Fire in the Upper Heavens

Locating Hell in Middle Period Narratives of Muḥammad's Ascension

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As we examine the idea of “locating hell,”¹ it might be worth our time to examine how Muslim popular depictions of where hell is located change over time. One way to examine such changes is to examine the development of Muslim accounts of Muḥammad visiting hellfire or meeting its terrifying guardians during his otherworldly journeys. By the phrase “otherworldly journeys,” I here refer to the genre of narratives known under the rubric of Muḥammad’s *isrā’* and *mi’rāj*, or his “night journey” and “ascension” respectively, which for convenience sake I will be referring to collectively as the Islamic *mi’rāj* or “ascension” narratives. Roberto Tottoli has recently studied “tours of hell and punishments of sinners in *mi’rāj* narratives” in an article by that name,² a study which makes an important contribution to our knowledge of the historical development of Muslim conceptions of hell as depicted in different versions of the story of Muḥammad’s ascension. Tottoli’s piece demonstrates how the types of sinners depicted in ascension narratives and the types of punishments they receive therein gradually change as these narratives develop over time. Here I wish not so much to reproduce that study but to build on it, asking a slightly different question, namely: Where do these ascension narratives locate hell? By examining select ascension accounts from the early to late medieval period, I shall argue that while descriptions of the topography of hell may remain largely terrestrial, Muḥammad’s initial encounter with hell and its guardians appear in increasingly upperworldly, non-terrestrial locations. His tour of hell gradually becomes more extensive and more detailed, and gets deferred until later and later in the story as one traces its development and expansion from the formative period of Islamic history through its apogee in the late medieval period. We shall see that at the height of the development of the non-canonical but

1 This essay was first delivered at the conference “Locating hell in Islamic Traditions” (28–29 April 2012, Utrecht), organized by Christian Lange. I offer my thanks to him for his invitation to participate, and for his insightful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. All faults and mistakes in this final draft are, of course, my own.

2 Tottoli, *Tours of hell*.

widespread Ibn ‘Abbās ascension narratives in the seventh–ninth/thirteenth–fifteenth centuries, the beginning of the tour of hell comes to be located at two primary sites in Muḥammad’s otherworldly journey: on the one hand, in the fifth heaven, and on the other hand, after his audience with God, somewhere in the sixth or seventh heaven.

In the earliest extant written hadith reports, the tour of hell appears nowhere in the heavens, and in fact it hardly ever is mentioned at all.³ As Tottoli correctly points out, most early reports on Muḥammad’s *mi’rāj* do not contain any detailed reference to the Prophet’s tour of hellfire on his journey, beyond the idea that he witnesses the punishment for some classes of sinners,⁴ and briefly meets Mālik, the guardian of hellfire. In the early reports where these details do appear, these two scenes often are presented separately in different parts of the narrative, which suggests that the Prophet’s merely observing the tortures reserved for a few types of evil-doers on the road to Jerusalem, for instance, cannot be classified as an full-fledged “tour of hellfire” any more than the witnessing of a certain class of the blessed constitutes a full-fledged “tour of paradise.”⁵ But there are a few instructive exceptions in early hadith reports that say that the tour of hell was part of the Prophet’s heavenly ascent, and these early exceptions are worthy of our attention, for they serve as the

3 The early reports on the night journey and ascension that I have in mind here are those hadith reports written down in the formative period and appearing in the major sound Sunni collections of the 3rd/9th century, including in works by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Ibn Ḥanbal, etc., as well as reports from the early collections of Shi’i hadith reports and *akhbār* that become authoritative for mainstream Shi’i scholars in and around the 4th/10th century. It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss such narratives in detail here; the interested reader could consult my *Narrating Muhammad’s Night Journey*, as well as the work by Brooke Olson Vuckovic entitled *Heavenly journeys, earthly concerns*. Aside from the exceptions discussed in what follows here, few early reports even mention a visit to hell as a part of the Prophet’s otherworldly journey. Tottoli, *Tours of hell*, cites the example of an additional key narrative attributed to Abū Hurayra by al-Ṭabarī and al-Bayhaqī but not found in the collections of early reports cited above, but as he states, even this Abū Hurayra *mi’rāj* narrative only mentions the punishments of evil-doers that Muḥammad sees on his night journey—presumably on earth on his way to Jerusalem—prior to his ascension through the heavens.

4 Tottoli, *Tours of hell* 12.

5 I am thinking here of the Abū Hurayra ascension narrative included in al-Ṭabarī’s commentary on Q 17:1 and elsewhere. On this version of the Prophet’s ascension, see my *Narrating Muhammad’s Night Journey* 96–101. A partial translation into English by R. Firestone appears in Renard (ed.), *Windows* 336–45, but unfortunately this version skips over these narremes from the Prophet’s journey to Jerusalem, merely summarizing their contents.

forerunners to the more extensive and detailed versions of the tour of hell included in the ascension narratives of subsequent centuries.

For example, in a report recorded in al-Tirmidhī's (d. 279/892) *Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*, one that intriguingly calls into question the widespread idea that Muḥammad prayed with the other prophets in Jerusalem, we find the Garden and the Fire on the itinerary of Muḥammad's otherworldly journey: "Hudhayfa said, 'The Messenger of God was brought a mount ... [Burāq, who is described next, after which it continues:] They did not abandon Burāq's back until after they saw paradise, hellfire, and all the threatening promise of the afterworld. Then the two came back ...'"⁶ This hadith report does not go into any detail about what the Fire looked like or about the types of sinners and punishing angels encountered therein, but it does assert that Muḥammad and Gabriel had a vision of (if not a tour of) hell, apparently near the end of their journey together, for its mention immediately precedes the hadith's mention of their return.

