“There Is Matter for Thought”

The Episode of the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension in the Sīra ḥalabiyya, at the Beginning of the Seventeenth Century

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All this, they argued, had to have been part of a single artistic vision that worked its way through the epic's many themes and episodes.... Where some people see chaos and incoherence, others will find sense and symmetry and wholeness....

I talked about ring composition, that remarkable narrative technique that weaves the present and the past together, that allows the account of a specific episode in a character's life to expand to encompass his entire life.

DANIEL MENDELSON, *An Odyssey: a Father, a Son, and an Epic*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2017, p. 72.

1 Introduction: A Conciliatory *Sīra* and a Weapon

Egyptian *shaykh* ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Ḥalabī¹ was over 60 years old when he accepted shaykh al-Bakrī's request to write the biography of the Prophet. He completed his *Sīra* in 1043/1633, undoubtedly aware it would be his last work. He died soon after on 29 sha'bān 1044/February 17, 1635. *Insān al-‘uyūn fī sīrat al-amīn al-ma’mūn* was a decisive work and yet was presented modestly as an imperfect compendium of two main sources from the Mamluk era.

The first source was the *‘Uyūn al-athar fī l-funūn wa-l-shamā’il wa-l-siyar* by Ibn Sayyid al-Nās (d. 734/1334). Actually, Ḥalabī wrote a gloss of it instead of a compendium. He used Ibn Sayyid al-Nās's *Sīra* as the main framework for

¹ See Muḥibbī, *Khulāṣat al-athar fī a’yān al-qarn al-hādī ‘ashar*, III, 122–24.

his own, much longer narrative.² Though Ḥalabī chose a chronological over a thematic structure and honours Ibn Sayyid al-Nās's vast knowledge in terms of *ḥadīths* and chains of transmission, he does not adopt the latter's tone and spirit. As demonstrated by Tilman Nagel, Ibn Sayyid al-Nās rehabilitated the oldest sources, Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām and al-Waqīdī, carefully expunging the *ḥadīths* he deemed too weak.³ None of this, nor Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām, nor al-Waqīdī preoccupied Ḥalabī. As he explains in his introduction, the scholarship of his predecessors allowed him to forgo the chains of *ḥadīth* transmissions and write a more accessible text, where even weak or forged *ḥadīth* had a role to play – without necessarily being validated. In writing his own *sīra* at the beginning of the fourteenth century, three centuries before Ḥalabī, Ibn Sayyid al-Nās had already expressed the desire to write a simpler *Sīra*, one that did away with repetitions. Ḥalabī's version, infinitely more complex, was written for a variety of readerships and addressed a multitude of issues that were the battle lines of his day.

The second main source of the *Sīra ḥalabīyya*, the *Subul al-hudā wa-l-rashād fī sīrat khayr al-'ibād* by al-Shāmī al-Ṣāliḥī (d. 1536) was written a century earlier and was known as *al-Sīra al-shāmīyya*. Ḥalabī used it for what it was, an immense encyclopedia of *ḥadīths* grouped by theme. Here too, he avoided a thematic construction in order to maintain the focus on the meaning he conferred onto his own *Sīra*. Despite his apparent deference to his two predecessors, Ḥalabī did not always take the trouble to verify the details in their texts,⁴ because his own vision of the Night Voyage led him to use other authors he considered more pertinent than Ibn Sayyid al-Nās and al-Shāmī. Ḥalabī rallied his vast Sufi culture in his final work. Having studied under a number of masters, he had, in his youth, been the disciple of shaykh Muḥammad al-Bakrī (d. 1586), the shaykh of the Bakriyya family and father to shaykh Abū l-Mawāhib (d. 1628), the same person who had commissioned Ḥalabī's *Sīra*.⁵ Ḥalabī

2 The edition 1356/1937 *Uyūn al-athar* – published in Cairo and quoted by F. Rosenthal in his article in the *Encyclopédie de l'islam*, 2nd edition – was deemed faulty by the critical edition that appeared in both Beirut-Damascus and Medina around 1997, which we consulted. There is also a 1966 edition from Beirut of the *Uyūn al-athar*, which Tilman Nagel used in *Allahs Liebling*.

3 Ibn Sayyid al-Nās also used lost or obscure sources such as Mūsā b. 'Uqba, Ibn 'Ā'idh, Abū 'Aruba, Abū Bishr al-Dawlabī. See Nagel, *Allahs Liebling*, 218–229.

4 For example, on the question of the opening of the Prophet's chest, Ḥalabī writes, "I saw that he [al-Shāmī] had gathered this in a part titled 'The light of the moon in what has been written during the opening of the chest' (*Nūr al-badr fī-mā jā'a fī shaqq al-ṣadr*), but I went no further. And God is most knowledgeable", I, 518.

5 On the Bakrī, see Mughazy and Sabra (eds.), *Manāqib al-Sāda al-Bakrīya*. Sabra, Adam, "Household Sufism in Sixteenth-Century Egypt: The Rise of al-Sāda al-Bakrīya" 101–118.

was thus tied to Cairo's Turkish-Ottoman aristocracy: his courses at Al-Azhar brought together "the virtuous (*al-fuḍalā'*) and the noble of spirit (*al-nubalā'*) [... for ...] he was respected by both the elite and the masses."⁶

Ḥalabī had also been the disciple of the Egyptian Shāfi'ī mufti, Shams al-Dīn al-Ramlī (d. 1596), which placed him within the great Shāfi'ī, Ash'arī, and Shādhilī traditions of Egypt during the Mamluk era.⁷ The combination of fiqh, *ḥadīth*, and Sufism that characterised the works of Egyptian scholars at the end of the Mamluk era and the beginning of the Ottoman era – a combination whose coherence has been deftly demonstrated by Éric Geoffroy⁸ – is the foundation of Ḥalabī's *Sīra*.⁹ Ḥalabī often quotes the Egyptian authors from the fifteenth century,¹⁰ especially Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1449), whose *Fath al-bārī*, commentary of Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, is used but whose title is never cited. Another constantly mentioned source are Suyūṭī's (d. 1505) two books: *al-Khaṣā'is al-kubrā* and *al-Khaṣā'is al-ṣuḡhrā*. Though the *Ṣaḥīḥ*s by Bukhārī and Muslim, the *Musnad* by Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, and sometimes the work of al-Shāfi'ī ("our Imam"), appear in these discussions, it is through the compilations of Ibn Ḥajar and Suyūṭī that Ḥalabī offers a new reading of the *ḥadīths*. To a lesser extent, he cites the *Imtā'* by the historian Maqrīzī (d. 1442)¹¹ and *al-Mawāhib al-laduniyya* by al-Qastallanī (d. 1517). Ḥalabī also mentions Sufi authors from the beginning of the Ottoman era, such as al-Sha'rānī (d. 1565), notably concerning angelology. It is partially through al-Sha'rānī that he also used Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240). Finally, despite the prevalence of Egyptian authors, Ḥalabī, along with Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, readily quotes two works by Moroccan authors of Andalusian origins in the twelfth century: the famous *Shifā'* by Qaḍī

6 See Muḥibbī, *Khulāṣat al-athar fī a'yan al-qarn al-hādī ʿashar*, III, 122–124. Translation by Pascale Pinel-Cahagne, *Le merveilleux dans la biographie de Muḥammad (sīra) due à Nūr al-Dīn al-Ḥalabī. Choix d'épisodes*, 71.

7 On Ramlī, see *Khulāṣat al-athar fī a'yan al-qarn al-hādī ʿashar*, III, 342–43. Shams al-Ramlī was the son of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ramlī (d. 957/1550), disciple of Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī (d. 1520).

8 Geoffroy, *Le soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie sous les derniers Mamelouks et les premiers Ottomans*.

9 The majority of Ḥalabī's work deals with devotion to the Prophet with a commentary on the forty *ḥadīths* of Nawawī (d. 1277), another on the *Burda* by Būṣīrī (d. 1294), and a third on *al-Shamā' il al-nabawiyya*, by Tirmidhī (d. 279/892). See Ḥājji Khalifa (1609–1657), *Kashf al-ẓunūn ʿan asmā' al-kutub wa-l-funūn*, I, 180. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur* II, 307 and *Supplement*, II, 418.

10 Ḥalabī generally references with either the name of the author or the title of the work, very rarely both. Often, quotes are indicated with simply "it has been said" or "in a version", which does not situate them at all.

11 Maqrīzī, *Imtā' al-asmā' bi-mā li-l-nabī min al-aḥwāl wa-l-amwāl wa-l-ḥafada wa-l-matā'*.

ʿIyāḍ (d. 1149) and the *Rawḍ al-unuf fī sharḥ al-sīra al-nabawīyya li-Ibn Hishām*, by al-Suhaylī (d. 1185).

In sum, aside from his main sources – one “chronological” (*ʿUyūn al-athar*) and the other “thematic” (*al-Sīra al-shāmiyya*), Ḥalabī did not use the *Sīras* to write and certainly not to shape his arguments. He very rarely quotes Ibn Ishāq (sometimes mentioning his name, sometimes merely the title, *al-Sīra al-hishāmīyya*) and when he does, it is generally by referencing Ibn Sayyid al-Nās. Ḥalabī did not necessarily equate old and biographical *Sīras* with truth and thus, he was less interested in the oldest sources (Waqīdī, Ṭabarī, or Ibn Saʿd), preferring the more recent Ibn Sayyid al-Nās. When opinions diverge or interpretative crossroads appear, Ḥalabī reverts to debates between *ḥadīth* specialists of the Mamluk era or uses a Qurʾānic *tafsīr*, that of Tustārī (d. 896), the *Kashshāf* by Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), Bayḍawī (d. 1286), al-Jalāl al-Maḥallī (d. 1460), first author of *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* – all are quoted by Ḥalabī;¹² whereas Ibn Sayyid al-Nās cited the *tafsīr* by ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 827) and that of Yaḥyā Ibn Sallām.¹³ Ḥalabī also draws on the extensive history of the prophets by Ibn Kathīr, in *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*. After presenting contradictory versions of an episode, he often concludes by quoting verses from the *Tāʾīyya* by Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 1370) and from the *Hamzīyya* by Buṣīrī (d. 1294) because the dense and elegant style of devotional poetry helps Ḥalabī discuss the meaning of the miraculous episodes of the Life of the Prophet.

Grounded mainly in the Mamluk era, Ḥalabī grappled with many Islamic debates at the beginning of the seventeenth century. There was something new: his *Sīra* was written for an educated readership and thus needed to be deliberately and carefully constructed. Shaykh al-Bakrī most certainly commissioned the work in response to the ideas of the Qadizādeli. The group of Qadizādeli were hostile to Sufism and their ideas were defended in Istanbul by the Sultan Murād IV.¹⁴ This work was also a chance to present to an elite a unification of the Islamic sciences: Qurʾānic sciences, Arabic philology, fiqh, Sufism, *ḥadīth*, and *adab*, in the name of a Sufi synthesis oriented towards

12 The chronological order of the works cited by Ḥalabī, which I have listed here for more clarity, was of no importance to Ḥalabī. Though he took great care to order the sequences and events of Muḥammad’s experiences, he was not interested in dating his sources. Works were given equal standing regardless of their dates of publication, with the most recent often considered the most interesting as they offered the most information. Age was never linked to authenticity.

13 *ʿUyūn al-athar*, I, 250–51.

