

Middle Eastern Literatures: incorporating Edebiyat

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/come20>

The Familiar and the Fantastic in Narratives of Mu[hdot]ammad's Ascension to the Heavenly Spheres

Peter Webb

Version of record first published: 30 Nov 2012.

To cite this article: Peter Webb (2012): The Familiar and the Fantastic in Narratives of
Mu[hdot]ammad's Ascension to the Heavenly Spheres, Middle Eastern Literatures: incorporating
Edebiyat, DOI:10.1080/1475262X.2012.726575

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1475262X.2012.726575>



PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any
substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing,
systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation
that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any
instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary
sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings,
demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or
indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

The Familiar and the Fantastic in Narratives of Muḥammad's Ascension to the Heavenly Spheres

PETER WEBB

Abstract

The story of Muḥammad's Night Journey and Ascension to the Heavenly Spheres is perhaps the most fantastic episode in the Prophet's biography, and its fantastic aspects became widely accepted as historical facts notwithstanding the misgivings of early Muslim scholars. This paper investigates the narrative function of the fantastic in Ibn Kathīr's extensive accounts of the story within a comparative framework. By examining his version of Muḥammad's Journey against narratives of utopia in western literature, it is possible to see the striking similarity in their narratives' patterns, always beginning with the 'familiar' departure, then moving into the 'remarkable' journey, and ending in the 'fantastic' arrival, where the traveller comes into contact with the source of special knowledge. This paper proposes that Muslim *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* and western narratives of utopia follow a fairly universal structure, what I would call 'utopian travel rubric', which blends the 'familiar', 'remarkable' and 'fantastic' to engender a sense of plausibility for both the Heavenly and Utopian journeys.

The reception of the story of Muḥammad's Night Journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and Ascension to Heaven—*al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*—has been controversial among Muslims and non-Muslims alike in the past and at present. What we would call the 'fantastic' in the accounts of this journey, such as Muḥammad's rapid travel on a hybrid donkey-like mount (al-Burāq), his ascent via ladder to the Heavens, meetings with past Prophets and audience with God, have been especially divisive, being either accepted as miraculous proof of Muḥammad's prophetic status,¹ or dismissed as fiction derived from sources traceable to earlier religious traditions.²

Peter Webb, School of Oriental and African Studies, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, UK. Email: pw9@soas.ac.uk

¹This response is clearly espoused by most Muslim scholars since the 4th/10th century; see al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321/933): 'The *Mi'rāj* is a true event (*ḥaqq*) ... God corporeally raised [Muḥammad] while he was awake to the Sky ... and God bestowed honours upon him.' Ibn Abī al-ʿIzz Al-Ḥanafī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqīdat al-Ṭaḥāwīyya* (Cairo: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 2005), 223.

²A number of western scholars since the early 20th century have sought 'the historical lines of connection between Islam and the older religious ideas of the Near East.' Geo Windengren, *Muḥammad, the Apostle of God and His Ascension* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1955), 207. Most focused on Judeo-Christian prototypes, which they proposed as the origins of the Muslim story. See A. A. Bevan, 'Muḥammad's Ascension to Heaven', in *Bieft zur Zeitschrift für die attestamentliche Wissenschaft XXIV* (New York: De Grayter, 1924, 55–61); Harris Birkeland, 'The Legend of the Opening of Muhammed's Breast', in

The unease with the story's fantastic may even be detected during the first three Islamic centuries when many Muslim scholars maintained that Muḥammad merely dreamt the journey.³ Nevertheless, the supernatural aspects of the story that distinguish Muḥammad's journey from the terrestrial travel of the common man have persisted in all accounts of this episode of Muḥammad's life to a degree unlike any other event in his biography. This 'fantastic' in fact seems to have become deliberately emphasised since the 4th/10th century when Muslim scholars rejected the earlier dream theories and affirmed a literal interpretation for all details of the journey.⁴ Thereafter, most Muslims have read *al-Isrā'* *wa-l-Mi'rāj* as a historical fact—a part of the reality of the Prophet's life.