This representation of Muḥammad's journey as involving a vision or tour of hell finds support in Ibn Sa'd's (d. c. 230/845) *Ṭabaqāt*, where he summarizes the events of the *mi'rāj* as follows:

The Prophet used to ask his Lord to show him the Garden and the Fire. On the night of the 17th of Ramaḍān, 18 months before the hijra, while the Prophet was sleeping on his back in his house, Gabriel and Michael came to him. They said, "Come away to what you asked of God!" So they brought him to the site between the Maqām [Ibrāhīm] and Zamzam. He was brought the Mi'rāj [Ladder], which was the most beautiful thing to behold. They ascended with him to the heavens, heaven by heaven, and in them he met the prophets and ended at the Lote Tree of the Boundary, and was shown the Garden and the Fire ... And he was commanded [to fulfill the duty of] the five daily liturgical prayers.⁷

The most remarkable aspect of this brief reference from Ibn Sa'd's history is the way that it suggests that the Prophet's desire to tour paradise and hellfire provides the primary reason he was taken on the heavenly journey. Moreover, it portrays these tours as taking place near the end of the journey, presumably

6 See Tirmidhī in Ibn 'Arabī, *ʿArīḍa* xi, 304–5 (no. 3159, *tafsīr* Q 17:1), translated in Colby, *Constructing* 129–30.

7 Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* i, 213, emphasis added; the full translation (sections updated here) appears in Colby, *Constructing* 103–4. Later versions of this same report appear in the works of Ibn 'Asākir (d. 571/1176) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505).

in the vicinity of the Lote Tree, prior to God assigning the five daily liturgical prayers to the Muslim community. The report never specifies exactly where hell might be located, but it suggests that his vision of the Fire—and at least the portal to the Fire if not the actual site of the Fire itself—is located in one of the highest heavens.

In Ibn Hishām's (d. 218/833) recension of Ibn Ishāq's (d. 150/767) *Sīra*, he offers a narrative of Muḥammad's *mi'rāj* that draws together fragments from diverse hadith reports, and nowhere does this early composite account present an explicit tour of hell that joins the vision of the Fire with a tour of some of its scenes of post-mortem retribution. It does, however, present encounters that could be related to these individual themes, for instance, the anecdote in which Muḥammad meets the guardian of hellfire in the first heaven:

Ibn Ishāq said: One of the hadith folk told me what had been told to him from the Messenger of God, who said: "Angels greeted me when I entered the [first] heaven, and each one laughed joyfully, expressing good wishes, until I met one among them who said the same things without laughing, looking unlike any I had seen. I asked Gabriel about him ... and he replied, "If he would have laughed with any individual, before or after you, he would have laughed with you, but he does not laugh. This is Mālik, the guardian of hellfire. I said to Gabriel ..., "Command him to show me the Fire." "Of course. Mālik, show Muḥammad the Fire!" So he uncovered its covering, and it transformed. It raised up so high that I thought it would consume all that I had been shown. I told Gabriel to command him to return it to its place, so he did, and [the Fire] returned to the place from which it had emerged. I can only compare its return to the descending of shade, until the point at which it entered where it had exited. Then he [Mālik] returned its cover over it.

This report does not so much describe a tour of hell, per se, as a vision of the Fire that results from its being uncovered at the Prophet's request. Immediately following this account, after his description of Muḥammad's encounter with the prophet Adam as he presides over the spirits of recently departed individuals, Ibn Hishām transmits a different anecdote describing several groups of evil-doers who receive measure-for-measure types of punishments in the first heaven: those who devoured the wealth of orphans (with hot stones shoved into their mouths); those who charged usury (with swollen bellies that got trampled); male adulterers (who left good meat for rotting meat); women adulterers (who hang by their breasts). Variations on this fragmentary report

appear in several sources from the formative and middle periods, and seem to originate in a widely circulated report transmitted by Abu Saʿīd al-Khudrī.⁸

The early Shiʿite exegete al-Qummī (d.ca 307/919) supplements and develops the Abu Saʿīd al-Khudrī report in the long narrative about Muḥammad's *miʿrāj* that he includes his Quran commentary, one in which the Prophet encounters the guardian of hell soon after entering the first heaven (just as in Ibn Hishām's version):

Gabriel went up and I went up with him to the [first] heaven, at which was an angel called Ismaʿīl ... Under his command are seventy-thousand angels, each of whom command seventy-thousand more angels. He asked, "Gabriel, who is that with you?" [Gabriel] replied, "Muḥammad." He asked, "Has he been sent?" He replied, "Yes." So [Ismaʿīl] opened the gate. I greeted him and he greeted me; I begged forgiveness for him and he begged forgiveness for me. He said, "Welcome righteous brother and righteous prophet."⁹ Then I continued to receive angels until I entered the [first] heaven. Every angel I met laughed and was joyful, until I met one who was greater than the others I had seen. He was ugly in appearance and outwardly angry. He addressed me in a way similar to the others, yet he did not laugh, nor did I see in him the joy that I had seen in the other angels. I asked, "Who is that, Gabriel? He scares me!" He answered, "You have reason to be scared of him, for we all are. That is Mālik, guardian of the hellfire. He has never laughed since the time God appointed him in charge of hell. Each day his anger and fury at the enemies of God increases. God will take vengeance on them through him. Were he to have laughed in the presence of anyone before or after you, he would have laughed with you, but he does not laugh." I greeted him, and he returned the greeting, giving me joyful tidings of paradise. I asked Gabriel ..., "Will you command him to show me the Fire?" So Gabriel said,

8 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, vol. 1/1, 268–9. Tottoli mentions the specific groups enumerated by Ibn Hishām. See Tottoli, *Tours of hell* 13–14. For a discussion of this Khudrī report across different sources from the early period, see Colby, *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey*, 55–6 (Ibn Hishām), 101–4 (Tabarī), 105–8 (Qummī), 124–5 (Bayhaqī).