14 The sultan knew of Ḥalabī thanks to a short treatise from 1630 on the reconstructions of the Kaʿba, translated into Ottoman Turkish and sent by the Governor Mehmed Pasha. See Mayeur-Jaouen, “La *Sīra ḥalabīyya* (1633)”.

the Prophet that transcended and subsumed them. In 1633, Ḥalabī was convinced that only such a synthesis could convince the Ottoman *honnête homme*, imbued with Sufism but also taken with rationality and logic, and who had perhaps started to criticise the legendary series of hagiographies and the overflow of *ḥadīths*, pointing out the contradictions and impossibilities. Perhaps the reader had gone so far as to doubt the miracles of the Prophet when re-reading Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) who categorically refused the possibility that the fully conscious Prophet could physically see God with his own eyes. The *Sīra ḥalabīyya*, on the contrary, depicts Muḥammad, as described by Tilman Nagel, as “an always intervening intermediary of knowledge necessary to our salvation”.¹⁵

Ḥalabī was fighting on several battlefronts to win over readers with diverse positions. To convince fastidious traditionalists who would potentially point out the dubious nature of different *ḥadīths*, he began undermining their arguments in his introduction: Ḥalabī acknowledges that the authenticity of *ḥadīths* is important in legal matters, however, the *Sīra* required greater flexibility. He thus justified the fact that he did away with the chains of transmission of the *ḥadīths* that his predecessors had scrupulously quoted. Ḥalabī strengthened his position by explaining he was merely accommodating a period that was unfortunately less scholarly than that of his predecessors. His goal was to simplify the reading of the *Sīra* for the Ottoman elite and for scholars (but not necessarily the ulama) who needed to be convinced of the exceptional nature of the Prophet and his House and of the reality – or at least the plausibility – of the Prophet’s miracles. Ḥalabī thus never hides the suspicious or forged nature of a particular *ḥadīth* or *isnād*; instead, he replaces it with a plausible and trustworthy version of the events. The *Sīra* must make sense. The *Sīra ḥalabīyya* skillfully handles the divergent and sometimes conflicting versions of the same event – without ever pretending to offer a definitive answer. It offers a synthesis that is acceptable to the rational mind of the faithful. Ḥalabī’s *Sīra* reconciles rather than summarises. It does not aim for a single unique truth, but rather, it focuses on opening the Muslim mind to a field of possibilities and plausibilities that take into account all at once a firm demand for rationality and logic (in terms of a chronological succession or the non-simultaneity of events), a thirst for history (situating events in a plausible narrative arc), and the recognition that supernatural and miraculous elements must be compatible with logic and reason in order to convince the more determined *esprits forts*.

¹⁵ Nagel, *Allahs Liebling*, 230.

Ḥalabī was wary of fantastical tales and allusions. His account of the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension did however take into account (without ever citing it) a text that he had commented on elsewhere, *al-Ibtihāj fi l-kalām ‘alā l-isrā’ wa-l-mi’rāj* by the Egyptian shaykh Najm al-Dīn al-Ghayṭī (d. 1576), the most widespread *Mi’rāj* narrative of the beginning of the seventeenth century.¹⁶ Ghayṭī’s *Mi’rāj* was so short and allusive that multiple interpretations and glosses were more than justified. It had also been commented by Aḥmad al-Qalyūbī (d. 1659), an Egyptian shaykh who was Ḥalabī’s contemporary, in a text that was further studied a century later by the famous shaykh al-Dardīr (d. 1786).¹⁷ Far from being written to convince a hesitant readership, Qalyūbī’s commentary was addressed to devout, faithful Sufis.¹⁸ The same would later hold true for Dardīr’s commentary. When Qalyūbī commented on the Ka’ba’s roof splitting open, he began with the declaration that everything “would be extraordinary” during this miraculous night.¹⁹ Ḥalabī, on the contrary, proclaimed that the *kharq al-‘āda* could not be excessively used, and not without some sort of analysis.

The Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension are so well known that Ḥalabī did not bother to narrate or comment on everything. Instead, he quickly mentions certain passages, such as the visions of the damned, that occupied a central place in al-Ghayṭī’s work. What did matter to Ḥalabī was the general meaning of the events, situating the Prophet among other prophets, placing his Community within other communities, and convincing his readers of the reality of the Night Journey, the Heavenly Ascension, and ultimately the Beatific Vision.

We will be studying the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension in the *Sīra ḥalabīyya*; comparing Ḥalabī’s method and narrative with his known models (Ibn Sayyid al-Nās and al-Shāmī), as well as with al-Qalyūbī’s commentary of al-Ghayṭī’s *Mi’rāj*. Such a comparative reading allows us to measure on the

16 According to Muḥibbī, in an unfinished commentary of the *Shamā’il*, Ḥalabī “clearly explained what can be found in the *Mi’rāj* by shaykh Najm al-Dīn”, see Muḥibbī, *Khulāṣat al-athar fi a’yān al-qarn al-hādī ‘ashar*, III, 122–124. Ḥalabī was responding to ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf al-Munāwī (d. 1622) who, in 1591, had written two commentaries on the *Shamā’il*. See Chouiref, *Soufisme et ḥadīth dans l’Égypte ottomane*. ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf al-Munāwī (m. 1031/1622), 100.

17 Qalyūbī quoted the Qāḍī ‘Iyād and Ibn Kathīr – as did Ḥalabī, Ibn Ḥajar, and Suyūṭī, but he wrote for a different public and with different goals. Shaykh al-Dardīr (d. 1786) added nothing conclusive. The work was published (with no mention of al-Qalyūbī) with the title *Ḥāshiyat Abī l-barakāt Sīdī Aḥmad al-Dardīr ‘alā qīṣṣat al-Mi’rāj li-l-Ghayṭī*. In this article, the 1289 H. edition was used and cited as *Ḥāshīya*.

18 *Ḥāshīya*, 2.

19 *Ḥāshīya*, 3.

one hand the differences in the writing of the *Sīra* between the Mamluk era and the seventeenth century, and on the other, the differences in writing a key episode of the *Sīra* at a single moment in time – the first half of the seventeenth century. The analysis will offer us a glimpse of Ḥalabī's intentions in the writing of his *Sīra* and the particular image he offers of the Prophet.

1.1 *A Method*

The *Sīra ḥalabīyya* follows the “chronological” *Sīra* by Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, whose citations are introduced by the mention *qāla* and completed, when needed, by *ḥadīths* collated by al-Shāmī and others. Though Ibn Sayyid al-Nās's text was his main model (*al-aṣl*, in his words), Ḥalabī's version is considerably longer. The published version of the *ʿUyūn al-athar* devoted fifteen short pages to the Night Journey whereas that of the *Insān al-ʿuyūn* runs to 72 pages.²⁰ Ḥalabī often intervenes in the account (*aqūlu*) to offer a generally conciliatory conclusion between several contradictory hypotheses.

In the episode of the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension, Ḥalabī takes certain liberties when quoting Ibn Sayyid al-Nās's text: he dismantles the narrative framework and reorganises the elements in a completely different manner. Ibn Sayyid al-Nās followed the sequence of events very loosely and juxtaposed, with numerous repetitions, the most authentic *ḥadīths* possible. Inspired by Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām, he reveals very little of himself in the text, despite occasionally stating his positions. His concision stands in contrast with Ḥalabī's project. The latter pays scant attention to Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām and constructs his narrative in a literary, scholarly, sophisticated, and highly personal fashion. Ḥalabī, in contrast to his predecessors, is much more attached to a logical chronology in his narrative. Taking into account the various debates, he avoids abrupt conclusions and we can often find statements such as “This is what he has said, giving matter for thought and God is the wisest” (*hādhā kalāmuhu fā-l-yutaʿammal, wa-Llāhu aʿlam*). Ḥalabī's writings are highly organised and he generally saves the author with whom he agrees for the end. For Ḥalabī, the last to speak (or more precisely, whom he has speak) is the wisest. However, he does not impose his opinions without having first discussed contrary opinions, going so far as rendering them such that both alternatives are possible *together*. When a conciliation between the various versions (*jamʿ bayna l-riwāyāt*) is impossible, he at least highlights the contradictions in the sources and the texts in order to better appeal to the reader's intelligence and guide him towards the conclusion.

20 The *ʿUyūn al-athar* had two volumes and the *Insān al-ʿuyūn* three. See al-Nās, *ʿUyūn al-athar* 1, 241–56 and Ḥalabī, *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, 1, 514–86.

To explore his method, let us take a closer look at two examples. The first is the scene where God opens the Prophet's chest. Ḥalabī begins with Umm Hānī bint Abī Ṭālib's testimony of the Prophet's mysterious absence in the night and of his mysterious return. Muḥammad had fallen asleep at her home in Mecca and yet, at dawn, he tells her that he had slept that night in the sanctuary (*al-masjid al-ḥaram*). As another text states, "in the Hījr", Ḥalabī attempts to render possible these multiple locations. Three angels arrive while the Prophet is resting in the sanctuary in Mecca, lying between his uncle Hamza and his cousin Ja'far b. Abī Ṭālib. Transported to Zamzam, his chest (*al-ṣadr*) or stomach (*al-baṭn*) is opened and his heart (*qalb*) is purified. Gabriel asks Mikā'il to bring a vessel (*tist*) of Zamzam water to purify Muḥammad's heart, which he extracts, washes three times of whatever impurities (*adhā*) it still contained. Ḥalabī interrupts his narrative to point out difficulties. First, the Prophet has had his chest opened perhaps three times:²¹ the first when Muḥammad was a child with his wet-nurse, the second was when he was ten, the third was during the prophetic mission. It is possible that the opening had been repeated, but – Ḥalabī emphasises – the extraction of the blood clot only took place the first time and the later stain is different from the clot removed in his childhood.²²

Once this logical and chronological (for Ḥalabī, the two go hand in hand) confusion resolved, he examines the meaning of the events. After having brought three vessels of water from the Zamzam, Mikā'il brings a vessel "full of wisdom and faith" and pours in into the Prophet's chest. Ḥalabī compares this version to that of the purification of the Prophet's heart when he was with his nurse. God stamped him with the Seal of the Prophet, but there are three divergent versions concerning the location of the seal: his heart, his chest, or between his shoulders.²³ The Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ refutes the possibility that the Prophet's chest was once again opened during the night of the *isrā'*; for him, it was a unique event. Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī suggests that "the versions can coincide" (*al-riwāyāt tawāradat*), all the more so in that he sees a different wisdom (*ḥikma*) each time. In the end, Ḥalabī concludes with, "I say" (*aqūlu*). He suggests that Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's refusal of the *shaqq*'s repetition only pertains to the clearly unique moment when the angel extracted the black clot from the Prophet's heart.²⁴

21 The *Ḥāshiya* goes so far as suggesting four openings of the Prophet's chest: the fourth in order to receive the revelation and that of the Night Journey would then be the fifth, *Ḥāshiya*, 4.

22 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 517.

23 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 517.

24 Should a distinction be made between the Prophet's heart being washed and his chest being opened? They took place at the same time, offers Ḥalabī, even if certain versions

A second example of the method used in the *Sīra ḥalabiyya* is the location of each prophet in the various heavens during the Heavenly Ascension. Ḥalabī points out the various versions and offers an ingenious solution, certain prophets descended from their own heaven to welcome the Prophet during his ascent, whereas others rose from theirs to meet the Prophet during his descent. Ibn Ḥajar, however, refuses this conciliation (*lā yarā al-jamʿ*) by choosing the most authentic version (*aṣaḥḥ al-riwāyāt*). Ḥalabī counters by stating, “I believe that this is to be taken into consideration” (*wa-ʿindī fihi naẓar ẓāhir*), “for conciliation is preferable to affirming a contradiction, especially between the most authentic (*al-aṣaḥḥ*) and the authentic (*al-ṣaḥīḥ*), even if the authentic is unique (*shādhdh*), for we do not give precedence to the *aṣaḥḥ* over the *ṣaḥīḥ*, unless conciliation excuses it. There is matter for thought”. What is to be gleaned from all these versions is that each of the prophets who met Muḥammad had his own heaven, “here is a wisdom (*ḥikma*) that would take too long to discuss in detail”.²⁵

Thus, by considering both the *ḥadīths* and the readings of his illustrious predecessors, all of whom had become “primary sources” of sorts, Ḥalabī offers up a synthesis of the multiple versions that acknowledges then minimises the contradictions, adds details and rivers of scholarship, suggests without overburdening theological or mystical points, and imposes no simplified ideology – but rather, admits several narrative possibilities.