The enduring presence of the fantastic in accounts of *al-Isrā'* *wa-l-Mi'rāj* suggests that Arabic storytellers valued its narrative function. Current research has largely overlooked the function of the fantastic in the story and focused instead on the development of the story in Muslim traditions.⁵ This paper shall adopt a literary approach, seeking to understand how Arabic storytellers narrated the event and why the fantastic came to be so prominent in their writings. The various versions of *al-Isrā'* *wa-l-Mi'rāj* in the Muslim tradition are commonly cast in the form of a travel narrative that relates Muḥammad's journey in terms that escalate from the familiar to the remarkable and finally the fantastic. This itinerary is comparable with that of western narratives of utopia. Both adhere to what I see as a fairly universal travel narrative structure: a 'utopian travel rubric'.

Utopian Travel Rubric in Narratives of Utopia

The western tradition of literary utopias is usually said to have begun in 1516 with Thomas More's well-known work *Utopia*, which describes the fictitious character

Auhandlinger Utgitt Av Det Norske Videnskaps Akademi (Oslo: N.p., 1955); Windengren, *Muḥammad*; and, more recently, Brent E. McNeely, 'The Mi'rāj of Muḥammad in an Ascension Typology', <http://www.bhporter.com/Porter%20PDF%20Files/The%20Miraj%20of%20Muhammad%20in%20an%20Ascension%20Typology.pdf> (accessed 1 July 2012).

³Al-Ṭabarī reports the names of several scholars who maintained the 'dream theory', citing evidence attributed to Muḥammad's wife 'Ā'isha and the first Umayyad Caliph, Mu'āwiyā ibn Abī Sufyān. Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr Jāmi' al-Bayān*, ed. Ṣidqī Jamīl al-ʿAttar (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1999), 15: 22. Al-Ṭahāwī's staunch rejection of the dream theory in *al-ʿAqīda* gives further evidence of its former prevalence (al-Ḥanafī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqīdat al-Ṭahāwīyya*, 223).

⁴The earliest extant rejections of the dream theory date from the 4th/10th century, and see Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) for the fullest summary of this discourse. Abū al-Fidā' Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya*, ed. Ahmad Abū Mulhim et al. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, n.d.), 3: 112–13. From the 4th/10th century onwards, accounts of *al-Isrā'* *wa-l-Mi'rāj* preserve much fantastic material gathered from earlier sources without expressing doubt as to its historicity: see the similarities between al-Ṭabarī's 4th/10th century version attributed to Abū Hurayra (al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr Jāmi' al-Bayān*, 15: 10–16), and the 8th/14th-century works history of Ibn Kathīr (Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya*, 3: 109–10; and Abū al-Fidā' Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1994), 3: 3–21).

⁵Separate from the search for the story's 'true origins' (see note 2); Colby's and Vuckovic's recent studies of *al-Isrā'* *wa-l-Mi'rāj* focus on the development of the story in the Muslim tradition. Frederick S. Colby, *Narrating Muḥammad's Night Journey* (Albany: State University of New York, 2008); and Brooke Olson Vuckovic, *Heavenly Journeys Earthly Concerns—The Legacy of the Mi'rāj in the Formation of Islam* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2005). More akin to this article's literary approach to the Ascension narratives in Muslim writing, Christiane Gruber and Frederick Colby eds. *The Prophet's ascension: cross-cultural encounters with the Islamic mi'rāj tales* (Bloomington: Indiana, 2010) contains stimulating accounts of the employment of Muḥammad's Ascension story for esoteric and missionary purposes, particularly in the later Persian and Turkish traditions from the twelfth century onwards; this present article, however, engages with the earlier Arabic tradition.

Raphael Hythloday's journey to the island of Utopia, a perfect social, legal and political commonwealth.⁶ More was the first to coin the term 'utopia', deriving it from the Greek οὐ τόπος ('no place'). But he also punned it with the homonym εὐ τόπος ('the good place'), and therein articulated utopia's duality: it is spatially located in the 'not here'/'not now', indefinitely remote from present reality; and it is metaphorically idealised, the model of perfect community.

More also distinguished narratives of utopia from pure escapist fantasies. More explained that a narrative of utopia is '[a] fiction whereby the truth, as if smeared with honey, might a little more pleasantly slide into men's minds'.⁷ Narratives of utopia share a common purpose of inspiring their audiences to work towards recreating utopia in the 'here and now' of the present.⁸ Hence a literary utopia can be described as a fictional place that, by virtue of the way it is narrated, acquires a potential to become real. Literary utopias are 'plausible fiction'.