9 The language used in this exchange duplicates the language used for the Prophet's encounter with other individuals in his prophetic lineage, including Adam, Jesus, Moses, Abraham, etc. This fact suggests that although Ismaʿīl is called an angel at the beginning of this narrative, he takes on some of the qualities of a human prophet such as Abraham's son, Ishmael (= Ismaʿīl). Notice how this figure calls Muḥammad his "brother" just as other prophets do in this account.

“Show Muḥammad the Fire.” [Mālik] uncovered it and opened one of its gates. A blaze shot out from it, spreading through the heavens. It boiled and rose until I thought it would consume me and everything I saw. I cried to Gabriel, “Tell him to return its cover!” He did, and when [Mālik] said “Return!” then [the Fire and cover] returned as they were before.¹⁰

As already mentioned above, this encounter with Mālik and vision of the uncovering of the Fire as presented by al-Qummī directly mirrors that of Ibn Hishām’s account (transmitting an anecdote which was similarly attributed to al-Khudrī, and likely derives from the same source), merely elaborating and expanding on a few of its details. In al-Qummī’s version, Muḥammad goes on in the first heaven to meet Adam who sits in judgment, dividing good spirits from evil spirits, followed by the Angel of Death, who describes his methods of capturing souls. Then one finds several scenes in which Muḥammad witnesses the punishment of groups of individuals who committed evil deeds, for instance, the Muslims “who eat forbidden foods while they had been invited to eat permitted foods.”¹¹ These scenes of punishment in al-Qummī and Ibn Hishām’s works, while related to the punishments that one would expect to find in the Fire, are presented separately from Muḥammad’s vision of the uncovering of the Fire. Therefore, I would maintain that they can only be classified as a “tour of hell” with the caveat that the account never labels them with that rubric nor associates them directly with hell, presenting these scenes apart from the places where the Fire is mentioned explicitly.

Another noteworthy composite ascension report that includes a vision of the Fire appears in the *Tafsīr* of the famous exegete from Nishapur, al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035). It describes how Mālik uncovers hellfire for Muḥammad early in his heavenly journey, a detail we have already seen from Ibn Hishām’s recension of the *Sīra* and al-Qummī’s commentary.¹² Later in al-Thaʿlabī’s same narrative, however, one finds an explicit and fully-fledged tour of hellfire that follows after the Prophet has traversed all the heavens, has had a dialogue with God, and has been taken on a tour of the Garden.

10 Qummī, *Tafsīr* ii, 4–5 (commentary on Q 17:1). A fuller translation of this narrative’s description of the angels and other beings the Prophet meets in the first heaven appears in Colby, *Constructing* 206–10, from which this passage has been adapted (*ibid.*, 207). Regarding early Shiʿi ascension narratives, see Colby, *The early Imami Shiʿi narratives*.

11 Qummī, *Tafsīr* ii, 6–7; Colby, *Constructing* 209.

12 Thaʿlabī, *Tafsīr* iv, 10 (on Q 17:1).

Then he showed me the Fire until I had seen its manacles and chains, its snakes and scorpions, its stench and smoke. I looked, and suddenly I was with a people who had lips like those of camels, along with one assigned to take their lips and force into their mouths stones of fire, which then exited from their buttocks. I asked Gabriel who they were, and he said, "Muhammad, they are those who wrongfully consume the wealth of orphans." Then we moved on, and I found myself with a group that had stomachs as large as houses, on the path of Pharaoh's people. When the people of Pharaoh passed them, they were stirred up. [Each one] inclined his stomach toward one of them, and fell. The people of Pharaoh trampled upon them with their legs while they were stretched out, morning and night, over fire. I asked Gabriel who they were, and he replied, "They are the consumers of usury. They are like the *one whom Satan lays low by his touch* [Q 2:275]." Then we moved on, and I suddenly found myself among women hanging from their breasts, their legs upside down. I asked, "Who are they, Gabriel?" He responded, "They are those who commit [sexual] indecency (*zinā*) and kill their children."¹³

On seeing the last of its punishments, al-Tha'labī records that Muḥammad states, "After [Gabriel] brought me out of the Fire, we passed out of the heavens, descending from heaven to heaven until we came to Moses." This transitional detail suggests that the tour of hell quoted above must have taken place above the sixth heaven, for that is Moses' typical location in the heavens, and earlier in this narrative as the Prophet ascends up through the heavens he encounters Moses there.¹⁴ Al-Tha'labī's version thus depicts Muḥammad's tour of hellfire as taking place somewhere in the upper realms, presumably in the seventh heaven near or beyond the Lote Tree.

Select ascension reports from al-Tha'labī, al-Qummī, al-Tirmidhī and others, then, demonstrate how a few versions of Muḥammad's journey break with the majority of early ascension reports that make little mention of hell or paradise as part of the *mi'rāj*. These exceptional early reports, such as the ones discussed above, in contrast, depict a vision of the Fire or even a full-fledged tour of hell as representing a part of Muḥammad's heavenly ascent. Moreover, a few of these exceptional references, such as that found in Ibn Sa'd's narrative, suggest that such a tour was in fact one of the main purposes of sending Muḥammad on a journey through the heavens in the first place. With the

13 Ibid., 15. Note the close correspondence between the three specific classes of evil-doers mentioned in this brief tour of hell and three of the four classes of evil-doers given by Ibn Hishām in his account from the *Sīra*, summarized above.

14 Ibid., 11.

exception of al-Thaʿlabī's account, however, these early references do not offer much detail about what the Prophet's vision or tour of hell was like.

