CHAPTER 15

The ‘Eight Gates of Paradise’ Tradition in Islam: A Genealogical and Structural Study

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1 Defining Paradise as Myth: Synchronicity and the Study of Cobwebs

Myth is not fiction; unlike folktales and other fictitious narratives, myths are true for those who use them.1 Taking this act of epoché as its point of departure, this article proposes to explore the Muslim paradise as myth.2 But are the images and ideas about paradise developed in Islamic tradition adequately described by this term? Myths, one might object, are set in a primordial past, not in a distant future, as is the case, at least on the face of it, with eschatological narratives.3 However, views on what the term ‘myth’ signifies

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1 Leach, Introduction 6. Earlier anthropologists writing in the tradition of James Frazer tended to stress that myths are “incorrect.” See Csapo, Theories 25–57, esp. 48. Also inclining toward this view is Beltz, Mythen 261–85, which is the only sustained scholarly attempt known to me that addresses the Muslim paradise and hell as mythical narratives. Overall, Beltz’s study assumes the applicability of the concept of “myth” rather uncritically, showing little interest in the problem of definition. On Beltz’s contribution to Religionswissenschaft, which he practiced still largely under the constraints of pre-unification GDR, see Bochinger, Walter Beltz, esp. 493.

2 According to Annemarie Schimmel, “the genre of eschatological myths” in Islam is “particularly rich.” See Schimmel, Deciphering 126. Schimmel, however, does not explore this mythical material at any length (cf. 237–9). One thus has to agree with al-Azmeh, Rhetoric for the senses 219 that a “study of [paradise] narratives as myth is still missing from scholarship on the Islamic paradise.”

3 This is an element in some of the most influential and sophisticated definitions of myth. See for example, Bascom, Forms 4; Eliade, Cosmogonic myth 75. Note, however, that scholars of myth sometimes speak of myths of the future. Stolz, for example, speaks of “myths of the end
differ greatly,\textsuperscript{4} and indeed most definitions stress that myth altogether transcends historical time.\textsuperscript{5} In such a perspective, what characterizes mythic time is not so much that it belongs to a distant past or future, but that it is a different kind of time. Myths, in fact, tell of events outside time, as opposed to legends and apocalyptic narratives, which speak of events that are temporally distant, but diachronically connected to the here and now.\textsuperscript{6} The time of myth, for those who use it, is eternal or sacred time; in the words of Mircea Eliade, it is an \textit{illus tempus} that is uncontaminated by the “terror of history.” Mythic time, in a word, is not at all, but rather its opposite: eternity. In the Islamic eschatological tradition, this theme is given expression, inter alia, by the prophetic \textit{ḥadīth} that on the day of judgment, time will be brought forth in the form of a white ram and slaughtered between paradise and hell.\textsuperscript{7}

Connected to the question of mythic time is a second issue. This is the problem that myths are commonly understood to tell a story with a beginning (often describing a situation which is unstable or unstructured) and an end (which brings a moment of stability and order).\textsuperscript{8} What happens in paradise and hell, on the other hand, is not an event that unfolds in linear fashion, but rather, an endless repetition of the same. The pleasures and torments of paradise and hell re-occur \textit{ad infinitum}. The \textit{ḥūrīs}, in Aziz al-Azmeh’s phrase, are “recursively virginal,” since their virginity is restored after every defloration by the inhabitants of paradise.\textsuperscript{9} In a similar vein, the sinners in hell are recursively mutilated: After each mutilation they suffer at the hands of the myrmidons in hell, their bodies grow back on them into their previous, unharmed shape (cf. Q 4:56).\textsuperscript{10}

However, more recent definitions of myth, particularly structuralist ones, lean toward understanding myth primarily in terms of its quality of permanence,

\textsuperscript{4} Cf. Strenski, \textit{Theories} 1–2.
\textsuperscript{5} Jamme, \textit{Mythos} 515.
\textsuperscript{6} Cf. Bascom, \textit{Forms}. In the words of Rosenthal, for medieval Muslims, as for medieval Christians, the apocalypse was the “history of the future.” See Rosenthal, \textit{History} 23, referring to Jaspers, \textit{Ursprung} 181.
\textsuperscript{7} Al-Bukhārī, \textit{Ṣaḥīḥ} iv, 1750; Muslim, \textit{Ṣaḥīḥ} iv, 2188; Ibn Ḥanbal, \textit{Musnad} iii, 9; al-Tirmidhī, \textit{Sunan} v, 315; al-Ghazālī, \textit{Iḥyāʾ} iv, 534.
\textsuperscript{8} Stolz, \textit{Mythos} 11 613.
\textsuperscript{9} Al-Azmeh, \textit{Rhetoric for the senses} 225.
\textsuperscript{10} See also Ibn al-Mubārak, \textit{Musnad} 1, 77; al-Tirmidhī, \textit{Sunan} iv, 705; al-Ṯa‘labī, \textit{Kashf} vi, 57; Asín, \textit{La escatología} 428.