The constitutions of western literary utopian communities have differed over time according to different authors' conceptions of the ideal community, but More's 'plausible fiction' and the structure of his narrative have remained the genre's enduring paradigm. Some, like Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1624), copied More directly, and even those like Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), which satirised More's idealism and narrated a dystopia, still emulated the structure of More's original. The western utopian narratives, including More, Bacon and Swift, are usually divided into two sections: a portrayal of utopia which is preceded by a travel narrative. Portrayals of utopia, which are invariably longer than the travel narrative, contain the utopian message derived from the author's conception of the ideal community. But no narratives dispense with travel, and each relates the journey according to a tripartite structure consisting of a departure, journey and arrival at utopia, with each segment embodying a different set of environments, encounters and actions of the traveller. Travel begins with departure from the 'familiar' (real and quotidian), and journeys into the 'remarkable' (the known but unfamiliar), then escalates into the 'fantastic' (the supernatural, unfathomable wonders) upon arrival in the fictional 'no place', utopia.

Departure

In contrast to its fictitious destination, authors stress the journey's *realistic* commencement, repeatedly mentioning precise, real and familiar landmarks that ostensibly situate their narratives firmly in the 'here and now'. More's *Utopia* begins in Antwerp, specifically when he 'was returning home from mass at St. Mary's, which is the chief church, and the most frequented of any in Antwerp';⁹ and Swift opens *Gulliver's Travels*

⁶The tradition initiated by More is sometimes referred to as 'scientific utopias', as the genre began in the European 'Age of Reason' and has a goal of inspiring societal betterment through rational political or technological improvement. See Khrisan Kumar, 'Aspects of the Western Utopian Tradition', in *Thinking Utopia: Steps Into Other Worlds*, ed. Jorn Fehr and Michael Rusen, Thomas Rieger (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 26–7; and Wolfgang Pircher, 'On the Construction of Worlds', in *Thinking Utopia: Steps Into Other Worlds*, ed. Jörn Rüsen, Michael Fehr and Thomas Rieger (New York: Berghahn Books: 2005), 68.

⁷Thomas More, 'Letter to Peter Giles', in *The Complete Works of Sir Thomas More, vol. 4*, ed. E. Surtz and J. H. Hexter (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964), 251.

⁸The understanding of utopia's purpose to inspire action is summarised by Marina Leslie, *Renaissance Utopias and the Problem of History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1998), 12).

⁹Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516) (London: Cassell & Company, 1901), 4.

with mention of Gulliver's address at 'a convenient house, near Newark, in Nottinghamshire, his native country', and even notes that family tombstones are 'still standing' in Banbury's churchyard.¹⁰ Such seemingly mundane details assert realism and set readers' minds into thinking that the story about to be told really could have taken place.

Journey

In line with the realistic mode set up at the outset, authors also locate the journeys in real ports with real destinations—travellers are not described as intending to travel to utopia. More's Raphael Hythloday embarks from New Castile (the contemporary name for the Philippines),¹¹ and Bacon marks his traveller's route from Peru intending to reach China and Japan.¹²

These destinations, however, also share another attribute. They are real places, but, from the perspective of contemporary readers, they are also remarkable; not fictitious but fanciful, they are familiar in so much as they are well known as icons of the 'unknown'. The remarkable, while still real, is a foil to quotidian reality: it hints at the possibility of a meta-reality beyond everyday expectations. Each of More's, Bacon's and Swift's travellers ventured from faraway ports into the South Sea which, for readers from the 16th to early 18th centuries, represented an almost entirely unexplored ocean where scholars believed an undiscovered, fabulous continent lay. A voyage to the South Sea was thus realistically possible, but, by the same measure, could be expected to yield wondrous discoveries.