Let us turn from these reports to later ascension accounts that circulate outside the canonical hadith collections in the middle centuries, attributed to Muḥammad's young companion Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687–8), and quite frequently circulated with reference to the popular storyteller Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bakrī (fl. in the second–third/eighth–ninth centuries?).¹⁵ I have dealt elsewhere with the development of what I have called the Ibn ʿAbbās ascension discourse and some of its versions attributed to al-Bakrī,¹⁶ and revisiting such issues is beyond the scope of this work. For our purposes it is sufficient to note that the Ibn ʿAbbās version of the *miʿrāj* story enjoyed a broad circulation in the middle periods of Islamic history, transmitted and copied in royal courts from Castille in al-Andalus to Zabid in Yemen to Tabriz in Persia.¹⁷ It is important to stress that we find versions (plural) of the Ibn ʿAbbās narrative in these types of disparate locations, for as Tottoli correctly observes, “[r]ather than forming a standard text, the *miʿrāj* narratives attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās should be considered a corpus of variant texts that share a number of peculiarities.”¹⁸ One of the peculiarities of these Ibn ʿAbbās narratives is the fact that Muḥammad's encounter with Mālik and his increasingly more extensive and detailed tour of hellfire in these narratives often begin in upperworldly locations. For example, in Istanbul Sulemaniye ms. Ibrahim Efendi 852/3 (dated 908/1502–3), Muḥammad encounters Mālik sitting on a throne of fire among innumerable other angels immediately on entering the third heaven.¹⁹ After Mālik and Muḥammad exchange pleasant greetings (nothing is said here about Muḥammad being afraid, nor about Mālik's not initially responding to him out of pride), Muḥammad notices Mālik's anger and asks him about it. He responds, telling Muḥammad that God created him out of anger, and that he prepares tests and punishments for those people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, who break the shariʿa. Muḥammad requests that Mālik “uncover

15 It is difficult to determine with any precision many of the details—or even the historicity—of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bakrī. Boaz Shoshan argues that the historical Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bakrī, if he indeed existed, likely flourished in the middle of the third/ninth century. See Shoshan, *Popular culture* 35–36.

16 Colby, *Narrating*.

17 Regarding the context of the Andalusian *Liber Scalae*, I have relied on the introduction by Isabelle Weill to Besson/Brossard-Dandre (eds), *Le Livre de l'Echelle* 27–38; for the Yemeni context of the Rasulid ms., see Colby, *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey*, chapter 8 and appendix B; for the Ilkhanid *Miʿrajnameh*, see Gruber, *Ilkhanid Book* 17–31.

18 Tottoli, *Tours of hell* 16.

19 Ibrahim Efendi 852/3 (dated 908/1502–3), fol. 16v. A parallel but slightly less detailed account appears in ms. Cairo Dār al-Kutub Tārikh Taymūr 738/10, fols. 330r–332v.

Jahannam” for him to be able to see the lot of the sinners so that he might warn his companions about it on his return.²⁰ Mālik informs Muḥammad that the Prophet could not bear to see it, and in any case, Mālik was not commanded to uncover it for him. Immediately a voice from above—the divine voice—commands Mālik to give Muḥammad, God’s beloved, what he asks, namely a tour of hell, for God only created the Garden and the Fire for Muḥammad’s sake. Mālik uncovers it, and after the fire and smoke rush out (cf. the versions of Ibn Hishām and others cited above), the Prophet sees 90,000 cities of iron, each containing 90,000 castles of brass, each containing 90,000 houses of lead, etc. It is then that he proceeds to witness specific measure for measure punishments, with punishments for sinful women highlighted in the final few scenes.²¹ Muḥammad then prays with the angels of the third heaven, and Gabriel proceeds to bring him up to the gate of the fourth.²²

Several things are remarkable about this tour of hell from Ibrahim Efendi 852/3 and its parallel text in Cairo Dār al-Kutub Tārikh Taymūr 738/10, not only that no encounter with any prophet appears in this version of Muḥammad’s tour of the third heaven, but also and perhaps more importantly, Muḥammad’s meeting with Mālik and his tour of hell all seem to have taken place in the midst of the third heaven only. While it is true that Mālik “uncovers” Jahannam for Muhammad to see near the beginning of his “tour,” and Muḥammad gazed into the fire and saw the thousands of cities and palaces, etc., there is no disjuncture between the end of the subsequent tour of the punishments and Muḥammad’s praying with the angels of the third heaven and ascending to the fourth. From the cosmology presented here, therefore, it appears that the Fire (or at the very least the entrance into the Fire) is located in the third heaven.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, however, in the majority of the more fully developed ascension narratives from the middle periods of Islamic history, two prominent patterns tend to emerge: accounts that locate the beginning of the full-fledged tour of hellfire in the fifth heaven, and accounts that locate its beginning in the sixth or seventh heaven. After examining several of the beginnings of Muḥammad’s “tours of hell” from these narratives, this essay hopes to offer some provisional theories as to why the launching place for these tours was located in these particular points in the story, and why this specific trope becomes one of the peculiarities which nearly all of the later Ibn ‘Abbās ascension narratives reflect.

20 Ibrahim Efendi 852/3, fol. 17r.

21 Tottoli describes how scenes depicting the punishments reserved for women become more and more prominent in later centuries. See Tottoli, *Tours of hell* 16–17, 22.

22 Ibrahim Efendi 852/3, fols. 17r–18r.

1 Tour in the Fifth Heaven

The idea that the Fire—or at the very least the gate or entrance into hell—appears in a precise location up in the heavens can be seen in a series of late middle period ascension accounts that show a number of the peculiarities of the Ibn ‘Abbās ascension discourse. While a few of these variations depict Muḥammad’s tour of hell as taking place in the first or third heaven (as in Ibrahim Efendi 852/3, discussed above), one finds an even greater number of manuscripts depicting Muḥammad’s tour taking place in the fifth heaven.