1.2 *The Reality of the Night Journey: Affirming the Dogma and Dispensing Proof*

The fluidity of the narrative allows Ḥalabī to focus on what matters most. His primary goal is to convince his readership that the Night Journey did indeed take place. Where Ibn Sayyid al-Nās attacks *in medias res* with the *ḥadīth* of Umm Hānī bint Abī Ṭālib woken by the Prophet and where al-Ghayṭī begins with the Prophet sleeping in Kaʿba between his uncle and his cousin, Ḥalabī prefigures his account of the Night Journey with a preamble on the reality of the miracle, supported by the Qurʾān (Sura 17 *al-Isrāʾ* and Sura 53 *al-Najm*). In Ḥalabī’s chapter on the Night Journey, the Qurʾān is cited more frequently than usual in the *Sīra ḥalabiyya*, proving the polemical nature of such a subject in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Ḥalabī affirms that there are no disagreements concerning the *isrāʾ*, since it is narrated in the Qurʾān and that thirty Companions, men and women,

abbreviate the narrative by only mentioning one of the two events. The *baṭn* designates the chest (*ṣadr*), *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 517.

25 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 561.

recounted the episode. The *isrāʾ* is established fact.²⁶ Ḥalabī goes on to say that the ulamas also agree on the fact that the *isrāʾ* took place after the Prophet's mission, when he was in a corporal and conscious state.²⁷ This is the leitmotif that is found at the end of his account of the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension.

As is often the case in his writings, once a general affirmation is stated, waves of contradictions and possibilities immediately unfurl. How many *isrāʾāt* were there? How many took place corporeally versus spiritually? Perhaps there were several night journeys?²⁸ Shaʿrānī (d. 1565) suggests that there were 34 *isrāʾāt*, of which only one was undertaken corporeally. By organising his citations, Ḥalabī suggests that many *isrāʾ* were possible as long as they did not impugn on the dogma he deems supported by the Qurʾān: the *isrāʾ* – at least one – did indeed take place in body and mind.

Ḥalabī then accumulates proof that corroborates or explains the Qurʾānic text. As with his contemporaries, for whom Ḥalabī wrote, the inhabitants of Mecca were sceptical about the Prophet's return. Not only did the Qurayshi pagans question the Prophet's story, but some of the first Muslims apostatised due to the story's improbability. Only Abū Bakr believed and thus became the Truthful One (al-Ṣiddīq).²⁹ Ibn Sayyid al-Nās mentions the Qurayshites's incredulity at the beginning of his text,³⁰ but Ḥalabī moves this element to *after* narrating the Night Journey and *before* discussing the Heavenly Ascension. This renders the Qurayshites' questions about Jerusalem more comprehensible; however, by placing the administration of proof here, he also introduces a hiatus between the two events and the two stories (the *isrāʾ* and the *miʾrāj*). Ḥalabī, like the majority of Sufi commentators, attempted to unify the two episodes. He suggests that Muḥammad made the Night Journey to Jerusalem so that the Meccans could question him with full knowledge of the facts.³¹ Why though would the Meccans be satisfied with questioning Muḥammad only about his Night Journey and not also wish to know more about his Heavenly Ascension? Perhaps, says Ḥalabī, it was because they had elements of information about Jerusalem and the means to verify them; which was not the case for the seven heavens. Therefore, once the first story was authenticated, the second became

26 Not everyone agreed on this. Certain scholars argued that several verses of the Qurʾān state that Muḥammad is merely an annunciator who warns and announces. See Gilliot, who summarised Nöldeke in "Coran 17, Isrāʾ, 1 dans la recherche occidentale", 2–3.

27 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 514.

28 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 514.

29 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 532.

30 *ʿUyūn al-athar*, 241–43.

31 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 534.

plausible. This clever interpretation, suggested by Qastallanī in his *al-Mawāhib al-ladunīyya*, implicitly suggests the hiatus.

To test the Prophet, the Quraysh who knew Jerusalem well questioned him about the Temple, which Muḥammad had never visited. Overwhelmed by their questions, the Prophet had a revelation (*tajallī*) in which God showed him the Temple so he could describe it in detail. Still sceptical, the Quraysh asked him for a sign (*āya*, or an *‘allāma* in Ḥalabī’s gloss).³² Muḥammad declared he had met up with a specific caravan in a wadi, where the Burāq had frightened a she-camel who then ran off. The Prophet had guided the Bedouins until they found her.³³ The caravan arrived in Mecca soon after and confirmed Muḥammad’s tale, eliciting a range of emotions from the Quraysh (“He’s a magician!”). Ḥalabī quotes the Qur’ān, *al-Isrā’*, 60: “We did not make the sight which We showed you except as a trial for the people” (*wa-mā ja’alnā al-ru’yā al-latī arāynāka illā fitnatan li-l-nās*), and comments: “this indicates that the vision (*ru’yā*) of the *isrā’* is truly a vision seen with his own eyes, if the vision of the *isrā’* had been a dream, we would not have denied it”.³⁴ Ḥalabī highlights the difference between the different versions and nevertheless, he continues to try to render them plausible and compatible.³⁵ He concludes that the accounts are not contradictory.

Later, more proof appears with the testimony – which neither Ibn Sayyid al-Nās nor al-Ghayṭī/Qalyūbī mention – of Abū Sufyān questioning Qayṣar (Caesar, Byzantine emperor) about the Night Journey: “Muḥammad says he travelled”, states Abū Sufyān, “from our holy land – Mecca – to your temple – Jerusalem – and back in one night when even our fastest camels need two months for the round-trip journey”. Caesar answers that indeed, a door of the Temple had remained open that night and that, in the morning, the Rock with Burāq’s imprint and marks had been found. The ancient sciences, remembers Caesar, announced that a prophet would ascend into the heavens from the Temple: this was a sign (*āya*).³⁶ The Heavenly Ascension thus belongs to a very ancient history in which the previous monotheist religions (here, Christianity) announced Islam.

At the end of this chapter, after the Heavenly Ascension, Ḥalabī again discusses Muḥammad’s return home.³⁷ He takes advantage of the opportunity to

32 *Uyūn al-athar*, I, 243.

33 *Insān al-‘uyūn*, I, 535.

34 *Insān al-‘uyūn*, I, 537.

35 *Insān al-‘uyūn*, I, 536.

36 *Insān al-‘uyūn*, I, 523.

37 He quotes the passages from the Qur’ān that were revealed during the descent from the heavens to earth: *al-Ṣāfāt*, 164; *al-Zakhruf*, 45, and perhaps the last two verses of the

offer more proof from the Qur'ān concerning the *isrā'* and the *mi'rāj* in body and mind: "who made his servant travel", says *al-Isrā'*, 1; the servant is present in body and soul as we can see in "Have you seen the one who forbids a servant when he prays?" (*al-'Alaq*, 9–10), as well as in "... And when the slave of Allah stood up in prayer to Him ..." (*al-Jinn*, 19). If the *isrā'* had been nothing but a dream, the Qur'ān would have specified: "by his servant's soul (*bi-rūḥi 'abdihi*)". Furthermore, a steed such as the Burāq is not mounted by spirits but by bodies. More proof from the Qur'ān, "The sight (*al-baṣar*) did not swerve, nor did it transgress its limit" (*Najm*, 17). Ḥalabī does however admit that this may have been an allusion to the vision of the heart.

1.3 *The Importance of Time and Chronology, of Space and Cosmogony*

To anchor his narrative even more firmly within an irrefutable reality, Ḥalabī dedicates long explanations to dates and places, tangible proof of veracity and also one of the main sources of contradictions in the *ḥadīths*. Ḥalabī carries out a meticulous study of possible chronological sequencing and spatial arrangements (how can a single event have taken place at two different moments and/or in two different places). Paying close attention to his narration and the order of his text, he attempts to do away with contradictions and extraneous statements. His efforts for harmony in his search for the credible also results in a temporal sacrality and a sacred cosmogony, in this other time and this other world where prophets can bend time and space.

Constantly concerned with chronology and temporal sequences, Ḥalabī starts with dates. When did the bodily Night Journey take place? He uses Ibn Sayyid al-Nās's³⁸ propositions and adds others: was it the night of 17 or 27 Rabī' 1? Of 27 Ramadan or the 27 Rabī' 11? In Shawwāl or in Dhū l-ḥijja? The 17 Rajab, as believed by al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Ġanī al-Maqdisī (d. 1203), whose opinions were accepted by the majority to commemorate the event (*wa-'alayhi 'amala l-nās*)? Sha'rānī argues that all the *isrā'* took place the same night, one, two, or three years before the Hijra. Was it before the journey to al-Ṭā'if (as written by Ibn Ishāq), or after? "There is clearly matter for thought" (*wa-fīhi naẓar ẓāhir*)³⁹ and disagreement over this point, notes Ḥalabī. The same holds true for the day of the *isrā'*. Did the Night Journey take place Friday, Saturday, or Monday? Ibn Dihya (d. 1235) favours Monday because that is the day the Prophet was

al-Baqara Sura. Ḥalabī reminds us that the Sura was revealed at the Distance of two bows (*Qāb al-qawsayn*), I, 577.

38 *Uyūn al-athar*, ed. 1997, 249–51.

39 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 515.

born, the day of his mission, the day of the Hijra, and finally of his death “and”, concludes Ḥalabī, “there is matter for thought” (*fa-l-yuta’ammal*).⁴⁰

As for the length of the Night Journey, it cannot be evaluated by earthly time. Ḥalabī quotes the *Tā’iyya* by Subkī who has the Prophet say, “I returned and everything had taken place in the space of a single moment”. As is often the case with Ḥalabī, Sufi poetry offers the ultimate answer, one that opens onto another interpretation of the world – far from the legal arguments rooted in the science of the *ḥadīth* or the rational arguments to which he is so attentive. With his characteristic discretion, Ḥalabī reminds the reader that God lengthens short lapses of time and “bends” long stretches for the saints of his community and that many stories discuss this bending of time (*tāyy al-zamān*), which is all at once a mysterious period of time, the absence of a specific length of time, and a temporal layering.

Just like time, places must also be organised rationally; however celestial geography is infuriating and difficult to understand, given the contradiction of the various versions and the awkward repetition of episodes. One of Ḥalabī’s goals is to establish an organised topography, linked to Earth and the very real places that were familiar to his Ottoman readers: Mecca and its surroundings, Jerusalem, the Nile, Euphrates. Ḥalabī considers the complex cosmogony of the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension, between Heaven and Hell. For example, one version (cited by Ibn Sayyid al-Nās⁴¹) describes Adam seated between the door of Hell and that of Heaven, both guarded by lions, as he passes judgement over the souls of faithful (destined for Heaven) and those of pagans (destined for Hell). The same description exists in al-Ghayṭī’s text but Qalyūbī does not ask the same questions as Ḥalabī: why do both doors exist in the first heaven when the Fire is on the seventh level of Earth and Heaven above the seventh heaven? Ḥalabī offers ingenious solutions.⁴²

Every stage elaborates a complex system to match up Heaven and Earth, the tangible world and the imaginal one. The Heavenly Ascension starts with the Ladder that the souls of the sons of Adam must climb after their death. In a passage from the *Mawāhib* cited by Ḥalabī, Qastallānī talks about the Door to Heaven, called “the Angels’ ladder” that is said to stand facing the temple of Jerusalem and which can be used to climb directly to Heaven. According to Ibn Kathīr, this Ladder suggests that the Heavenly Ascension did not include the Burāq, contrary to Buṣīrī’s suggestion.⁴³ Qalyūbī deferred to Suyūṭī and stated

40 *Insān al-‘uyūn*, I, 515.

