are expected to conform to ethical principles revealed to us by means of a human language; but there can be no greater mistake than to think that these "translations" could ever enable us to define the Undefinable.

And, as the Qur'an makes it clear in the seventh verse of Al-Imran, only "those whose hearts are given to swerving from the truth go after that part of the divine writ which has been expressed in allegory, seeking out [what is bound to create] confusion, and seeking [to arrive at] its final meaning [in an arbitrary manner: but none save God knows its final meaning."

Appendix II Al-Muqatta'at

ABOUT one-quarter of the Qur'anic surahs are preceded by mysterious letter-symbols called muqatta'at ("disjointed letters") or, occasionally, fawatih ("openings") because they appear at the beginning of the relevant surahs. Out of the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet, exactly one-half that is, fourteen - occur in this position, either singly or in varying combinations of two, three, four or five letters. They are always pronounced singly, by their designations and not as mere sounds - thus: alif lam mim, or ha mim, etc.

The significance of these letter-symbols has perplexed the commentators from the earliest times. There is no evidence of the Prophet's having ever referred to them in any of his recorded utterances, nor of any of his Companions having ever asked him for an explanation. None the less, it is established beyond any possibility of doubt that all the Companions - obviously following the example of the Prophet - regarded the muqatta'at as integral parts of the surahs to which they are prefixed, and used to recite them accordingly: a fact which disposes effectively of the suggestion advanced by some Western orientalists that these letters may be no more than the initials of the scribes who wrote down the individual revelations at the Prophet's dictation, or of the Companions who recorded them at the time of the final codification of the Qur'an during the reign of the first three Caliphs.

Some of the Companions as well as some of their immediate successors and later Qur'an commentators were convinced that these letters are abbreviations of certain words or even phrases relating to God and His attributes, and tried to "reconstruct" them with much ingenuity: but since the possible combinations are practically unlimited, all such interpretations are highly arbitrary and, therefore, devoid of any real usefulness. Others have tried to link the muqatta'at to the numerological values of the letters of the Arabic alphabet, and have "derived" by this means all manner of esoteric indications and prophecies.

Yet another, perhaps more plausible interpretation, based on two sets of facts, has been advanced by some of the most outstanding Islamic scholars throughout the centuries:

Firstly, all words of the Arabic language, without any exception, are composed of either one letter or a combination of two, three, four or five letters, and never more than five: and, as already mentioned, these are the forms in which the muqatta'at appear.

Secondly, all surahs prefixed by these letter-symbols open, directly or obliquely, with a reference to revelation, either in its generic sense or its specific manifestation, the Qur'an. At first glance it might appear that three surahs (29, 30 and 68) are exceptions to this rule; but this assumption is misleading. In the opening verse of surah 29 (Al-'Ankabut), a reference to revelation is obviously implied in the saying,

"We have attained to faith" (amanna), i.e., in God and His messages. In surah 30 (Ar-Ram), divine revelation is unmistakably stressed in the prediction of Byzantine victory in verses 2-4. In verse 1 of surah 68 (Al-Qalam) the phenomenon of revelation is clearly referred to in the evocative mention of "the pen" (see note 2 on the first verse of that surah). Thus, there are no "exceptions" in the surahs prefixed by one or more of the muqatta'at: each of them opens with a reference to divine revelation.

This, taken together with the fact that the muqatta'at mirror, as it were, all word-forms of the Arabic language, has led scholars and thinkers like Al-Mubarrad, Ibn Hazm, Zamakhshari, Razi, Baydawi, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Kathir to mention only a few of them - to the conclusion that the muqatta'at are meant to illustrate the inimitable, wondrous nature of Qur'anic revelation, which, though originating in a realm beyond the reach of human perception (al-ghayb), can be and is conveyed to man by means of the very sounds (represented by letters) of ordinary human speech.