The narrative's reliance on such remarkable locations can be seen in the effect James Cook's exploration of the South Sea in the late 18th century had on western utopian literature. Cook found it was merely an extension of the Pacific Ocean with no hidden marvels; the South Sea, now mapped and 'discovered', no longer constituted the very edge of the 'known world', lost its 'remarkable' lustre, and henceforth it largely ceased being cited in narratives of utopia.¹³

At the same time, authors give their travellers similarly remarkable means of transport. More places Raphael in a seagoing galleon, a vessel synonymous with adventure and exploration in the European 'Age of Discovery', and specifically notes that Raphael has previously accompanied 'Americus Vesputius',¹⁴ Amerigo Verspucci being the distinguished Italian explorer whose seafaring exploits were recognised as some of the most remarkable adventures of More's day. Bacon and Swift mount their travellers on galleons too. Turning briefly to vehicles in more modern utopian literature, we find Jack Vance's utopian hero Claude Glystra riding an intergalactic star ship in the 1957 utopia

¹⁰Jonathan Swift, 'Travels into Several Remote Nations of the Worlds in Four Parts (Gulliver's Travels)', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature Vol I*, ed. M.H. Abrams et al. (New York: Norton, 1962), 1925–26.

¹¹More, *Utopia*, 4.

¹²Francis Bacon, 'New Atlantis', in *Ideal Commonwealths*, ed. Francis Bacon, Thomas More, Thomas Campanella, James Harrington (New York, London: P. F. Collier & Son, 1901), 103.

¹³South Sea mystique was not entirely extinguished: Europeans from Diderot to Gaugin imagined idealised native communities in the remote islands of the South Pacific. These conceptions do differ from utopia, however, as the island ideals were 'real' places that anyone could visit, not the inaccessible 'no place' of the utopian tradition.

¹⁴More, *Utopia*, 4.

Big Planet. Again, in the spirit of More, Vance selected a vehicle deemed remarkable in the minds of an audience whose generation was preparing to fly to the moon.¹⁵ The remarkable vehicles, representing the highest technological achievement of the day, together with remarkable destinations, generate the expectation that the journey about to unfold will have a special trajectory.

This said, the journey's remarkable aspects are usually counterbalanced with additional quotidian details. For example, Bacon tells us that supplies on board are 'for five months' and more',¹⁶ and More speaks of Raphael's wagons, boats and guides as furnished by local princes, all in line with the familiar means of travel to distant lands.¹⁷ Such details pull readers back to reality, as if to assure them that despite the remarkable circumstances, the journey is a real undertaking.

The tension between the familiar and the remarkable is gradually resolved in favour of the latter as the journey progresses to the edge of the audience's known world—the South Sea in the classic narratives. Here, familiar details rapidly recede and the remarkable details come to the fore, pushing the boundaries of belief. More's traveller endures 'vast deserts' and places inhabited by 'wild beasts and serpents, and some few men, that were neither less wild nor less cruel than the beasts themselves'.¹⁸ Thereafter, he notes a wondrous change in the climate, and encounters curious civilisations, which, for example, despite their learned deportment, have no knowledge of the needle!¹⁹ In a similar vein, Bacon's traveller's 'ordinary' itinerary to China is interrupted by 'strong and great winds' that bring them into 'the midst of the greatest wilderness of waters', drifting further to a part of the South Sea which 'was utterly unknown', and under thick clouds they meander in the dark until they reach a place 'between death and life, for we are beyond both the Old World and the New.'²⁰

Arrival

That place, the 'above and beyond', is the utopic destination. Having brought their travellers to the edge of the known world, and having described its environment in increasingly remarkable fashion, it is but a short step beyond into the 'not here, not now' of utopia described in wholly fantastic terms.²¹ Here, the journey ends, all connection with familiar reality is lost and portrayal of utopia takes centre stage.

Travel maps the route to utopia, progressing in a linear fashion from the familiar into the remarkable, and traversing the 'known world' into an entirely unexplored place. Narratives of utopia are structured according to a utopian travel rubric represented in Figure 1.

¹⁵Jack Vance, *Big Planet* (New York: Avalon, 1957).

¹⁶Bacon, 'New Atlantis', 103.

¹⁷More, *Utopia*, 4.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Bacon, 'New Atlantis', 104–8.

²¹For example, Bacon's description of the first encounter with citizens of utopia has them in gilded boats with sumptuous robes, 'an excellent azure color, far more glossy than ours' ('New Atlantis', 105). Utopia's fruits are of unusual colour and have wondrous effects against infection, and its citizens live in houses of blue bricks and dine on food more delicious even than the 'collegiate diets' known in Europe ('New Atlantis', 106–8)!