The earliest extant dateable ascension narrative that shows this pattern is found in the Persian text Istanbul Sülemaniye Kütüphanesi ms. Ayasofya 3441, recently published by Christiane Gruber in a wonderful edition and translation titled *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension* (2010). In the version from Ayasofya 3441, on entering the fifth heaven, Muḥammad first meets the prophet Aaron and an angel named Saqtiyāyil. After these encounters he comes upon a bejeweled gate in the fifth heaven, with no guardian in front of it, but with a lock upon the gate that opens when the *shahāda* is recited.²³ Muḥammad describes what happens next: “The door opened, and I looked at it. [Gabriel] said: ‘O Muḥammad, look.’ When I looked, the heavens disappeared and a land (*zamīn*) appeared.” In what follows, he gazes on seven lands, given names that are sometimes associated with hell in these types of narratives: Ramka, Khawfa, ‘Arfa, Ḥadna, Damā, Tanīnā, and Ḥanīnā.²⁴ Subsequently, he tours more valleys and mountains within the Fire, sees a series of valleys that are given the standard “seven names” of hell along with their respective guardians,²⁵ and after that yet another tour of hell is collated into the narrative, with Muḥammad greeting Mālik (who now appears sitting in front of a door) and asking him to open the door of hell (*dar-i dūzakh*) so that he might be able to see inside. In this next stage of the tour in Ayasofya 3441, there are many more specific descriptions of punishments than were recounted in the earlier section of the same narrative. At the end of this text’s tour of hell, Muḥammad asks Mālik to show mercy to his community, but Mālik refuses, and Muḥammad weeps and prays, after which Gabriel carries him the standard five-hundred-year distance

23 Ayasofya 3441, fols. 28r–28v; Gruber, *Ilkhanid Book* 52.

24 Ayasofya 3441, fols. 28v–29v; Gruber, *Ilkhanid Book* 52; the emphasis in the quotation is mine. The origin of these seven names remains something of a mystery. They differ from the names given to the seven lower earths recorded by al-Tha‘labī in his *Qisas al-anbiyā’*. See Tha‘labī, *Qisas* 7. They are also different from the names of the seven gates of hell recorded by al-Qāḍī, for which see Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire* 118–9.

25 Ayasofya 3441, fols. 31v–32r; Gruber, *Ilkhanid Book* 53; on these names, see below.

to the sixth heaven. The fact that this five-hundred-year distance is the conventional distance separating each of the heavens suggests that despite this long tour of hell having apparently shown the Prophet various “lands” outside of the fifth heaven, nevertheless in the manuscript’s worldview, Muḥammad’s actual tour of the Fire appears to remain within the fifth heaven, rather than traveling outside of it. In other words, while the seven heavens seem to have disappeared before Muḥammad as he looked upon the fiery earths, still the whole visionary tour appears to have taken place within the general realm of the fifth heaven in this Persian Ilkhanid *Mi’rājnāma*.

This same pattern, with Muḥammad’s tour of hell being launched from and/or entirely located within the fifth heaven, appears again in a number of subsequent Ibn ‘Abbās ascension manuscripts, including a large number of the Bakrī narrative that I have analyzed elsewhere.²⁶ The fact that the recension commonly reproduced in the cheap mass-printed versions of the Ibn ‘Abbās *Kitāb al-mi’rāj* also places the tour of hell in the fifth heaven helps to explain the ubiquity of this particular pattern in modern Ibn ‘Abbās ascension texts. This, then, forms the first of two major patterns.

2 Tour after the Audience, in the Sixth or Seventh Heaven

A second major pattern, one that presents the tour of hell near the very end of the journey and after the audience with God, the pattern we saw above in al-Tha’labī’s *Tafsīr* and alluded to in other early reports, becomes another common trope of the late medieval ascension narratives, found in some of the versions most well known to scholars today, including the Timurid Chaghatay *Mi’rājnāma* and the Andalusian Latin *Liber Scalae Machometi*. One of the earliest extant independent examples of the more developed Ibn ‘Abbās ascension narrative appears again in Persian in a work by an anonymous Shi’i scholar that is ascribed by its contemporary editor to approximately

26 Ayasofya 867 (dated 886/1481). This text has been analyzed as the “Reshaped Version of the Pseudo- Ibn ‘Abbās Ascension Narrative” in Colby, Constructing, with the complete text of this ascension narrative translated therein as Appendix 2. See Colby, “Constructing” 442–62. For other examples of versions of Ibn ‘Abbās Ascension narratives containing this trope, see the following manuscripts (not listed in the bibliography below): Cairo Dār al-Kutub, ms. Ta’rīkh Taymūr 738/8 (= Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. Arabe 1931); Istanbul Sülemaniye, ms. Hacı Mahmud Efendi 648 (fols. 10v–14r, dated 1179/1765–6); Istanbul Sülemaniye, ms. Hacı Mahmud Efendi 4475 (fols. 13v–17r, dated 1282/ ca. 1861); Istanbul Sülemaniye, ms. Düğümlü Baba 360/3 (fol. 64v–, dated 1291/1874–5); Istanbul Sülemaniye Laleli 1927 (fols. 19v–25v, n.d.).

the twelfth century CE.²⁷ The text depicts Muḥammad as first meeting Mālik, guardian of hellfire, on his entrance to the first heaven, before his meeting with Adam and the angelic Ismāʿīl.²⁸ But for Muḥammad's vision of the Fire in this Persian Ibn ʿAbbās narrative, one needs to wait until after Muḥammad's audience with God at the divine throne (*ʿarsh*). As Muḥammad returns from the divine presence, he sees an angel with a terrifying form and asks Gabriel about him, receiving the reply that this is none other than Mālik of hell (*Mālik-i dūzakḥ*), a figure whom Muḥammad supposedly already met on his ascent.²⁹ Unlike in that cursory first meeting, however, here Muḥammad expresses a wish to see the states of the sinners (*ʿaṣīyān*) in hell, and Mālik agrees to let him tour the Fire, where he proceeds to witness specific punishments assigned to specific classes of evildoers.