However, even this very attractive interpretation is not entirely satisfactory inasmuch as there are many surahs which open with an explicit reference to divine revelation and are nevertheless not preceded by any letter-symbol. Secondly - and this is the most weighty objection - the above explanation, too, is based on no more than conjecture: and so, in the last resort, we must content ourselves with the finding that a solution of this problem still remains beyond our grasp. This was apparently the view of the four Right-Guided Caliphs, summarized in these words of Abu Bakr: "In every divine writ (kitab) there is [an element of] mystery - and the mystery of the Qur'an is [indicated] in the openings of [some of] the surahs."

Appendix III On The Term And Concept Of Jinn

IN ORDER to grasp the purport of the term jinn as used in the Qur'an, we must dissociate our minds from the meaning given to it in Arabian folklore, where it early came to denote all manner of "demons" in the most popular sense of this word. This folkloristic image has somewhat obscured the original connotation of the term and its highly significant - almost self-explanatory - verbal derivation. The root-verb is janna, "he [or "it"] concealed" or "covered with darkness": cf. 6:76, which speaks of

Abraham "when the night overshadowed him with its darkness (janna 'alayhi)". Since this verb is also used in the intransitive sense ("he [or "it"] was [or "became"] concealed", resp. "covered with darkness"), all classical philologists point out that al-jinn signifies "intense [or "confusing"] darkness" and, in a more general sense, "that which is concealed from [man's] senses", i.e., things, beings or forces which cannot normally be perceived by man but have, nevertheless, an objective reality, whether concrete or abstract, of their own.

In the usage of the Qur'an, which is certainly different from the usage of primitive folklore, the term jinn has several distinct meanings. The most commonly encountered is that of spiritual forces or beings which, precisely because they have no corporeal existence, are beyond the perception of our corporeal senses: a connotation which includes "satans" and "satanic forces" (shayatin - see note 16 on 15:17) as well as "angels" and "angelic forces", since all of them are "concealed from our senses" (Jawhari, Raghib). In order to make it quite evident that these invisible manifestations are not of a corporeal nature, the Qur'an states parabolically that the jinn were created out of "the fire of scorching winds" (nar as-samam, in 15:27), or out of "a confusing flame of fire" (marij min nar, in 55:15), or simply "out of fire" (7:12 and 38:76, in these last two instances referring to the Fallen Angel, Iblis). Parallel with this, we have authentic ahadith to the effect that the Prophet spoke of the angels as having been "created out of light" (khuliqat min nar: Muslim, on the authority of 'A'ishah) - light and fire being akin, and likely to manifest themselves within and through one another (cf. note 7 on verse 8 of surah 27).

The term jinn is also applied to a wide range of phenomena which, according to most of the classical commentators, indicate certain sentient organisms of so fine a nature and of a physiological composition so different from our own that they are not normally accessible to our sense-perception. We know, of course, very little as to what can and what cannot play the role of a living organism; moreover, our inability to discern and observe such phenomena is by no means a sufficient justification for a denial of their existence. The Qur'an refers often to "the realm which is beyond the reach of human perception" (al-ghayb), while God

is frequently spoken of as "the Sustainer of all the worlds" (rabb al-alamin): and the use of the plural clearly indicates that side by side with the "world" open to our observation there are other "worlds" as well - and, therefore, other forms of life, different from ours and presumably from one another, and yet subtly interacting and perhaps even permeating one another in a manner beyond our ken. And if we assume, as we must, that there are living organisms whose biological premises are entirely different from our own, it is only logical to assume that our physical senses can establish contact with them only under very exceptional circumstances: hence the description of them as "invisible beings". Now that occasional, very rare crossing of paths between their life-mode and ours may well give rise to strange - because unexplainable - manifestations, which man's primitive fantasy has subsequently interpreted as ghosts, demons and other such "supernatural" apparitions.