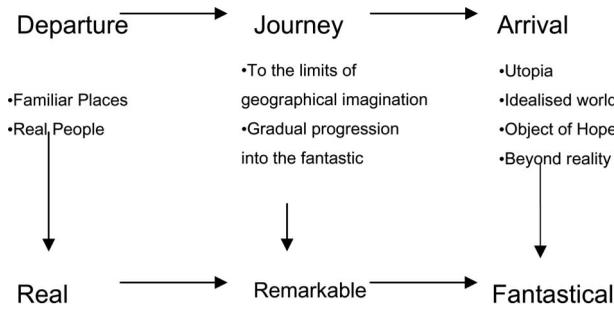


Figure 1. The Utopian Travel Rubric.

Authors adopt this model to construct a persuasive narrative for their utopian message. As noted above,²² More stresses that utopian narratives must be plausible. Failure to ground utopia within the realm of the plausible results in what later scholars call a ‘false utopia’, such as the Cokaygne Paradise commonly referenced in Medieval European literature which is so fantastic that no reader could reasonably aspire to recreate it in reality.²³ The specific structure of the travel narrative engenders the vital plausibility by virtue of the gradual shift from familiar into remarkable and finally fantastic. Like narrative ‘gears’, the gradual amplification of the fantastic smoothly transitions away from the real and credibly conditions readers to accept what would otherwise be a sudden, and inexplicable jump from their reality into utopia’s fantasy.

The initial familiarity even suggests that a contemporary reader could attempt the journey himself by following the utopian voyager’s footsteps. But once the remarkable elements are amplified, the possibility of the journey’s physical repetition is replaced with only metaphorical possibility. Readers, having been led, quite literally out to sea, can now only complete the mission by learning from the text’s utopian message and recreating the ideal community on the real ground of their familiar world.

The Sources of *al-Isrā’ wa-l-Mi’rāj*

Reading *al-Isrā’ wa-l-Mi’rāj* against this utopian travel rubric may provoke scepticism. Whereas each western utopia is a stand-alone single-authored text, Muḥammad’s journey to the heavenly spheres is narrated in multiple variations. Furthermore, it was a historical event and it occurred some 900 years before More even penned the first ‘scientific utopia’ of western literature. These apparent differences, however, cannot conceal significant resemblances between the two traditions that will become apparent when the sources, narrative structure and message of *al-Isrā’ wa-l-Mi’rāj* are examined closely.

In terms of source texts, Muḥammad did not write an account of his journey, and the earliest reference is contained in enigmatic and scattered verses in the Qur’ān. The most explicit reads:

²²See note 7.

²³See Kumar ‘Aspects of the Western Utopian Tradition’, 7–9 on Cokaygne as a ‘false utopia’; and for a full analysis of this ‘fools paradise’ eschewed by scholars, see A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1952), 16–17 and *passim*.

Glory be to Him, who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque to the Further Mosque the precincts of which We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs. He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing.²⁴

On its own, the verse records the occurrence of the Night Journey (*al-Isrā'*), the places of its departure and destination, but all other details, such as the ascent to Heaven and the meetings with past Prophets and God that later would become archetypally linked with *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*, are absent. Some modern commentators have inferred that the Muslim community in the earliest period believed that the Night Journey took place separately from the Ascension (*al-Mi'rāj*), and evidence from early 3rd/9th-century texts, such as Ibn Sa'd's biography of the Prophet and references in Muqātil ibn Sulaymān's commentary of the Qur'an, can support this theory.²⁵

For my purposes, the Qur'an provides only a skeletal account of the event, leaving Muslim narrators much scope for expansion. They took the opportunity. They retold the story, adding elaborate and fantastic details and conjoining both the Night Journey and the Ascension to produce a long, colourful and engaging narrative that first emerged in extant texts some 200–300 years after the Prophet's death. A 'canonical' version seems to have taken shape by the early 4th/10th century at the latest.²⁶

This 'canonical' version is recorded by Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) in his world history, *al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya*, and with even more detail and variation in his commentary on the Qur'an, known as *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*.²⁷ Together they provide the source texts for this paper. In common with much pre-modern Arabic writing, Ibn Kathīr did not 'author' the accounts of *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*, nor did he compose one continuous narrative of the event, but instead he gathered in encyclopaedic fashion a vast array of anecdotes recorded in earlier texts. These anecdotes were originally derived from an oral tradition that claimed to have preserved stories told by companions of the Prophet. For *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*, Ibn Kathīr cites four companions in particular,²⁸ recounting copious variations of the stories they told, each recension containing slightly different anecdotes and details.