Later in this same Persian work, there is a separate whole chapter devoted to the description of hell (*dūzakḥ*) and the types of punishments in it, and here we find a mention of the detail that during his *miʿrāj* to the sixth heaven (sic!), Muḥammad meets the angel “Sarḥāʿīl” whom God commands to take him on a tour of the Fire, where he learns the respective names of seven different earths (*zamīn*) or layers of hell.³⁰ Subsequently, we learn that this “Sarḥāʿīl” presides over *jahannam*,³¹ and a series of specific scenes of measure-for-measure punishments follow thereafter. The fact that the “tour of hell” scene appears in more than one location in this Persian Ibn ʿAbbās text, and the fact that Muḥammad is forced to ask Gabriel to identify Mālik more than once in these encounters, suggests that this particular twelfth century *miʿrāj* account brings together different ascension narremes from earlier periods.

A century or so later, in an Arabic text ascribed to the enigmatic Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bakrī, recorded in a manuscript apparently copied in seventh/thirteenth-century Yemen and now found in Istanbul's Amcazade Hüseyin

27 *Majlis dar qisṣa-yi rasūl* 65–75, supplemented by a description of hellfire at 307–312. I wish to express my sincere thanks to Christian Lange and his research team for calling my attention to this text and sending me a copy of it.

28 This trope of an initial meeting with the guardian of hellfire and other significant angels (such as the Angel of Death, the angel in the form of a rooster, or the angel made half of fire and half of ice) derives from very early versions of the Ibn ʿAbbās narrative. See Colby, *Narrating* 32–3 and 176–7 (Appendix A).

29 *Majlis dar qisṣa-yi rasūl* 74.

30 *Ibid.*, 307.

31 The fairly commonly repeated names for the seven hells listed by O'Shaughnessy in his article “The seven names for hell in the Qurʾān” are subsequently given here, together with their respective guardians. *Ibid.*, 308. Cf. O'Shaughnessy, *Seven names*.

Paşa 95/2,³² we find again that Muḥammad first encounters the guardian of hellfire before the first heaven,³³ just prior to his encounter with the angel Ismāʿīl and the prophet Adam.³⁴ Muḥammad approaches and asks Mālik a series of questions, including why the guardians of the hellfire never exit from the Fire to seek some relief.³⁵ After finishing with his questions, Muḥammad and Gabriel pass onward, grieving from what they heard Mālik say, and seeking refuge in God from the hellfire, but still not having seen hellfire itself or any specific punishments therein.

Just as we find in al-Thaʿlabī's *Tafsīr* and in the Ibn ʿAbbās *miʾrāj* account from the twelfth-century Persian ascension narrative, the narrative in Amcazade 95/2 defers the actual tour of hellfire until after Muḥammad's audience with God. Here the comparatively brief tour of the Fire, again launched from the sixth heaven, focuses on reporting the names of each layer of hell, and each of the guardians therein. Because there might be utility in comparing this short text to others of its type, and since I did not translate it previously where I translated nearly the rest of this key ascension narrative, the English translation of this tour of hellfire follows here, taking up the story after the audience with God and after the tour of the Garden:

[81r] He took me by the hand and led me to Mālik, the guardian of the Fire, who was in the sixth heaven. [Gabriel] said to Mālik, "Indeed God has commanded you to show Muḥammad what [God] prepared for his enemies in the Abode of Punishment. So he said to me, "Look, Muḥammad!" He led me by the hand and the five heavens [below us] parted so that I gazed at the valley of the House of Sanctity [Jerusalem], which was called the Valley of Jahannam.

I found myself suddenly with an enormous angel, the most frightening angel I had ever seen, more intensely black than the dark night. His body

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- 32 Amcazade 95/2. The majority of this *miʾrāj* text is translated in Colby, *Narrating* 195–234 (Appendix B).
- 33 Just prior to this encounter, the Angel of Death explains to Muḥammad that *Sijjīn* is the deepest pit of hell, the "seventh and the lowest." See Amcazade 95/2, fol. 36v; Colby, *Narrating* 204.
- 34 Not only is Muḥammad terrified of Mālik in this version, but Gabriel, too, appears terrified, praying to God that Mālik is not to be on his path in the future, and explaining that "there is no angel in the heavens that does not seek refuge from him, for he knows one's fate." See Amcazade 95/2, fol. 38v; Colby, *Narrating* 206.
- 35 Mālik explains that these guardians are comfortable in the Fire, for they were created in it, and they would die if they were to exit from it, just as a fish dies when it leaves the water. Moreover, he continues, they proceed with their punishments of the evildoers unabated, unheeding any pleas for mercy. See Amcazade 95/2, fol. 39r; Colby, *Narrating* 207.

was larger than a mountain, and set in his face were two blue eyes like blue glass jars. Suddenly tongues of flame shot from his ears, nostrils and mouth. The length of his body was as if it were the distance between heaven and earth. He was turning over live coals and rocks of brimstone. Mālik called to him, “O Sūkhā’il,” and he replied “Here I am, Gabriel.” [Muḥammad] said, “When I heard his [greeting] “here I am” to Gabriel, my intellect flew from me, and my soul nearly departed from my body. Blindness came over me from the terror of that form. So Gabriel said to me, “That is the guardian of the first gate of the gates of *jahannam*.”

[81v] Then he called out, “Look, Muḥammad, on the punishments that God prepared in them. Sūkhā’il said, “Look, Muḥammad,” and he pointed with his hand to the earth. The first earth split open, and its name is al-Ramkā, its width being the distance of five hundred years. I saw in it the chains of the people of the Fire. Then I saw in it a people whom I will not describe, since I am not able to describe them.