41 *Uyūn al-athar*, I, 248.

42 *Insān al-‘uyūn*, I, 550.

43 *Insān al-‘uyūn*, I, 549.

that the Burāq remained attached to the door of the Temple of Jerusalem and the Prophet rode it again only to return to Mecca. This also seems to be Ḥalabī's opinion.

According to Ibn Ḥajar, each heaven has a house (*bayt ma'mūr*), and in the "heaven of the *dunyā*", an image (*ḥayyāl*) of the Ka'ba can be found. The different "homes" are linked between each other in a topography that combines Heaven and Earth: the Ka'ba to Mecca, the Temple of Jerusalem, the heavenly *bayt ma'mūr*.⁴⁴

At the end of the Heavenly Ascension, Gabriel leads Muḥammad to the Lote tree in the seventh heaven, from which spring all the celestial rivers. Contrary to other *Sīras* authors, and despite barely evoking Zamzam, Ḥalabī discusses these rivers at length. This singular passage, one of the virtuoso pieces in Ḥalabī's text, was deemed important enough to be specifically cited by Shaykh al-Dardīr in his commentary.⁴⁵ Dedicated to rendering heavenly geography clear and stable, Ḥalabī starts by citing Ibn Sayyid al-Nās: at the foot of the Lote tree of the furthest limit four rivers spring forth, two "internal" rivers (*bāṭin*) – hidden when they arrive in Heaven states Ḥalabī in a gloss – and two "external" ones (*ẓāhir*) – visible when flowing through Paradise. The two "external" rivers are the Nile and the Euphrates, which cut across Paradise while the two "internal" rivers, the Sayḥān and the Jayḥān do not. Ḥalabī digs deeper (the name of the rivers, their source, on Earth or in Heaven, visible or hidden). The Sayḥān and Jayḥān, in one version, do not start at the foot of the Lote tree and the rivers designated as "the internal rivers" were likely al-Salsabīl and al-Kawthar, as stated by Muqāṭil (d. 767). The *Sīra shāmīyya* follows this logic and quotes Qurṭubī who suggests that the Sayḥān and Jayḥān were only branches of the Nile and the Euphrates. Ḥalabī has reservations⁴⁶ because Muḥammad had seen the Nile and the Euphrates in the first heaven,⁴⁷ as well as their source. This, however, contradicts what is said elsewhere, that the Prophet saw at the foot of the Lote tree of the furthest limit four rivers, including the Nile and the Euphrates. It is possible, offers Ḥalabī, that the source (*manbaʿ*) begins under the Lote tree of the furthest limit, when their point of departure (*ʿunṣur*) can be found lower in the heaven of *dunyā*, and therefore after their route through Heaven and before they flowed onto the world.

44 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 534.

45 *Ḥāshiya*.

46 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 562.

47 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 562. The Nile in Egypt and the Euphrates along the banks of Kūfa, specifies Ḥalabī, who mentions a *ḥadīth* quoted by Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201) in *al-ʿIlal al-mutanāhiya fī l-aḥādīth al-wāhiya*, according to which not a day goes by that water does not flow from Heaven into the Euphrates.

It is also said that the source (*‘ayn*), al-Salsabil, can be found at the Lote tree of the furthest limit. From there flow two rivers, the Kawthar and the River of mercy (*nahr al-raḥma*). Both *bāṭin* rivers could thus flow from the roots of the Lote tree of the furthest limit but not from the same place as the Nile and the Euphrates. Is the Kawthar a branch (*qism*) of Salsabil? This goes against Muqātil who suggested it was an accompanying but not secondary river, a consort (*qasīm*) of sorts. If the Sayḥān and the Jayḥān rivers flowed from the same spot, then there would be six rivers flowing from the Lote tree of the furthest limit. This possibility would allow al-Qurṭubī’s interpretation to be included (all rivers in Paradise flow from the foot of the Lote tree), if we accept that the Sayḥān and the Jayḥān are derived from the Nile and the Euphrates. It would also include Ṭabarānī’s text that describes four rivers by their contents: water (the Sayḥān), milk (the Jayḥān), wine (the Euphrates), and pure honey (the Nile), the last point was confirmed by Ka’b b. al-Aḥbār. Ibn Abī Jamra⁴⁸ suggests that if these heavenly rivers flow from the Lote tree of the furthest limit, this would then mean that the tree is planted in Heaven. As for their names, Qaḍī Iyāḍ explains that Sayḥūn refers to Sayḥān and Jayḥūn to Jayḥān, which Ibn Kathīr contradicts – as does Nawawī – with a list of four distinct rivers (Sayḥūn, Sayḥān, Jayḥūn and Jayḥān).⁴⁹ Ḥalabī points out that Kawthar is issued from the Salsabil source, at the foot of the Lote tree of the furthest limit, which is not contradictory with its previous existence as a Heavenly river.

This long, rather overwhelming passage about the rivers of Heaven could be taken as a useless digression, as can be found in a work of *adab*. Here, however, nothing is left to chance. It is important to Ḥalabī to establish a framework in which he can place the account of the Heavenly Ascension, a framework that corresponds to and explains the realities of the Middle East of his time. In this version of the Night Journey, the importance of Moses and Joseph – two prophets who travelled through Egypt – correlate and support the significance of the Nile. Ḥalabī was Egyptian after all.

1.4 *The Prophet, Blessed among All Prophets*

Within this temporal and geographic framework, which organises and links the earth below with the heavens above, Ḥalabī establishes one of the major themes of the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension: the ties between the Prophet and the prophets who precede him and his superiority over them. The role of the Prophet, already and always present, in the past history of prophets and of humanity, within the alliance between God and men, explains how

48 A Sufi of Andalusian origin who died in Cairo in 1300.

49 *Insān al-‘ayūn*, I, 564.

and why the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension make sense in the history of redemption, in the alliance between God and men, in the future of the Muslim community.

The Prophet knows the prophets and they recognise him. When the Prophet prays in Jerusalem before the other prophets, Gabriel informs Muḥammad of their identity. According to Ḥalabī, these presentations do not contradict the fact that Muḥammad already knew and recognised most of them. How is it then that later during the Heavenly Ascension, Gabriel had to, once again, present these same prophets to Muḥammad?⁵⁰ Ḥalabī believes, as does Ibn Kathīr, that the two events are not contradictory. Perhaps the prophets in heaven do not have the same form or appearance (*ṣuwar*) as they did in Jerusalem because the *barzakh* is the imaginal world (*ʿālam al-mithāl*). The vision of the prophets in heaven would be a vision of their spirits, *arwāḥ* (except Jesus and Idrīs, who rose to heaven body and soul), whereas in Jerusalem, Muḥammad would have seen their terrestrial bodies, *aḡṣād*, resuscitated for the occasion.⁵¹

Ḥalabī examines the specificities (*khaṣāʾiṣ*) of the Prophet. Did other prophets have their chests opened, as al-Shāmī's believes, or was it only Muḥammad?⁵² "I respond" (*ujibu*) answers Ḥalabī before going back to the origins, discussing the Arch of the Banī Isrāʾīl that God brought down to earth with Adam, which was handed down from prophet to prophet until Moses placed inside the Torah, his staff, Aaron's turban, the fragments of the Tablets, and the golden vessel of Paradise that had been used to wash the heart of the prophets. This is the proof that the washing of his heart was not unique to the Prophet Muḥammad, but rather was shared (there was *mushāraka*) with certain prophets. Ḥalabī contradicts Suyūṭī's *khaṣāʾiṣ* here (the latter considers the opening of the Prophet's chest to be one of his specificities), aligning himself with al-Shāmī's.⁵³

As for the Burāq, Ḥalabī wonders if the pre-Muḥammadan prophets had already ridden it, as believed by Bayhaqī (d. 1066) and Shaʿrānī. For Nasāʾī (d. 915), only the prophets preceding Jesus had ridden it but none between Jesus and Muḥammad. Ḥalabī suggests that this *ishtirāk* (the sharing of characteristics between the Prophet and other prophets) is proven by the *ḥadīth* on the Burāq:⁵⁴ "and [the Prophet] tied it at the gate of the mosque, using the ring

50 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 526. The same conciliation as in Qalyūbī's *Ḥāshiya*.

51 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 527.

52 Qalyūbī wonders the same thing in his commentary of the *Mīʾrāj* by al-Ghayṭī: *Ḥāshiya*, 1289 H., 4.

53 Concerning this particular point, he states he ignored al-Shāmī's opinions and the conclusions are his. *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 518.

54 *ʿUyūn al-athar*, 241.

by which the prophets tied it before him". However, Suyūṭī says in the *Khaṣā'is sughrā* that only the Prophet had ever ridden the Burāq. Ḥalabī offers an ingenious hypothesis: perhaps Suyūṭī was simply saying that Muḥammad was the only one to have ridden the Burāq saddled and harnessed.⁵⁵

Ḥalabī is less interested in establishing the singularities of Muḥammad compared to all other prophets than in studying his relationship to the other prophets in Jerusalem. Ḥalabī examines a *ḥadīth* quoted by Ibn Sayyid al-Nās: "God has resuscitated for me (*nushira lī*) a group of prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus",⁵⁶ and the Prophet prays at the head of them all. Ḥalabī adds that "the wisdom of this precision is clear", Abraham personifies Hanifism, Moses Judaism, Jesus Christianity. It is important to establish the heritage of Islam and its supremacy over the preceding monotheisms – this is one of the key lessons of the Night Journey to Jerusalem.⁵⁷ The life of the prophets beyond the grave is detailed: Jesus was not resurrected as he was not dead. Ḥalabī takes the opportunity to underline the strength of the link between body (*ajsād*) and spirit (*arwāḥ*), since the prophets are in the *barzakh*, a form of existence that resembles our earthly lives (the *dunyā*).⁵⁸ This bit of information or this reminder, inserted in a flood of scholarly debates, is characteristic of Ḥalabī's tendency to mention important theological elements, as if in passing.

Another clue from the Night Journey is the sun standing still for the Prophet, this is backed up by a verse of Subkī's *Tā'yya*. Ḥalabī offers a wealth of details to answer whether or not the sun stood still only for the Prophet. Did it also refrain from setting for David, as suggested by a (weak) *ḥadīth*? For Solomon? And for Yūsha' b. Nūn b. Yūsuf al-Ṣiddīq (Joshua), the son of Moses' sister? Ibn Sayyid al-Nās declares that this miracle only took place for Joshua and Muḥammad,⁵⁹ but Ḥalabī recopies a story from *'Arā'is al-Majālis* by al-Tha'labī (d. 1035): the story of the Israelites attacking and massacring the Canaanite giants in Jericho.⁶⁰ He goes back to the forty-year Exodus of the Israelites in the desert⁶¹ and proceeds to tie it into the *al-Mā'ida* Sura (Cor. v, 23–28). According

55 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 520.

56 *Uyūn al-athar*, I, 241.

57 "The entirety of the narrative must be considered as an initiation into prophetic functions," writes Schrieke, "Die Himmelsreise Muhammeds", 21. Ḥalabī does not mention Idrīs and Elijah, whose ascensions are discussed by Qushayrī; he simplifies the prophetic landscape. See Böwering, "From the word of God to the Vision of God", 208.