Occasionally, the term jinn is used in the Qur'an to denote those elemental forces of nature - including human nature - which are "concealed from our senses" inasmuch as they manifest themselves to us only in their effects but not in their intrinsic reality. Instances of this connotation are found, e.g., in 37:158 ff. (and possibly also in 6:100), as well as in the earliest occurrence of this concept, namely, in 114:6.

Apart from this, it is quite probable that in many instances where the Qur'an refers to jinn in terms usually applied to organisms endowed with reason, this expression either implies a symbolic "personification" of man's relationship with "satanic forces" (shayatin) an implication evident, e.g., in 6:112, 7:38, 11:119, 32:13 - or, alternatively, is a metonym for a person's preoccupation with what is loosely described as "occult powers", whether real or illusory, as well as for the resulting practices as such, like sorcery, necromancy, astrology, soothsaying -, etc.: endeavours to which the Qur'an invariably refers in condemnatory terms (cf. 2:102 and the corresponding note 84; also 6:128 and 130, or 72:5-6).

In a few instances (e.g., in 46:29-32 and 72:1-15) the term jinn may conceivably denote beings not invisible in and by themselves but, rather, "hitherto unseen beings" (see note 1 on 72:1).

Finally, references to jinn are sometimes meant to recall certain legends deeply embedded in the consciousness of the people to whom the Qur'an was addressed in the first instance (e.g., in 34:12-14, which should be read in conjunction with note 77 on 21:82) - the purpose being, in every instance, not the legend as such but the illustration of a moral or spiritual truth.

Appendix IV The Night Journey

THE PROPHET'S "Night Journey" (isra) from Mecca to Jerusalem and his subsequent "Ascension" (mi'raj)

to heaven are, in reality, two stages of one mystic experience, dating almost exactly one year before the exodus to Medina (cf. Ibn Sa'd III, 143). According to various well-documented Traditions - extensively quoted and discussed by Ibn Kathir in his commentary on 17:1, as well as by Ibn Hajar in Fath al-Bari VII, 155 ff. - the Apostle of God, accompanied by the Angel Gabriel, found himself transported by night to the site of Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem, where he led a congregation of many of the earlier, long since deceased prophets in prayer; some of them he afterwards encountered again in heaven. The Ascension, in particular, is important from the viewpoint of Muslim theology inasmuch as it was in the course of this experience that the five daily prayers were explicitly instituted, by God's ordinance, as an integral part of the Islamic Faith.

Since the Prophet himself did not leave any clear-cut explanation of this experience, Muslim thinkers - including the Prophet's Companions - have always widely differed as to its true nature. The great majority of the Companions believed that both the Night Journey and the Ascension were physical occurrences - in other words, that the Prophet was borne bodily to Jerusalem and then to heaven - while a minority were convinced that the experience was purely spiritual. Among the latter we find, in particular, the name of 'A'ishah, the Prophet's widow and most intimate companion of his later years,

who declared emphatically that "he was transported only in his spirit (bi-ruhihi), while his body did not leave its place" (cf. Tabari, Zamakhshari and Ibn Kathir in their commentaries on 17:1); the great Al-Hasan al-Basri, who belonged to the next generation, held uncompromisingly to the same view (ibid.).

As against this, the theologians who maintain that the Night Journey and the Ascension were physical experiences refer to the corresponding belief of most of the Companions - without, however, being able to point to a single Tradition to the effect that the Prophet himself described it as such. Some Muslim scholars lay stress on the words *asra bi-'abdihi* ("He transported His servant by night") occurring in 17:1, and contend that the term *'abd* ("servant") denotes a living being in its entirety, i.e., a combination of body and soul. This interpretation, however, does not take into account the probability that the expression *asra bi-'abdihi* simply refers to the human quality of the Prophet, in consonance with the many Qur'anic statements to the effect that he, like all other apostles, was but a mortal servant of God, and was not endowed with any supernatural qualities. This, to my mind, is fully brought out in the concluding words of the above verse - verily, He alone is all-hearing, all-seeing" - following upon the statement that the Prophet was shown some of God's symbols (*min ayatina*), i.e., given insight into some, but by no means all, of the ultimate truths underlying God's creation.