²⁴Qur'an 17:1. Arberry's translation. See also Qur'an 17:60 and 53:13–18 for more cryptic references usually interpreted as connected to *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*.

²⁵In modern scholarship, Colby makes this case, citing both Ibn Sa'd and Muqātil. Muqātil, however, is ambivalent in this regard. His commentary on Chapter 17 of the Qur'an can be read to imply that *al-Isrā'* was separate from *al-Mi'rāj* (2: 513–20), but in his commentary on Chapter 53 he indicates that both events occurred together (4: 160–1). Muḥammad Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir 'Atā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1997); and Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr al-Qur'an al-'Azīm*, ed. 'Abd Allah Maḥmūd a-Shaḥata (Cairo: Al-Hay'at al-Misriyya al-'Āmma li-l-Kutub, 1979–1989).

²⁶By 'canonical' I intend texts that constitute some of the main sources for orthodox dogma up to the present, written in the early 4th/10th century, and that unambiguously relate *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* in the form familiar today. See, for example, al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr Jāmi' al-Bayān*; and al-Ḥanafī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqīdat al-Ṭahāwīyya*.

²⁷Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 3: 3–23; and Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya*, 3: 107–20. *Al-Bidāya* is expressed as a more condensed version than the *Tafsīr*, containing what Ibn Kathīr deems 'sufficient detail' (*maqna' wa kifāya*) (3: 107), although it is a long section with ample fantastic detail, such as descriptions of the ranks of thousands of angels at the gate of Heaven (3: 109), and the rivers of Paradise (3: 114).

²⁸Ibn 'Abbās, Abū Hurayra, Anas ibn Mālik and Sa'd al-Khudrī.

Our textual source is therefore an amalgamation of a vast tradition: the primary 'source' for *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* existed as a pool of myriad different anecdotes from which Arabic storytellers since early Islamic times drew material to craft their accounts, gradually adding to and amending the pool over the centuries.²⁹ From the 3rd/9th century the oral tradition began to be recorded, haphazardly and sparingly at first,³⁰ but the first outpouring of extensive narratives in al-Ṭabarī's 4th/10th-century Qur'ān commentary are testament to the depth and variety of the anecdote pool.³¹

While Ibn Kathīr's selections exhibit great variation at the level of detail, he selected texts that possess a common journey framework. To read Ibn Kathīr's account, therefore, is to read an accumulation of anecdotes narrated separately and arranged consecutively that adhere to a very similar pattern, rarely contradicting each other and essentially fused into one master narrative when read together. Ibn Kathīr, as *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* storyteller, achieves a 'unity in diversity' whereby the similarities between the versions enable a reader to perceive a unified story, and Ibn Kathīr even assists this process, offering short editorial 'corrections' to any anecdotes which stray too far from the general framework.³² While his text is almost entirely a compilation of older sources, Ibn Kathīr has a definitive conception of the journey, he judiciously chooses his material, deftly rejects variations as 'mistakes' and overall he prompts the reader to apprehend the different narrators he cites as 'remembering' different parts of the story.³³ Ibn Kathīr lays these remembrances out separately in his text, but they are fully combinable by a reader and a composite impression of *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* materialises.

Ibn Kathīr's collection reveals how the Qur'ān's laconic account flourished at the hands of later storytellers who added fantastical descriptions of Heaven and Hell, angels, supernatural animals and conversations between Muḥammad and past prophets, along with other mundane anecdotes on, for example, camel caravans that Muḥammad passed in the desert. The nature of these details, their arrangement and the narratives in which they are contained, and the ways in which Ibn Kathīr frames these demonstrate noteworthy parallels with the western narrative of utopia. An analysis of these elements will show that Arabic storytellers emphasised particular aspects of the journey in ways that resonate with the utopian travel rubric underpinning western narratives of utopia.

²⁹Colby's work on the evolution of anecdotes associated with Ibn 'Abbās provides excellent analysis of the changes that could occur to 'original' material as it was cited and re-cited over the centuries.