58 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 524.

59 *Uyūn al-athar*, 244.

60 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 538–539.

61 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 539–540.

to Ḥalabī, the legend told by Thaʿlabī, just like the narrative of the Exodus in Damirī's (d. 1405) *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*, is merely an explanation of Sura 5.⁶²

Always careful to link the texts to his readership's direct experience, he opens up other possibilities by quoting *al-Uns al-jalīl* by Muḥīr al-Dīn al-ʿUlaymī (1456–1522) – Ḥalabī's source for anything in relation to Palestine – that offers details on Jericho.⁶³ Ḥalabī also seizes the opportunity to retell the episodes of the Mosaic saga, which is the backdrop for the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension. Moses was getting ready to walk to the Holy Land with the bones of the Prophet Joseph, because he did not want them to be left in Egypt, and planned on burying them in the Holy Land in accordance with Joseph's final wishes. Moses had promised the Banū Isrāʾīl to leave when the moon rose but asked God to delay its appearance (and thus the setting of the sun) in order to find Joseph's bones, buried in an unmarked grave.⁶⁴ This Mosaic precedent furthers the underlying dialogue between the Qurʾān and the *Sīra*, between the stories of the prophets and the story of the Prophet, between Moses and Muḥammad.

Moses appears again in the sixth heaven during the Heavenly Ascension. Ḥalabī quotes Ibn Sayyid al-Nās: Moses cries when he learns that a young man sent after him (Muḥammad) will usher into Paradise more members of his community than will enter the members of Moses' community.⁶⁵ This explicit competition is one of the recurrent themes of Ḥalabī's narrative, which retells that of Suyūṭī. The comparison of the eschatological roles of the Prophet and Moses refers to the *al-Māʾida* Sura.⁶⁶

Muḥammad meets another "Egyptian" prophet, Joseph, in the third heaven. Once again, the comparison between the two is to the advantage of the Prophet. Had Joseph received half the beauty of "people"? Or rather, with his mother, the third of the beauty of the world? Or two thirds or even nine tenths as stated by Wahb b. Munabbih? For Ḥalabī, it is clear that the mention of "people" necessarily excludes the Prophet, whose beauty cannot ever be fractioned as indicated by the author of the *Burda* (Būṣīrī): "for the essence of the beauty in him cannot be divided". The poet Ibn al-Munīr (d. 1153) states however that Joseph had received the same amount of beauty as the Prophet, a point of view

62 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 539–540.

63 This is *al-Uns al-jalīl li-tārīkh al-Quds wa-l-Khalīl*, see Little, "Muḥīr al-Dīn al-ʿUlaymī's Vision of Jerusalem in the Ninth/Fifteenth Century" 237–247.

64 According to *al-Uns al-jalīl*, a 900-year old woman shows Moses where to find Joseph's grave in the middle of the Nile. As the Nile flows over the grave, it spreads its *baraka*, irrigating all of Egypt. *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 542.

65 *ʿUyūn al-athar*, I, 248.

66 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 558.

adopted by the commentator of Subkī's *Tā'īyya*. It is also stated that Joseph inherited the beauty of Isaac, who had received his from his mother Sarah, who in turn had inherited her beauty from Eve. Joseph, as beautiful as an angel, looked like Adam the day God created him and had inherited half or a third of his beauty. The final conclusion places Muḥammad in the lead: according to the *al-Khaṣā'is al-ṣughrā* by Suyūṭī, the Prophet had received all the beauty of the world, whereas Joseph had only received half. Ḥalabī concludes with a *ḥadīth*, God had never sent a prophet (*nabī*) who was not beautiful and gifted with a beautiful voice, but our Prophet had the most beautiful face and the most beautiful voice.⁶⁷

The Heavenly Ascension recapitulates all the prophets and their recognition of Muḥammad. At each of the heavens they visit, Gabriel presents Muḥammad to the prophet who lives there and confirms that Muḥammad had been invested with a prophetic mission. The variations (which prophet lives in which heaven) do not detract from a rather stable cosmogony – that of Ibn Sayyid al-Nās and adopted by al-Ghayṭī/al-Qalyūbī. At the first heaven, Muḥammad meets Adam who judges the souls of his descendants, the faithful are sent to the heaven of 'Ilīyīn whereas the infidels are sent to Sijjīn (a valley in Hell). In the second heaven, Muḥammad meets Jesus and John the Baptist. Ḥalabī quotes the *ḥadīths* that are favorable to Yaḥyā. In the *Kashshāf*,⁶⁸ while the Companions discuss the comparative merits of the prophets, Muḥammad speaks up to highlight those of Yaḥyā. He will be the one to slit death's throat – death in the shape of a ram – on Resurrection Day.

Joseph is in the third heaven and in the fourth dwells Idrīs who recognises in Muḥammad a “pious son”. Idrīs, descendant of Seth, who was the first of Adam's descendants to be sent, is the ancestor of Noah according to some. However, Idrīs was neither Noah's grandfather nor one of the Prophet's ancestors, Ḥalabī quickly amends. Idrīs was raised to the heavens, perhaps from Egypt as stated in the Qur'ān (*Maryam*, 57).⁶⁹ Back on earth, Idrīs called all creatures to God in 72 different languages, taught them the sciences, and was the first astrologer. Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240) underlines the fact that no passage of the Qur'ān supports the hypothesis of Idrīs's mission as an emissary. Noah was the first prophet (*nabī*) to have received a message (*risāla*) from God; before him, each prophet lived according to the law of his Lord.⁷⁰

67 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 555.

68 Ḥalabī often quotes the *tafsīr* by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144).

69 Ḥalabī is quoting Ibn Sayyid al-Nās: *Uyūn al-athar*, 246.

70 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 556.

In the fifth heaven, Aaron is surrounded by the Banū Isrāʾīl.⁷¹ The sixth heaven is home to Moses; Ḥalabī describes his thick hair, his anger, his animal gait. The seventh heaven is that of Abraham, sitting facing the doors of Paradise.

As with his prophetology, Ḥalabī's angelology – often inspired by that of Shaʿrānī – carefully examines hierarchy and precedence: Did the Prophet ride the Burāq behind Gabriel, or did Gabriel simply guide the steed? And what of the role of Mikāʾīl? Here, Ḥalabī deploys the *Shifāʾ* by Qāḍī ʿIyād, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* by Ibn Ḥibbān (d. 965), and the *Sharaf*,⁷² readings that result in several hypotheses. Perhaps Gabriel had at times ridden and at times guided the Burāq, standing to its right. Perhaps Mikāʾīl had also taken the reins of the Prophet's steed but to its left. Ḥalabī finally quotes the opinion of Damīrī: Gabriel did not ride the Burāq, because this is one of the particularities of the Prophet (or of certain prophets).⁷³

2 The Burāq, the Rock and the Houris: Discretion on the Enchantment

As usual, Ḥalabī is more interested in the relationship between the Burāq and the Prophet than in the Burāq itself. Faced with sceptics and opponents, Ḥalabī concentrates on proving the truth of the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension, searching for it in a sort of rational plausibility supported by the Qurʾān and the Sunna. He therefore talks little of the legendary and fantastic aspects that generally accompany accounts of the Night Journey. When discussing the legendary Burāq, Ḥalabī prefers to deal with the subject as a scholarly lexicographer (the Burāq is thus named because of its radiance or its speed, the name of its coat states that it is black and white, with a black that is close to red) and discusses the way the animal flies, lands, its gait. Quoting Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, he describes an incredibly rapid animal that is between a donkey and a mule in size. Between earth and sky, the Burāq places its hooves at the farthest boundary of its gaze.⁷⁴ It bucked when the Prophet approached and was admonished by Gabriel.⁷⁵ Ḥalabī continues half-heartedly, because of his *sanad ḍaʿīf*, by quoting the description of the Burāq by Thaʿlabī (d. 1038):

⁷¹ *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, 1, 557.

⁷² This is certainly a reference to Saʿd ʿAbd al-Malik al-Khargūshī's work, *Sharaf al-Muṣṭafā* (or *ʿUyūn al-ḥikāyāt fī sirat Sayyid al-bariyya*).

⁷³ *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, 1, 521.

⁷⁴ *ʿUyūn al-athar*, 245.

⁷⁵ *ʿUyūn al-athar*, 244. *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, 1, 519–521.

its ears like those of an elephant, its snout like that of a camel, its elephant-like chest, its eagle wings, its horse hooves, and camel tail. Another description gives the creature a human face, a horse's body, and bull hooves. "And we must reconcile these versions to appreciate the truth (*wa-yuḥtāj ilā l-jam' bayna ḥādhihi l-riwāyāt 'alā taqdīr al-ṣiḥḥa*) concludes Ḥalabī prudently.⁷⁶ Unlike Qalyūbī, he does not discuss the ten animals that entered Heaven⁷⁷ and offers no details concerning the Burāq's saddle and halter.⁷⁸ Ḥalabī does not dwell on a fantastical Burāq, offering up instead a Burāq that remains miraculous while playing only a minor role.

The same holds true for the Rock. When the Prophet arrives in Jerusalem and attaches the Burāq to a ring, Gabriel uses his fingers to make a hole for him in the Rock (*al-ṣakhra*).⁷⁹ Maqrīzī's *Imtā'*, quoted by Ḥalabī, mentions that people continue to place their hands on the imprint.⁸⁰ The Rock is said to come from Heaven, near the palm tree under which Āsiya and Maryam bint 'Umrān organise banquets until Resurrection Day, according to a *ḥadīth* that Ḥalabī mentions was rejected by al-Dhahabī (d. 1348): "its *isnād* is obscure and it is a proven lie". Abū Bakr Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1148), the legal scholar, in his commentary of the *Muwatṭā'*, clearly affirms that the Rock of Jerusalem is one of God's miracles because it stands in the middle of the *Masjid al-aqṣā*, with, on one side, the imprint of the Prophet's foot when he climbed onto the Burāq, and on the other side, the marks of the angel's fingers.⁸¹ However, Suyūṭī (d. 1505), when asked if Muḥammad's footprint in the stone had been attested in the *ḥadīth*, answered negatively.⁸² In sum, without directly denying the miracles dear to the faithful devotees, Ḥalabī leaves ample room for criticism of the devotions that dominated Islam during his lifetime.

Ḥalabī also refrains from encouraging an abusively emotive vision of Heaven. There is even a legendary element, present in other *Sīras*, that Ḥalabī passes over: Gabriel's invitation to visit the Houris. The description of the Lote tree of the furthest limit remains sober, as does that of Heaven. Though he does state that Muḥammad enters Heaven with its pearl domes and soil of musk,⁸³ its pomegranates and birds. Despite being absent from Ibn Sayyid al-Nās's version, Ḥalabī adds the pomegranates to explain the fruits in Heaven: according

76 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 521.

77 *Ḥāshiya*, 8.

78 *Ḥāshiya*, 7.

79 *'Uyūn al-athar*, I, 248. *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 522.

80 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 522.

81 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 523–24.

82 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 524.