The most convincing argument in favour of a spiritual interpretation of both the Night Journey and the Ascension is forthcoming from the highly allegorical descriptions found in the authentic Traditions relating to this double experience: descriptions, that is, which are so obviously symbolic that they preclude any possibility of interpreting them literally, in "physical" terms. Thus, for instance, the Apostle of God speaks of his encountering at Jerusalem, and subsequently in heaven, a number of the earlier prophets, all of whom had undoubtedly passed away a long time before. According to one Tradition (quoted by Ibn Kathir on the authority of Anas), he visited Moses in his grave, and found him praying. In another Tradition, also on the authority of Anas (cf. *Fath al-Bari* VII, 158), the Prophet describes how, on his Night Journey, he encountered an old woman, and was thereupon told by Gabriel, "This old woman is the mortal world (*ad-dunya*)". In the words of yet another Tradition, on the authority of Abu Hurayrah (*ibid.*), the Prophet "passed by people who were sowing and harvesting; and every time they completed their harvest, [the grain) grew up again. Gabriel said, 'These are

the fighters in God's
cause (al-mujahidun).' Then they passed by people whose heads were being
shattered by rocks; and every
time they were shattered, they became whole again. [Gabriel] said, 'These are
they whose heads were
oblivious of prayer.... Then they passed by people who were eating raw, rotten
meat and throwing away
cooked, wholesome meat. [Gabriel] said, 'These are the adulterers.'"

In the best-known Tradition on the Ascension (quoted by Bukhari), the Prophet
introduces his narrative
with the words: "While I lay on the ground next to the Ka'bah [lit., "in the
hur"], lo! there came
unto me an angel, and cut open my breast and took out my heart. And then a
golden basin full of faith
was brought unto me, and my heart was washed (therein) and was filled [with
it]; then it was restored
to its place..." Since "faith" is an abstract concept, it is obvious that the
Prophet himself regarded
this prelude to the Ascension - and therefore the Ascension itself and, ipso
facto, the Night Journey
to Jerusalem - as purely spiritual experiences.

But whereas there is no cogent reason to believe in a "bodily" Night Journey
and Ascension, there is,
on the other hand, no reason to doubt the objective reality of this event. The
early Muslim theologians,
who could not be expected to possess adequate psychological knowledge, could
visualize only two
alternatives: either a physical happening or a dream. Since it appeared to them
- and rightly so - that
these wonderful occurrences would greatly lose in significance if they were
relegated to the domain of
mere dream, they instinctively adopted an interpretation in physical terms and
passionately defended
it against all contrary views, like those of 'A'ishah, Mu'awiyah or al-Hasan
al-Basri. In the meantime,
however, we have come to know that a dream-experience is not the only
alternative to a physical
occurrence. Modern psychical research, though still in its infancy, has
demonstrably proved that not
every spiritual experience (that is, an experience in which none of the known
organs of man's body has
a part) must necessarily be a mere subjective manifestation of the "mind" -
whatever this term may
connote - but that it may, in special circumstances, be no less real or
"factual" in the objective sense
of this word than anything that man can experience by means of his

physiological organism. We know as yet very little about the quality of such exceptional psychic activities, and so it is well-nigh impossible to reach definite conclusions as to their nature. Nevertheless, certain observations of modern psychologists have confirmed the possibility - claimed from time immemorial by mystics of all persuasions - of a temporary "independence" of man's spirit from his living body. In the event of such a temporary independence, the spirit or soul appears to be able freely to traverse time and space, to embrace within its insight occurrences and phenomena belonging to otherwise widely separated categories of reality, and to condense them within symbolical perceptions of great intensity, clarity and comprehensiveness. But when it comes to communicating such "visionary" experiences (as we are constrained to call them for lack of a better term) to people who have never experienced anything of the kind, the person concerned - in this case, the Prophet - is obliged to resort to figurative expressions: and this would account for the allegorical style of all the Traditions relating to the mystic vision of the Night Journey and the Ascension.