Then the second was split open, and its name is al-Khawfā. Its width was the distance of five hundred years. I saw in it terrors and punishments.

Then the third was split open, and its name is al-‘Arqā [‘Arfā?],³⁶ and its distance was five hundred years. Between it and the fourth was a distance of five hundred years. In it were striped garments, which were the clothing of the people of the Fire.

The fourth was split open, and its name is al-Khalada [Ḥadna?]. Its width was the distance of five hundred years. Between it and the fifth was a distance of five hundred years. In it were the snakes and scorpions of the people of the Fire.

Then the fifth was split open, and its name was Damā. Its width was the distance of five hundred years, and in it were the stones which were thrown upon the people of the Fire. They were the ones mentioned by God in his Clear Book [the Quran] when He says, “Its fuel are people and rocks, and in it are angels who are brutal, intense,”³⁷

[82r] [at its heart]³⁸ are rocks of brimstone.

Then the sixth was split open, and its name was Fashā [Tanīnā?]. Its width was five hundred years, and between it and the seventh was five hundred years.

Then the seventh was split open, and its name is Jahannam [Ḥanīnā?]. Its width was five hundred years. In it were different types of punishments

36 On these names, compare Gruber, *Ilkhanid Book* 52, cited above.

37 Q 66:6; cf. similar phrasing to the beginning in Q 2:24.

38 A repair in the binding partially obscures the text at this point, so this reading is somewhat speculative.

that only God knows, which God prepared. Those are for they who “consume his bounty” and worship other than He ...³⁹

As with the earlier Persian text discussed above, in this text the actual tour into the Fire is led not so much by the guardian of all of hellfire, Mālik, but with another terrifying angel, here named “Šūkhā’il,” guardian of the first gate of *jahannam*.⁴⁰ “Šūkhā’il” leads Muḥammad down through the seven levels of the Fire, named respectively al-Damkā, al-Ḥarqā, al-‘Arqā, al-Khalada, Damā, Fashā, and Jahannam. The description of each of these realms spans scarcely more than a sentence or two, and immediately after this tour of the seven layers of the Fire, Gabriel brings Muḥammad together with Burāq, and they set off on the return journey from Jerusalem to Mecca. The fact that there is very little segue between this tour into the levels of hell split open before Muḥammad’s eyes and his terrestrial journey on the road to Mecca may suggest that in this particular account from Amcazade 95/2, the tour of hell (proceeding after the audience with God and after the tour of the Garden) takes him back from the heavens and down to the earth, where these seven layers of hell split open below.⁴¹ This key manuscript, then, offers more evidence in support of the idea that the tour of hellfire takes place at the very end of Muḥammad’s journey, although once again the text offers conflicting information about where the Fire is located, ultimately apparently going back to the earlier model (familiar

39 The tour of hell ends at this point, and the manuscript quickly concludes in two folio pages with the return of the Prophet to Jerusalem and Mecca on the back of Burāq, and the questioning he receives at the hands of the doubting Quraysh (fol. 82r line 6 to fol. 82v).

40 Compare “Sarḥā’il” of the Persian text in Anon., *Majlis* 307. The letters *ṣād-wāw* here are a close kin to the Persian ms.’s *sin-rā’* at the beginning of the name. See Amcazade 95/2, fol. 81r–81v. Instead of God commanding the guardian from on high to show Muḥammad around on a tour of hellfire, however, in this version Gabriel does the commanding, and the guardian responds by giving the “here I am” phrase from the *talbiya* to Gabriel. That this displacement must be a later emendation to the original version, however, becomes clear when a few lines later in the narrative, our heroes leave behind Mālik (without so much as a goodbye) and Gabriel explains that the terrifying form that Muḥammad then beholds is none other than “Šukhā’il.”

41 The connection between the beginning of this tour and Muḥammad’s upperworldly encounter with the angel “Sarḥā’il” or “Šukhā’il,” guardian of *jahannam*, which is mentioned both in this 7th/13th-century Amcazade Bakrī text as well as the anonymous Persian 6th/12th-century text, is suggestive but not definitive proof of the idea that this angelic guardian who is standing in front of a firey gate takes Muḥammad through that gate which leads him straight down to the lowest earthly realms.

also in the pre-Islamic period) depicting its actual location to be below the earth near Jerusalem and associated with the Valley of Jahannam.

One final text I wish to offer as evidence before turning to my conclusions is the Arabic ascension text of the early ninth/fifteenth-century Anatolian scholar Musa Iznikī (d. 833/1429). In Iznikī's version of the Ibn Abbas account, the first hint of a tour of hell comes once again in the fifth heaven, where an unnamed angel sitting on a throne holding pillars of fire (and whose description resembles that of Mālik) presides over the punishment of evildoers such as those guilty of associating partners with God (*shirk*), who wear clothes of fire. Shortly thereafter he meets Mālik himself in the sixth heaven. No actual tour appears at this point in Iznikī's story, however; after Muḥammad talks with Mālik, he immediately goes on to meet the prophets Noah and Idris/Enoch elsewhere in the sixth heaven.⁴²

The tour of hell proper once again gets postponed to the end of the audience with God, where God asks Muḥammad if he wishes to view what God has prepared for believers in the Garden, to which he replies with an ardent "Yes!"⁴³ Following this long tour of the Garden, Muhammad reports that his vision of the Garden causes him also to want to see *jahannam*, and he asks Gabriel to take him there.⁴⁴ The tour of hell that comes next is approximately twice as long as Iznikī's tour of the Garden.⁴⁵ Mālik calls on his servant angel Susā'il, who appears to be one of the punishing angels called the *zabāniya*, and now serves as Muḥammad's guide through his tour of hell.⁴⁶ After the tour, God questions Muḥammad about his experience, and leaves him with a final commission:

42 Iznikī, *Mi'rāj-nāma* (dated 1095/1684) fol. 10v–11r.

43 Ibid., fol. 19v.

44 Ibid., fol. 21v.

45 Ibid., fols. 21v–25r.

46 Ibid., fol. 21v. Aside from the extraordinary length of this tour of hell, one particularly remarkable scene in Iznikī's texts appears where specific individuals are mentioned in the Fire. In Iznikī's account, similar to Ayasofya 867 discussed above in which Muḥammad sees a woman who recognizes him and asks for his help during his fifth heaven tour of *jahannam*, Muḥammad himself recognizes specific people, in this case his own parents, on his tour of hell. Muḥammad asks Gabriel if he might be able to intercede with God on his parents' behalf, but Gabriel informs him that he would have to make a choice: either intercede on behalf of his parents or intercede later on behalf of the whole Muslim community, and of course Muhammad chooses the latter option, leaving his parents to burn out of his greater compassion for his entire *umma*. Ibid., fols. 23v–24r.

Muḥammad, you and your obedient community are protected from the intensities of the Fire and its punishments, and I have prepared in the Garden for you and your community—with all the monotheist submitters [muslimūn]—pleasures whose number only I know. Return to the world, and call your community to belief and the pleasures of the Garden, inform them about its pleasures, and warn them of the punishments of the Fire ...⁴⁷

After this “commission,” Muḥammad descends to the sixth heaven, encounters Moses, and the familiar bargaining session with God for the reduction of the number of daily prayers begins. The text makes explicitly clear the exhortative and didactic purpose of Muḥammad’s tour of the Garden and of hellfire, and its placement near the culmination of the ascension narrative—after the audience with God and likely somewhere near the seventh heaven—gives this section of Iznīkī’s text special emphasis.

3 Conclusions

Narrative accounts of Muḥammad’s ascension show a clear movement from a brief vision of the Fire in or around Jerusalem near the culmination of the *isrā’*, or similar descriptions in the first heaven of the *mi’rāj* in some of the earliest texts, to a brief encounter with Mālik in the first heaven followed by a vision of hellfire near the culmination of the ascension in the early middle periods, and then the appearance of two major patterns in the Ibn ‘Abbās texts of the seventh/thirteenth to ninth/fifteenth centuries, one in which a full tour of hell takes place in the fifth heaven, and another in which it occurs shortly after Muḥammad’s audience with God in the sixth or seventh (or higher) heavens. One may wonder why we find the narreme of the tour of hell in such diverse places in these ascension reports, and I conclude this survey by offering some working hypotheses.

One theory to explain why the tour of hell is reported in diverse upper-worldly locations is that there was an element of oral transmission and oral performance in these non-canonical *mi’rāj* narratives. Just as one could not predict with any certainty in the Ibn ‘Abbās ascension accounts in which heaven one might find Muḥammad’s encounter with Adam, Jesus, Solomon, or even Moses and Abraham,⁴⁸ so too it appears that, until the modern era at

47 Ibid., fol. 25r.

48 See Colby, *Narrating* 138–41 (Table 1).

least, the tours of hellfire in these ascension reports never achieved a stable format or standard location in the discourse. Despite this lack of single form, however, we have seen that certain patterns do begin to emerge, and in the later middle periods the tour of hell more often than not becomes placed in one of the upper heavens, especially the fifth, sixth, seventh or beyond. This development, too, could be seen as consistent with theories of oral transmission and oral history, especially as conditioned by scholarly concerns with narrative authenticity that would tend to channel diverse oral reports into particular patterns.

Unlike the placing of a vision of the Fire in the first heaven, which may be connected to the common early trope of Muḥammad meeting Adam in the first heaven as the latter presides over an evaluation of newly departed souls, for those narratives that place the tour of hell in the fifth heaven, the connection between the tour of hell and the prophet whom Muḥammad encounters in the fifth heaven is less clear. Sometimes Aaron shows up in this heaven, as in many mainstream Sunni hadith reports, but sometimes Muḥammad finds Idris/Enoch there, and in other versions he finds no prophet at all. Although it is rare for Muslim ascension texts to make any direct connection between the seven heavens and the respective planetary spheres of the Ptolemaic universe, it is intriguing to consider the possibility that since the Ptolemaic model associates the fifth heaven with the red planet Mars (the God of War), this association could theoretically have something to do with the placement of the terrifying Mālik and the violent punishments of the Fire in this particular sphere in some later Ibn 'Abbās ascension narratives.

Perhaps more easy to explain is the placement of the extended tours of hell near the very end of Muḥammad's heavenly journey, at a location in the narrative where the long section would not detract from the flow of the accounts of the other heavens, and where it would be poised to have its most dramatic impact. One often finds this pattern reproduced on the borders of Islamdom—for instance, in the versions copied in al-Andalus, Greece, Herat, Anatolia, etc.—, sometimes accompanied by a few sentences that make explicit the moral and didactic purpose of the tours, as we saw in Izniki's account that was surveyed at the end of the discussion above. This positioning of the narrative and explicit didactic purpose underscores Gruber's thesis regarding the Ilkhanid and Chaghatay accounts, namely that they served as teaching manuals for recently converted Muslims at least as much as they might have been used as tools for the attempted conversion of non-Muslims to Islam.

This being as it may, the patterns that we have seen describing an upper-worldly hell in the fifth heaven or beyond demonstrate that Muḥammad's tour of hell—or at least the encounter introducing or leading to his tour of

hell—gets moved from a site on earth, its typical location in early ascension narratives and later eschatological manuals, to a position higher and higher in the heavenly realms in the majority of the widely-circulated ascension texts transmitted in the middle and later periods of Islamic history.

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