83 Ibn Sayyid al-Nās stops here, *'Uyūn al-athar*, I, 247.

to a *ḥadīth*, they are the same fruits found on earth, but in Heaven they are perfectly sweet and ripe. Ibn ‘Arabī explains that the fruit of Paradise, neither cut nor forbidden, are eaten without being picked. This does not mean that once cut, another fruit grows in its place, as some have believed, but rather that the essence (*al-‘ayn*) of what the servant eats is indeed the essence of what Ḥalabī sees “and this is matter for thought”.⁸⁴

During his journey, the Prophet, guided by Gabriel, passed by a threatening djinn who calls out to him in vain. For Qalyūbī, this is an opportunity for Gabriel to teach the Prophet apotropaic formulas, which he then explains in detail. Such is not the case for Ḥalabī.⁸⁵ The episode of the hairdresser of the Pharaoh’s daughter (Muḥammad smells the fragrance emanating from her tomb) occurs soon after. Ḥalabī sums it up in only five words whereas al-Qalyūbī recounts the event with a multitude of legends.⁸⁶ Perhaps Ḥalabī is showing restraint for tales that neither the Qur’ān nor any *ḥadīth* support. Or perhaps, the legend of a Jewish or Christian mother martyred with her children because of her faith (an allusion to the Maccabees developed by Syriac hagiography) was not conducive to establishing the superiority of the Prophet and of the Muslim community – one of the main goals of the Night Journey.⁸⁷

Ḥalabī thus limits the fantasy that grounds an entire genre of Egyptian literature in the seventeenth century.⁸⁸ Ḥalabī remains focused on the goal of the Night Journey: glorifying the Prophet and his community.

2.1 *The Prophet and his Community: The Damned, the fiṭra and Eschatological Roles*

Ḥalabī narrates the Prophet’s encounters and visions after Muḥammad prays in Jerusalem and right before the Heavenly Ascension. His choice is theologically motivated. Strengthened for his mission through his prayers before the other prophets, the Prophet is thus ready to face the temptations of the *dunyā*, the devil, the Christian and Jewish missionaries trying to convert his community,

84 *Insān al-‘uyūn*, I, 561.

85 *Insān al-‘uyūn*, I, 543. *Hāshiya*, 9. Qalyūbī underlines that the formulae protect from all ills coming from the sky (trials and ordeal – *al-balā’* – descend to punish rebels that have provoked the anger of God) and from all earthly evils: snakes, scorpions, temptations during the day and night, (*fiṭan al-layl wa-l-nahār*), in other words all attachment to earthly things – wealth, children, spouse, pleasures – anything that distances us from God.

86 On the hairdresser of the Pharaoh’s daughter, al-Qalyūbī develops the legends of the ten newborns who spoke from their cradle. Some of these legends (Jirjis in his hermitage, the martyr of young converts) come from Syriac Christian legends.

87 *Insān al-‘uyūn*, I, 544.

88 Such fantasy went at least as far back as the Mamluk era, see Thomas Herzog, “Mamluk (Popular) Culture. The State of Research (2012)”.

and to face the punishment awaiting sinners. Having these episodes take place in Jerusalem also corresponds to a cosmological analysis: since Hell is under the seventh layer of the Earth, how could it appear in Heaven? In the *qiṣṣā* by al-Ghayṭī adopted by al-Qalyūbī, the text is very similar, but the order of episodes is markedly different. The Prophet meets the damned and the tempters (the Jew, the Christian, the *dunyā*, Iblīs, the old lady) on the road to Jerusalem *before* and not after his prayer before the other prophets.

After the Prophet has already embarked on his Heavenly Ascension, there is another vision of the damned enduring unbearable punishment.⁸⁹ Ḥalabī is determined to reconcile the descriptions of the damned that the Prophet met in Jerusalem – thus on earth during the Night Journey – with these new descriptions seen in the first heaven of the Heavenly Ascension. An ulterior repetition occurs when Muḥammad once again sees the damned condemned for their aspersions and gossip on his way down after the Heavenly Ascension. Ḥalabī is keenly aware of the awkwardness of these repetitions and suggests the very frequency of this particular sin explains the recurrences.⁹⁰ Unusually laconic, Ḥalabī does not comment on these successive visions, nor does he give in to his customary examinations of contradicting *ḥadīths*.⁹¹

Al-Ghayṭī/al-Qalyūbī enumerates the damned before the “Jewish missionary” (*dāʾī al-yahūd*) and the “Christian missionary” (*dāʾī al-naṣārā*) call out to the Prophet. The Prophet is then tempted by a beautiful woman (the *dunyā*), then by Iblīs, and after an old lady (the other face of the *dunyā*) calls out to him. Ḥalabī modifies the encounters, changing their order. He starts with the calls from the Jew and the Christian and follows them by the damned, then the *dunyā* as a beautiful woman, then as the old lady, saving Iblīs for later.⁹² Ḥalabī is clearly concerned with coherence as he organises his Divine Comedy differently.

In the Night Journey, Ḥalabī is looking for that which makes sense in the history of salvation within the Muslim community. After seeing the damned and undertaking the Heavenly Ascension, the Prophet must choose, depending on the versions reported by Ḥalabī, between milk and honey, between wine and milk,⁹³ or between three jugs of wine, milk, and water.⁹⁴ Each time, the Prophet chooses milk, the drink of the *fiṭra* – in other terms, explains Ḥalabī, of Islam. Wine, states Gabriel, will be forbidden to the community, after having

89 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 551–552.

90 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 571.

91 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 543–544.

92 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 544–546.

93 This is the only version quoted by Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *ʿUyūn al-athar*, I, 241 and 245.

94 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 547.

first been allowed. There is debate around where these different choices took place: in Jerusalem or in Heaven? Ḥalabī deems that both possibilities are plausible because nothing is an obstacle (*lā māniʿ*) to this repetition before the Prophet leaves Jerusalem and after, right before the Heavenly Journey.⁹⁵ Neither is there a contradiction (*wa-lā taʿarud*) in the possibility that the receptacles contained different liquids.⁹⁶

Having harmonised and arranged the fairly confusing accounts of what happened in the hereafter, choosing to make no commentary on the situation of the damned, Ḥalabī can dwell longer than al-Ghayṭī or Ibn Sayyid al-Nās on the eschatology revealed during the Heavenly Ascension. One of the differences between the *Sīra ḥalabīyya* and other *Sīras* is that the Prophet is informed of the situation of people in Heaven and Hell. He smells the musk and hears the gentle music from Heaven before being attacked by the putrid stench and the cacophony from Hell. Only then does the text mention Muḥammad's encounter with Iblīs, without any further details.⁹⁷

Halabī then indulges in a short theological excursus. He refutes the Muʿtazilites who believe that God did not create Heaven or Hell and that He will not create them before Judgement Day because God cannot create these two places before their inhabitants are created. Ḥalabī argues that, on the one hand, “the virtuous man struggles for a created reward (*thawāb makhḷūq*) and to avoid a created punishment (*ʿiqāb makhḷūq*)” and that on the other hand, God did not include Heaven and Hell in *al-Zumar*, 68 (“and here are those who will be in Heaven and those who live on earth will be struck with lightning, except for those chosen by Allah”). The stroke of lightning, in other words death, concerns only those with a spirit (*rūḥ*).⁹⁸

Laconic concerning the fate of the damned and their spectacular punishments, with barely a word about Iblīs, Ḥalabī is loquacious concerning Heaven and the place therein for the Muslim community. There are 120 clans (*ṣaff*) in Heaven, 80 of which belong to “this community” (*hādhihi l-umma*) and only 40 to the other “communities”. Each community will have certain members in Heaven and others in Hell, except for “this community” (the Muslim community), which will be in Heaven in its entirety. This statement contradicts Muḥammad's vision during the Night Journey, when he sees sinners from his

95 Qalyūbī, in the same vein as Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Ḥajar, believes that the choice between two recipients was repeated on other occasions.

96 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 547.

97 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 546.

98 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 573.

Community in Hell. Ḥalabī eludes the contradiction by suggesting in his text the hierarchy of resurrected believers.

In the seventh heaven, the Home (*al-bayt al-ma'mūr*) – the heavenly image of the Ka'ba – is peopled with a horde of angels, the number ranging from 70,000 to 70 times 70,000.⁹⁹ After, there is a discussion of limbo for infants. Ḥalabī quotes Suhaylī, who in turn had quoted a *ḥadīth* used by Bukhārī in the *Kitāb al-janā'iz*, the children of the faithful or the infidels who die in their infancy were seen by the Prophet in the seventh heaven and are under the protection of Abraham.

The Prophet also sees his community split into two equal parts (*shaṭrayn*), one in white, the other in grey. He enters into the *bayt ma'mūr* exclusively with those dressed in white. Ḥalabī comments that both parts cannot be equal because that would mean that the number of sinners in his community is equal to the number of faithful. The gatekeeper of the seventh heaven, Abraham, predicts the Community will grow as they are rooted in the good soil of Heaven, made of *lā ḥawla wa-lā quwwata illā bi-Llāh* or, in a variation, of *subḥāna Llāhu wa-l-ḥamdu li-Llāh wa-lā ilāha illā Llāh wa-Allāhu akbar*.¹⁰⁰

At the end of the Heavenly Ascension, Gabriel stays behind and Muḥammad, in a cloud, rises to the Throne in a light where he hears the sound of pens (*ṣarīf al-aqlām*), and then climbs onto the *Raḥraf* to rise towards the Vision (*al-ru'ya*) and hearing the Word that is addressed to him (*al-khiṭāb*). Ibn Sayyid al-Nās barely talks of the realities of Heaven and skims the difficult subject of the vision.¹⁰¹ In contrast, Ḥalabī places eschatological realities at the heart of his narrative (even if, due to fear of anthropomorphism, he does not depict God sitting on the Throne). These realities allow for the introduction of the Prophet's ineffable approach to God. Muḥammad goes through 70,000 veils before hearing the voice of Abū Bakr, "Stop, your Lord is praying". This passage is commented further in the text when the discussion focuses on *al-Aḥzāb*, (Q 33:43) and in the comparison with Moses. For Ḥalabī, an angel, using Abū Bakr's voice, had called out to Muḥammad to warn him of the divine presence.¹⁰²

While Muḥammad ponders the message, a voice calls out, "Approach, Oh pinnacle of all creation, approach Oh Aḥmad, approach Oh Muḥammad". As said in the Sura *Najm*, 8–9: "Then he approached and hung above suspended until he was two bows' length away, or (even) nearer" (*thumma danā wa-tadallā fa-kāna qāba qawsayn aw adnā*). Ḥalabī immediately quotes the *Khaṣā'is*

99 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 558–559. *Uyūn al-athar*, 246.

100 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 559–560.

101 *Uyūn al-athar*, I, 247.

102 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 566.

ṣughrā by Suyūṭī, the Prophet is also singular due to the *isrāʾ*, to the fact that he was the only one to have travelled the seven heavens all the way to a distance of two bows' length (*qāb al-qawsayn*), and of all the prophets and angels, he is the one who has stood closest to God. This suggests that the Prophet is the acting subject of "approached" (*danā*) and "hung above suspended" (*tadallā*). A different author has God approaching Muḥammad. Ibn Ḥajar, quoting al-Bayhaqī, relates a *ḥadīth* that supports this interpretation. Ḥalabī explains that the meaning of the approach by God is similar to the meaning of the station of descent (*maqām al-tanazzul*) among the mystics (*ahl al-ḥaqāʾiq*), when God descends to talk to his servants with their own words, out of kindness and concern for them. To avoid any accusation of anthropomorphism,¹⁰³ Ḥalabī specifies that for the mystics, these expressions are realities (*ḥaqīqa*), whereas for Him, they are a metaphor (*majāz*). Ḥalabī also discusses an author who designates Gabriel as the subject of *danā* ("approached") and Muḥammad the subject of *tadallā* ("hung above suspended"). Still another designates the *Raḥrāf* as the subject of *tadallā* and Muḥammad the subject of *danā*: the *Raḥrāf* – cushion of light – was suspended so that Muḥammad could sit.¹⁰⁴

God placed his hand between the Prophet's shoulders (Ḥalabī specifies that the phrase is not literal) and gave him the knowledge of the firsts and the lasts. Though Muḥammad must keep silent (*kitmān*) about certain sciences, God allows him to teach others (*tablīgh*) in order to instruct humans, djinns, and angels. God asks Muḥammad what Gabriel would like: to help Muḥammad's community on the *Ṣirāṭ*, the Bridge over Hell on Judgement Day. God grants Gabriel his wish, but only, he stipulates to Muḥammad, "for those who love you and accompany you".¹⁰⁵ An undifferentiated salvation is thus not extended to the entire community; we have here a gradation in the intercession, one that Ḥalabī carefully defines. "Those that accompany you" are "those that obey Muḥammad in his religion and practice the *sunna*". The salvation of Muslims who do not practice their religion cannot be as dazzling as that of the devout who respect the law. Perhaps even, salvation is not guaranteed, as indicated by the display of the damned.