At this point I should like to draw the reader's attention to the discussion of "spiritual Ascension" by one of the truly great Islamic thinkers, Ibn al-Qayyim (Zad al-Ma'da II, 48 f.):

"A'ishah and Mu'wiyah maintained that the [Prophet's] Night Journey was performed by his soul (bi-ruhihi), while his body did not leave its place. The same is reported to have been the view of Al-Hasan al-Basri. But it is necessary to know the difference between the saying, 'the Night Journey took place in dream (manaman)', and the saying, 'it was [performed] by his soul without his body'.

The difference between these two [views] is tremendous.... What the dreamer sees are mere reproductions (amthal) of forms already existing in his mind; and so he dreams [for example] that he ascends to heaven or is transported to Mecca or to [other] regions of the world, while [in reality] his spirit neither ascends nor is transported...

"Those who have reported to us the Ascension of the Apostle of God can be divided into two groups - one group maintaining that the Ascension was in spirit and in body, and the

other group maintaining
that it was performed by his spirit, while his body did not leave its place.
But these latter [also]
do not mean to say that the Ascension took place in a dream: they merely mean
that it was his soul
itself which actually went on the Night Journey and ascended to heaven, and
that the soul witnessed
things which it [otherwise) witnesses after death [lit., mufaraqah,
"separation"]. Its condition on
that occasion was similar to the condition [of the soul] after death.... But
that which the Apostle of
God experienced on his Night Journey was superior to the [ordinary experiences
of the soul after death,
and, of course, was far above the dreams which one sees in sleep.... As to the
prophets [whom the
Apostle of God met in heaven], it was but their souls which had come to dwell
there after the separation
from their bodies, while the soul of the Apostle of God ascended there in his
lifetime."

It is obvious that this kind of spiritual experience is not only not inferior,
but, on the contrary,
vastly superior to anything that bodily organs could ever perform or record;
and it goes without
saying, as already mentioned by Ibn al-Qayyām, that it is equally superior to
what we term "dream-experiences",
inasmuch as the latter have no objective existence outside the subject's mind,
whereas spiritual
experiences of the kind referred to above are not less "real" (that is,
objective) than anything which
could be experienced "in body". By assuming that the Night Journey and the
Ascension were spiritual
and not bodily, we do not diminish the extraordinary value attaching to this
experience of the Prophet.
On the contrary, it appears that the fact of his having had such an experience
by far transcends any
miracle of bodily ascension, for it presupposes a personality of tremendous
spiritual perfection - the
very thing which we expect from a true Prophet of God. However, it is
improbable that we ordinary human
beings will ever be in a position fully to comprehend spiritual experiences of
this kind. Our minds can
only operate with elements provided by our consciousness of time and space; and
everything that extends
beyond this particular set of conceptions will always defy our attempts at a
clear-cut definition.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the Prophet's Night Journey from Mecca

to Jerusalem, immediately preceding his Ascension, was apparently meant to show that Islam is not a new doctrine but a continuation of the same divine message which was preached by the prophets of old, who had Jerusalem as their spiritual home. This view is supported by Traditions (quoted in Fath al-Bari VII, 158), according to which the Prophet, during his Night Journey, also offered prayers at Yathrib, Sinai, Bethlehem, etc. His encounters with other prophets, mentioned in this connection, symbolize the same idea. The well-known Traditions to the effect that on the occasion of his Night Journey the Prophet led a prayer in the Temple of Jerusalem, in which all other prophets ranged themselves behind him, expresses in a figurative manner the doctrine that Islam, as preached by the Prophet Muhammad, is the fulfilment and perfection of mankind's religious development, and that Muhammad was the last and the greatest of God's message-bearers.

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