CHAPTER 6

Fire in the Upper Heavens
Locating Hell in Middle Period Narratives of Muḥammad’s Ascension

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

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

² Tottoli, Tours of hell.
widespread Ibn ʿAbbās ascension narratives in the seventh–ninth/thirteenth–fifteenth centuries, the beginning of the tour of hell comes to be located at two primary sites in Muhammad’s otherworldly journey: on the one hand, in the fifth heaven, and on the other hand, after his audience with God, somewhere in the sixth or seventh heaven.

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

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

4 Tottoli, Tours of hell 12.

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