2.2 *Establishing Prayer and the Beatific Vision*

According to one version, upon seeing God, Muḥammad falls down in prostrate adoration, and God "reveals to him what he reveals" (a paraphrase of the

103 Van Ess, "Le *Mī'rāj* et la vision de Dieu", 33.

104 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 566.

105 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 567.

Sura *al-Najm*, Q 53:10)¹⁰⁶ – including the fifty daily prayers. After his celestial meeting, the Prophet goes back down to find Gabriel at the Lote tree of the furthest limit, then on to Abraham, and then to Moses. The last sends Muḥammad back up to request fewer prayers because he had experienced something similar with the Banū Isrāʾīl.¹⁰⁷ Ḥalabī summarises the trips the Prophet makes between Moses and God, and opens a debate about whether there had been a rescission, how, why, and was it valid for the Prophet or for his community.¹⁰⁸ He continues with a number of *ḥadīths* concerning other instructions given during the Heavenly Ascension (ablutions, *zakāt*, loans).

At the end of the passage of his *Sīra* on the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension, Ḥalabī returns to the institution of prayer.¹⁰⁹ On the morning of the night of the *Miʿrāj*, Gabriel teaches Muḥammad the prayer: it was the *ṣalāt al-ẓuhr*, thus named because it was the first to “appear” or because it is performed when the sun is at its zenith.¹¹⁰ Ḥalabī embarks on a legal discussion (he quotes “our imam al-Shāfiʿī”), concerning the *qibla*: the Kaʿba, Jerusalem, or even the Kaʿba placed between the Prophet and Jerusalem, during his prayer. There is also a discussion about Muḥammad’s exact location when he prayed – at which of the Kaʿba’s doors,¹¹¹ about the definition of a day and the moment of prayers as defined by al-Shāfiʿī.¹¹² While Ibn Sayyid al-Nās dedicates a third of the *ʿUyūn al-athar* (five out of fifteen printed pages) to the five prayers and their times,¹¹³ Ḥalabī allots less than one tenth of his *Sīra*.¹¹⁴ Contrary to his predecessor, he is most interested in the correspondence between the five moments of prayer and the different prophets (Adam, David and Ishāq, Solomon and ʿUzayr, Jacob or Jesus, Jonah).¹¹⁵

After having reached the summit of the Heavenly Ascension, it is time to summarise, thanks to the six lines of the *Hamziyya*, what the *Sīra* had just explained in detail over the previous fifty pages, from “the folding of the earth” for the Prophet during his journey on the Burāq’s back to how he achieved a

106 This is also a quote by Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 567. *ʿUyūn al-athar*, I, 246. Ḥalabī gives a list of Qurʾānic revelations that had occurred: the *al-Baqara* Sura, the verses of the *al-Duḥā* Sura, and the verse *al-Aḥzāb*, Q 33:43.

107 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 568. Ḥalabī quotes Bayḍāwī’s *tafsīr*, then Suyūṭī’s gloss.

108 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 569.

109 *ʿUyūn al-athar*, 251–56.

110 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 579.

111 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 580–81.

112 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 582.

113 *ʿUyūn al-athar*, 251–56.

114 Six pages out of 72, *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 580–86.

115 *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 580–86.

degree of perfect contentment that knows neither penury nor excess.¹¹⁶ Ḥalabī returns to why Moses wept upon meeting the Prophet. “I state,” he concludes, that this meeting between Muḥammad and Moses demonstrates “the pre-eminence of our Prophet and the pre-eminence of his community, in that he is the best of the prophets and his community the best of the communities” (*izhār faḍīlat nabīyyinā wa-faḍīlat ummatihi, bi-annahū aḥḍal al-anbiyā’ wa-ummatihi bi-annahā aḥḍal al-umam*).¹¹⁷ Ultimately, for Ḥalabī, this is the meaning of the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension, along with the requirement to pray, establishing a religion above all others that had come before, and the Prophet above all other prophets.

Of all the realities of the Hereafter the Prophet experienced, the Beatific Vision remains the most enigmatic and debated. According to Ḥalabī, Ibn Sayyid al-Nās states that there is *ikhtilāf*, but the majority of ulama agree that the Prophet saw God with his own eyes.¹¹⁸ This explains the admittedly questionable *ḥadīth* (*muḍṭarab al-isnād wa-l-matn*), “I saw my Lord in the most beautiful form” (*ra’aytu rabbī fī aḥsani ṣūra*). A mystic would have said that God, when examining the hearts of men, did not find one that pined for him as much as Muḥammad’s heart – this is why he rewarded him with the *Mi’rāj*, with sight and speech. ‘Ā’isha, followed by the Companions and the ulama, denied the vision, deeming it a frightful lie. However, according to al-Dārimī (d. 869), the majority of Companions, and many traditionalists and theologians, approve of the reality of the vision – as stated by Ibn Sayyid al-Nās in a single line, “he saw Him, and no one but Him, with his eyes and fully conscious, not metaphorically”. ‘Ā’isha refutes the possibility of the *ru’ya*, using the verse from the *al-An‘ām*, 103 Sura: “eyes cannot grasp him” (*lā tudrikuhu al-abṣār*). Masrūq apparently replied with this verse, “he had already seen Him during a different descent” (*al-Najm*, 13). However, does the pronoun-object (“he saw him”) designate God or Gabriel? Did the Prophet see God two different times?¹¹⁹ The repetition of the vision would correspond to the Distance of the two bows and to the Lote tree of the furthest limit, suggests Suyūṭī in *al-Khaṣā’iṣ al-ṣuḡhrā*, which concludes by stating that Muḥammad was the only prophet to see God (twice) but shares with Moses the honour of having been spoken to by God.¹²⁰

116 *Insān al-‘uyūn*, I, 570.

117 *Insān al-‘uyūn*, I, 570.

118 Ḥalabī reworks his source: Ibn Sayyid al-Nās gives more importance to the *ikhtilāf*. *‘Uyūn al-athar*, 250–251.

119 On this interpretation of the *al-Najm* Sura between anthropomorphists and transcendentalists, see Van Ess, “Le *Mi’rāj* et la vision de Dieu” 39.

120 *Insān al-‘uyūn*, I, 574. On this parallel between Muḥammad who saw God twice and Moses who was called by God twice, see Van Ess, “Le *Mi’rāj* et la vision de Dieu” 38.

ʿĀ'isha affirms having questioned the Prophet, "Have you seen the Lord?". To which Muḥammad is said to have replied, "I saw Gabriel." Ibn Sayyid al-Nās mentions that a Companion, Abū Ḍarr, also questioned the Prophet who is said to have replied, "I saw a light".¹²¹ Ḥalabī explains that the light prevented Muḥammad from seeing God because God is not light, rather he uses it as a veil (*ḥijāb*), as written by Muslim. In *al-Nūr*, 35 ("God is the light of the heavens and earth"), we are to understand that God is the "possessor of light" (*dhū nūr*). Qāḍi 'Iyāḍ refutes the idea that light is the essence of God (*ḍātuhu*), for light is an accident (*a'rāḍ*).¹²²

How then should we approach 'Ā'isha's fierce rejection of what so many Sufi authors agree upon? Ibn Sayyid al-Nās suggests that Muḥammad saw God with his heart (*fu'ād*) and not with his own eyes. God then created a vision or a view (*baṣar*) in the Prophet's heart. Ḥalabī opts for this elegant solution to save the idea of a conscious vision and to refute 'Ā'isha's Qur'ānic argument in *An'ām*, 103: "grasped" (*idrāk*) is not "vision" (*ru'ya*). When asked about 'Ā'isha's rejection of Muḥammad's vision of God, Imam Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal focuses on the *ḥadīth*, "I saw my Lord". What the Prophet said trumps anything 'Ā'isha may have recounted. However, for Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) (very rarely quoted by Ḥalabī), Imam Aḥmad designates here a dream vision (*ru'yat al-manām*); an authentic vision, yet it was not seen with his bodily eyes and in a state of consciousness. According to Ibn Taymiyya, pretending that the vision was a corporal vision is a fantasy, and the People of Sunna all agree that none can see God with their eyes here on earth. None of the major *ḥadīths* (*mashhūr*) on the Night Journey indicates that Muḥammad saw God – or if so, they are *ḥadīths* from a forged *isnād*. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* says, "Know that none among you can ever see our Lord before you die and that it was refused to Moses when he asked for it".¹²³ These arguments, which couldn't be easily dismissed, are clearly more important to Ḥalabī than the biased testimony of 'Ā'isha.

How to conclude? Al-Qurṭubī left the question in suspense (*waqf*), because there is no clear proof (*dalīl qāṭi'*), and the contradictory arguments of both sides (*al-farīqān*) are often subjects to comment (*qābila li-l-ta'wīl*). A decisive argument would be needed if belief in a physical vision was part of the tenets (*mu'taqadāt*),¹²⁴ whereas the vision is one of the things that must simply be believed such as the resurrection and the coming together of humans on

121 *Uyūn al-athar*, 250, quoted by *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 574.

122 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 574.

123 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 575.

124 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 575.

Judgement Day (*ka-l-ḥashr wa-l-nashr*).¹²⁵ Suyūṭī's *Khaṣā'is ṣuḡhrā* places the vision of God among the greatest of the Prophet's *khaṣā'is*, in accordance with *Najm*, 18 (*la-qad ra'ā min ayāti rabbihi al-kubrā*, "He saw certain of God's most important signs"). Ibn Dihya (1150–1235) already considered the vision and proximity to God as part of the Prophet's attributes and Nawawī (1233–1277) concluded that the most plausible explanation was that Muḥammad had seen God with his own eyes. As for his dream vision, Suyūṭī includes it among the Prophet's *khaṣā'is*, an opinion corroborated by Nawawī who adhered to the Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ.¹²⁶

The Beatific Vision the day of Resurrection will belong in principle to all creatures, humans and djinns, men and women, faithful and infidels, angels and others. There is however a disagreement (*ikhtilāf*), notes Ḥalabī, on the "vision by women" (*ru'yat al-nisā'*) of Paradise. Perhaps they will not see God because they will remain in their tents; or perhaps they would only see him on feast days, as compared to the men who would see him every Friday, and the chosen (*al-khawāṣṣ*) who would see him every day, morning and evening.

The dissociation between *isrā'* and *mi'rāj*, and the fact that the *al-Isrā'* Sura does not mention the *mi'rāj* are problematic – a situation that Ḥalabī is not the first to try to resolve. According to Suhaylī, quoted by Ibn Sayyid al-Nās,¹²⁷ then by Ḥalabī, the *isrā'* took place corporally and the *Mi'rāj* spiritually. This is why the Prophet told the Qurayshites only about the *isrā'* and not about the *mi'rāj*. Ḥalabī penned a lengthy discussion:¹²⁸ according to him, rather than two distinct events, there are two distinct accounts because the Prophet's account of the *mi'rāj* did not take place at the same time as that of the *isrā'*. If Muḥammad first talked about the Night Journey, it was a pedagogical strategy of progression since the Heavenly Ascension was a greater miracle and the Prophet wanted the Quraysh to evolve in their faith. Only when they believed in the Night Journey did the Prophet inform them of the Heavenly Ascension.

