Th.C. van der Meij and N. Lambooj (editors and translators), with the assistance of Oman Fathurahman

The Malay Hikayat Mi'raj Nabi Muḥammad. The Prophet Muḥammad's nocturnal Journey to Heaven and Hell. Text and translation of Cod. Or. 1713 in the Library of Leiden University. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014, xii + 210 pp. [Series: KITLV/Bibliotheca Indonesica Vol. 37]. ISBN 9789004277618. Price: EUR 92 (hardback).

The *mi'raj* is remembered by Muslims as the journey made by the Prophet Muhammad through the heavens, during which he experienced an audience with Allah. Tradition has attached this journey to another by Muhammad from the Sacred Mosque of Mecca to the Al-Aqsa Mosque ('Farthest Mosque') in Jerusalem. This latter journey is based on a verse of the *Al-Isra'* chapter of the Qur'an. The *mi'raj*, however, is not explicitly narrated in the Qur'an. Diverse descriptions of it are found in the hadith literature as well as vernacular genres. The *mi'raj* continues to be relevant in the present: for many Muslims, the Al-Aqsa mosque is distinguished because it was the starting place for the Prophet's journey; the obligation to pray five times a day can be traced to Muhammad's audience with Allah; Muhammad's precedence over other prophets was affirmed by Allah during the visit.

This book is a transliteration and translation of a Malay language manuscript of the *mi'raj* written in 1782. It is framed as a conversation between the Prophet Muhammad and Abbas, although Abbas only speaks a few sentences in the opening pages. In the rest of the work, Abbas listens to Muhammad's description of his journey through heaven and his experiences there. This hadith structure gives authority to the telling—one of Muhammad's companions (Abbas) heard the Prophet himself relate the events. The text is framed by statements that make clear the ritual context within which this manuscript would have been read and heard. There is advice about the decorum for reciting the text and about the forgiveness that a Muslim can obtain by reading it to others and by listening to it.

This *mi'raj* text is very clearly oriented to pedagogical and didactic ends. Although the *mi'raj* is well known for its spectacular elements—especially heaven's wonders and hell's grotesque tortures—this one is also anchored firmly in Qur'anic learning. It conveys to listeners a Qur'anically-based overview of Islamic cosmology (in the first part) and a moral framework for Islamic behaviour (in the latter). And so, interspersed between his observations of the levels of the heavens, Muhammad listens to explanations from Jibra'il and other angels regarding: the angels that grill a newly-deceased Muslim about his or her religion; the farthest lote tree on which the names of all Muslims are

written; the angel of death, who collects souls of the deceased; the preserved tablet, on which Muslims' deeds are recorded; the great weighing-scale; the trumpet to be blown on the last day; the throne on which Allah sits, and so on.

These detailed expositions make the work a handy reference about Islamic cosmology, and despite all the extravagances of the hadith, these teachings make the text a very accurate one in the Qur'anic sense. For this reason, much of this text's content is basic creed for Muslims. And that is where the datedness of the text emerges—it reads as an encyclopaedic reference for a cosmological vision suited to Islamic audiences of the past. At the risk of over-generalizing, literal, Qur'anically-based descriptions of Islamic cosmology are not the focus of Muslim attention in the way they used to be. The same could be said for other monotheisms. In the present, textually verifiable answers to the question 'What is heaven like?' are not in high demand.

The account of the journey presented here would be highly unacceptable to many Muslims in the present for its liberal descriptions of Allah behaving like a human in his dealings with Muhammad. In one episode of Muhammad's dialogue with Allah, Muhammad utters the first part of the Muslim creed (I testify there is no [...] et cetera), after which Allah verbalizes the second (And I testify that Muhammad is Allah's messenger). This depiction of Allah falls foul of Islamic thinking about the divine attributes as well as prohibitions on representation.

The *hikayat's* Malay language is not elegant. It conveys content in repetitive, simple structures. Poetic elements are encountered only in the passages where the many jewels and fabrics adorning the structures of heaven are described. These passages, full of alliteration, remind us of the Malay styles encountered in storytelling and other literary genres. Apart from these, however, there are not many stylistic indicators that the translator wished to reach out to engage listeners. One such indicator is the *hikayat's* authors' efforts to convey the dimensions of heaven and its constituent realms. These are a little tedious to read, but interesting in that that all measurements have been expressed in recognisable units of measurement. The distances are expressed in terms within the knowledge of the listeners. Examples such as this one make the unimaginable intelligible:

I [Muhammad] asked [to Jibrail], 'O my friend Jibrail, what is more intense, the heat of the sun or the heat of hell?' He said, 'Oh Muhammad, He has created them both, but it is because of the wish of Allah—the Highest—that the fire of hell emits more heat than the sun. Thus, the heat of hell is seventy times hotter than heat of the sun.' Then I [Muham-

mad] saw that the sun was about seventy times bigger than the moon. The moon is seventy times bigger than the stars and the stars are the size of the hills on earth [...]

MS 76

This book is valuable for revealing a vision of Islamic cosmology that no longer bears the authority it once did. The translation is very good. The text and translation have been prepared with care and skill. One exception to this is the quotation marks: the marking of direct speech in the transliteration and translation do not match fully, and that is regrettable. Some confusion is caused on page 1 of the translation, where the editors close a critical statement by Muhammad that they leave open in the transliteration. There are a number of other similar examples.

I recommend this book and consider it a valuable contribution, but there is a note to be made about the simplicity of the mediation undertaken by the authors. Their stated purpose is 'to present a text and a translation for others not versed in Malay to peruse, study, explore, and explain' (p. 9). They have achieved this purpose well, and have ceased their endeavours at the boundaries of this task, decisively leaving the perusing, studying, exploring, and explaining to others. It is tempting to conclude that the authors' limitation of their task merits a similarly limited review. Such a review would read: the authors have succeeded in presenting a transliteration and translation. End of review. But that is not my main point. The challenge for us in the present is to put texts such as these onto scholarly agendas, and to force them into the conversations taking place in the disciplines of anthropology, history, textual studies, Islamic studies etc. I hope this book will be perused, studied, explored and explained by people other than myself, but the authors have not helped its chances of being so treated. It could have been launched into the world in ways that would enable it to resonate more widely. For example, the introductory chapter could have worked harder to make intersections between the specifics of this text and more general conversations. Such an introduction could have been published as a journal article, a step which would prepare a path and perhaps a readership for the text to follow. Journal articles confront their authors with the need to speak to current concerns. Without this kind of work, the book's prospects of creating meaning for others are restricted.

Julian Millie

School of Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Monash University

julian.millie@monash.edu