Contrary to what al-Dimyātī (d. 1305–1306) suggested¹²⁹ (that the *mi'rāj* took place during Ramadan and the *isrā'* in Rabi' I), the two events took place the same night, affirms Ḥalabī, who backs up his statement with the title used by Bukhārī in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*: "How prayer was imposed on the night of the *isrā'*". As the five daily prayers were imposed during the *mi'rāj*,¹³⁰ there is only one

125 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 576.

126 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 576.

127 *'Uyūn al-athar*, 242–244.

128 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 578.

129 Al-Ḥāfiẓ 'Abd al Mu'min al-Dumyātī (d. 705/1305–1306), who was one of the shaykhs of Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, wrote *al-Mukhtaṣar fī sīrati Sayyid khayr al-bashar*.

130 *Insān al-'uyūn*, I, 578.

event. Ḥalabī mentions other authors who argue that the *isrāʾ* took place twice, once in dream and once awake; or starting in Mecca and not Jerusalem, and in full daylight.¹³¹ Re-examining Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, who in turn quotes Bukhārī, Ḥalabī returns to the *ḥadīth*'s brief account of the Heavenly Ascension – with no mention of the Journey to Jerusalem, “the roof of my home opened, while I was in Mecca, Gabriel descended ... and holding my hand, flew up into the heavens”.¹³² Ḥalabī ingeniously renders the different versions compatible.

He does however disqualify other hypotheses. It is strange to say that the conscious *miʿrāj* was repeated. Why would the gatekeepers of each heaven ask each time whether or not Muḥammad had already received his mission? Why would Muḥammad reiterate his questions to Gabriel? And finally, how could God repeat the obligation to pray? As for pretending that the dream *miʿrāj* prepared for the conscious ascension was simply the result of contradicting versions (*manshāʾ ikhtilāf al-rīwāyāt*). Ḥalabī is thus conscious of the risks of forcefully reconciling texts that are simply juxtaposed with no explanations. This must be avoided, and a path must be chosen. Following the example of Ibn Kathīr, Ḥalabī concludes, the Prophet accomplishes a single *isrāʾ* in mind and body (but perhaps with the eyes of his heart, adds Ḥalabī) and fully conscious.¹³³ Ḥalabī does not ever return to this debate nor to this final affirmation. This is his final answer to the main theme announced at the very start of his narrative.

3 Conclusion

The *Sīra ḥalabīyya* is as much a portrait of its author as it is of the Prophet. We can only agree with the words of al-Muḥibbī (1651–1699) on Ḥalabī several decades after his death, “He was a mountain of knowledge, a bottomless ocean of intelligence, a remarkable scholar, he embodied all sorts of excellence. He spent most of his life proposing and furthering useful knowledge and thus acquired an unrivalled prestige.... He dove deep in his studies thanks to a sharp understanding and strong ideas, he carefully examined the fatwas, and linked knowledge to action (*ʿilm wa-ʿamal*). He was a serious man who applied himself to the *ijtihād*.”¹³⁴

¹³¹ *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 578.

¹³² *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 579. *ʿUyūn al-athar*, 247.

¹³³ *Insān al-ʿuyūn*, I, 579. On Ibn Kathīr and the *Miʿrāj*, see Van Ess, “Le *Miʿrāj* et la vision de Dieu” 40.

¹³⁴ See Muḥibbī, *Khulāṣat al-athar fī aʿyān al-qarn al-ḥādī ʿashar*, 122–124. Our quote is based on Pinel-Cahagne's translation, 71.

As noted by Tarif Khalidi, *al-Sīra al-ḥalabiyya* was an immediate bestseller.¹³⁵ A century later, the Syrian Sufi ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (1641–1731) had already identified Ḥalabī as the “author of the famous *Sīra*”.¹³⁶ It was first published as an Ottoman Turkish translation by Būlāq in 1833, two years before the benchmark Arabic edition of *A Thousand and One Nights*, and more than a century before the first edition of Ibn Sayyid al-Nās’s *Sīra*. It would take another thirty years for the original Arabic text of the *Sīra ḥalabiyya* to be published in Cairo in 1863 and twelve more before a definitive edition was published by Būlāq in 1292/1875, thanks to a proofreader from Būlāq, the Azhar Sufi Shaykh Ibrāhīm ‘Abd al-Ghaffār al-Disūqī (d. 1883). The work’s three volumes displayed in their margins *Al-Sīra al-nabawiyya wa-l-athār al-muḥammadiyya*, written by a contemporary, the Shāfi‘ī mufti from Mecca, Sayyid Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān (d. 1886). In a decidedly Sufi and anti-Wahhabi vein, Daḥlān declared he had relied on the commentaries of *Shifā’*, on the *Mawāhib* by al-Qastallānī and their commentary by Zurqānī (d. 1710), and also on the most trustworthy *ṣiyar* (*aṣaḥḥ al-kutub al-mu’allafa fī hadhā l-sha’n*): those of Ibn Sayyid al-Nās and Ibn Hishām, the *Sīra shāmiyya* and the *Sīra ḥalabiyya*.¹³⁷ This goes to show that the *Sīra ḥalabiyya*, which summarised the three previous *Sīras* quoted by Daḥlān, was the pinnacle of what could be written on the subject for a Sufi scholar at the end of the nineteenth century. The same holds true for Orientalists.¹³⁸ In 2009, Palestinian historian Tarif Khalidi, born in 1938 in Jerusalem to an illustrious family, deemed the *Sīra ḥalabiyya* was still the most consulted. His opinion is not factually supported, but it is a reflection of the cultivated Muslim aristocracy in which he grew up. Recent editions attest to the fact that the *Sīra ḥalabiyya* is still – or is once again – being used to defend the Prophet. However, it has become too long, too complex, and also too Sufi. The twentieth century witnessed the decline of its reputation.

135 Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad*, 238–240.

136 ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, *al-Tuhfa al-nābulusiyya fī l-riḥla al-ṭarābulusiyya*, in *Die Reise des ‘Abd al-Ghanī an-Nābulusī durch den Libanon*, and [illegal?] reprint *Maktabat al-thaqāfa al-dīniyya*, 79–81. There is also another edition: ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, *al-Ṣulḥ bayna l-ikhwān fī ḥukm ibāḥat al-dukhān*, 99–100. I would like to thank Samuela Pagani for this reference.

137 Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān, in the margins of *Insān al-‘uyūn*, Būlāq, ed. 1875.

138 Certain scholars seem to have not read any further than the fascinating episodes of the beginning of the life of the Prophet, his birth, and his childhood. Their analysis of the *Sīra ḥalabiyya*, a book of *adab* (Schöller, *Mohammed*, 86–87) or the compilation of legends (Pinel-Cahagne, *Le merveilleux dans la biographie de Muhammad (sīra) due à Nūr al-Dīn al-Ḥalabī. Choix d’épisodes*) is thus affected, whereas Ḥalabī’s study of the Night Journey, for example, is very different. Tilman Nagel has a more balanced analysis of the *Sīra ḥalabiyya*.

Far from being a *Sīra* infatuated with fantastical events as it has sometimes been described, the *Sīra* by Ḥalabī is a work of the highest calibre, which, as stated Tarif Khalidī, focuses on conciliation using techniques to critique the *ḥadīths* without ever being enslaved by them. This form of rationality and logic prevails when organising material, but it never excludes the possibility of a miracle – or perhaps by concentrating on the miracles that count, those of the Prophet. Theology, criticism of the *ḥadīths*, Sufism and *fiqh*, the holy story was placed in perspective in a highly personal quest for coherence. The desire to reconcile divergent versions of the same event led Ḥalabī to display extreme ingenuity, but never to the point of dissimulating the oppositions and impasses when they occurred. At such moments, he chose to delve ever further rather than dismiss or attenuate differences. There is nothing peremptory in Ḥalabī, as opposed to Ibn Kathīr before him and Nabḥānī after him, who in 1894 hammered home what we are supposed to think, believe, and say about the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension.¹³⁹ When Ḥalabī discusses divergent opinions of certain authors, his progressive layout unveils the leanings of his heart, a heart that does not forget rational order, strives for harmony, and still takes into account contradictory debates. He goes so far as to quote Ibn Taymiyya – who was the most obvious opponent of the prophetic miracle.

With Ḥalabī, we are far from the concise narration of Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, far from the accumulation of *ḥadīths* by al-Shāmī, the concise and lively storyline of the *Mī'rāj* by al-Ghayṭī, or its pious commentary by Qalyūbī. "It's as if Muḥammad's *Sīra* was integrated into the Qur'ān as matter for the most advanced exegesis" (Tarif Khalidī). It is not because it is more recent, with the advantage of a vaster sedimentation of material over time, that Ḥalabī's *Sīra* is more developed than its predecessors. It is because its author made personal choices that he had long weighed amidst the ocean of texts and knowledge at his disposal in order to offer his fellow Muslims an orientation within the tradition. There is nothing left to chance in the *Sīra ḥalabīyya*, which was a commissioned work and perhaps even a work destined to be wielded on the battle lines of his day.

By discretely skipping over certain legends and avoiding the useless and the superfluous, Ḥalabī stands out from his predecessors (Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, al-Shāmī) and a portion of his contemporaries (Qalyūbī). His singularity is further underlined through a historicising format that is attentive to the logical coherence and the chronological succession of events, through his reflection on the providential inscription of the Prophet in the ancient history of prophecies, and finally through his insistence on the meaning of the Night Journey

139 Yūsuf al-Nabḥānī, *Al-Anwār al-muḥammadiyya min al-Mawāhib al-laduniyya*, 332 sq.

and the Heavenly Ascension. When his contemporary al-Qalyūbī stated simply that “all these things must be believed” (*wa-kullu hādhihi al-umūr yajibu al-īmān bihā*) because they flow from the divine power,¹⁴⁰ Ḥalabī sought to offer rational proof, and appeal to his readership’s intelligence, all the while rendering tangible and proximate the realities of Heaven that are mysteriously linked to those here on earth. By putting aside the fantastical elements and discretely distilling a vision inspired by Sufi authors, he studies numerous – often contradictory – versions that suggest a multitude of possible figures of the Prophet. He ignored none. Yet, the figure of the Prophet as seen by Ḥalabī emerges. His Prophet is not a fabulous, triumphant hero who climbs onto the fantastical Burāq and goes from heaven to heaven, surrounded by angels, like in the Persian or Ottoman miniatures of his time. Instead, we meet “this extraordinary man”, unique in his beauty and humility, who is woken in the middle of the night to experience the ineffable, which must be told nevertheless. Proof needed to be found of this incredible experience, unique moments that made Moses cry and left Gabriel at the Lote tree of the furthest limit. For Ḥalabī, the Prophet did truly undertake, at least once, the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension in mind and body. Night Journey and Heavenly Ascension culminate in the Vision of God, also real, where Muḥammad approaches God because he wished for it more deeply than anyone else (it is the only moment in the narrative where Muḥammad is fully an actor of his own story). Recognised as the Prophet among prophets in Jerusalem, Muḥammad travels through the seven heavens and learns the sciences revealed by God; he becomes the initiator of daily prayers and the eschatological intercessor for his community.

For Ḥalabī, the goal of this chapter was to prove the reality of the Night Journey and the Heavenly Ascension by Muḥammad, in body and mind, as well as the reality of the Beatific Vision with his eyes – perhaps the eyes of his heart. There are no authoritative arguments, but he offers the possibility of a miracle. As an exegete of the *Sīra*, Ḥalabī, like the Prophet before him, leads his readers where he chose to guide them: closer to God.

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