³⁰Some texts record small numbers of long narrative anecdotes (see Muqātil, *Tafsīr al-Qur'an al-'Aẓīm*, 2: 513–20), whereas others recorded larger numbers of shorter, more laconic anecdotes (see al-Ballādhurī's biography of the Prophet). Aḥmad ibn Yahyā Al-Ballādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashraf*, ed. Mahmud al-Fardous al-Azem (Damascus: Dār al-Yaqāẓat al-'Arabiyya, 1997), 1: 295–7.

³¹See al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr fāmī' al-Bayān*, 15: 3–24 and 27: 66–77.

³²For instance, one anecdote notes that Muhammad stopped to pray in Bethlehem on his way to Jerusalem. This is not widely attested and Ibn Kathīr declares it 'munkar', a non-recognised, disavowed fact (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 3: 16).

³³He states this in *al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya*, noting: 'some narrators would leave out some information on account of it being well known, or because they forgot it, or because they chose to mention what they thought was more important; while at times they would narrate all they knew, but at other times they cut their accounts according to what was most useful for them' (Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya*, 3: 115).

The Blending of the Familiar with the Remarkable: Borrowed Motifs in *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*

Many of the anecdotes that Arabic storytellers added to the Qur'ānic foundation borrow motifs from two traditions: Judeo-Christian religious texts and Arabian folklore. These borrowings perform a dual function of grounding the Arabic stories in familiar traditions, and of invoking the 'remarkable' to facilitate transition from departure to the journey and finally arrival.

The Judeo-Christian Tradition

Firstly, and most fundamentally, *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* echoes a well-established trope in the religious literature of the Near East in Late Antiquity. Judeo-Christian writings of the 2nd–5th centuries abound with the so-called 'Apocalypse' or 'Ascension' texts in which Jewish patriarchs and Christian mystics are recorded to have had visions of, or physically travelled to the Heavens with the aid of angels.³⁴ These stories have manifold similarities with *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*, outlined at length by McNeely, such as ascension from Jerusalem, meetings with past Prophets and even direct audiences with God.³⁵ Interestingly, such details are not mentioned in the Qur'ān, but are prominent in all accounts of *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* compiled by Ibn Kathīr.

Such borrowings suggest that the proliferation of the Apocalypse and Ascension tales around Muḥammad's time offered a ready-made model in which Muḥammad's own journey could be described. At the level of its narrative frame, *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* resounds with the utopian travel rubric: storytellers adopted a familiar trope from the Judeo-Christian tradition to guide their narrations of the event and to give their accounts plausibility as their audiences would have heard similar stories before. But the trope is itself 'remarkable': such journeys were reserved for recognised holy men, the Judeo-Christian saints and patriarchs, and *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*'s adoption of the trope gestures towards spiritual mystery and religious authority of Muḥammad.

The second borrowing from the Judeo-Christian tradition concerns Muḥammad's mount, al-Burāq, during his nocturnal journey from Mecca to Jerusalem. Although not found in the Qur'ān, most anecdotes in Ibn Kathīr mention that the Angel Gabriel bade Muḥammad ride al-Burāq, a fantastical white animal 'bigger than a donkey and smaller than a mule' whose every step would reach as far as the horizon.³⁶ Whilst al-Burāq is fantastical to the western audience today, in the Late Antique Near East this mount, much like the Ascension frame itself, would very likely have struck a familiar chord. Bashear, in his comprehensive survey of the prophets and their mounts in Semitic religions links al-Burāq to the long tradition of asses, donkeys and (to a lesser extent) camels that prophets were described as riding.³⁷ A particularly striking similarity can be

³⁴As these texts are mostly non-canonical, not all have survived, but extant texts were recently collected by James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1985); and James H. Charlesworth, *The New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987).

³⁵See McNeely, 'The Mi'rāj of Muḥammad, *passim*'; and Jean Delumeau, *History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1995), 23.

³⁶This curious description is fairly consistent across the versions, see Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 3: 5, 8, 14 and with slight variation, 12. In one narrative the animal is described as a horse (*faras*) (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 3:17).

found in the Apocalypse text of Deutero-Zechariah where the Messiah is described as 'riding upon an ass and upon a colt of the foal of the ass'.³⁸ Muslim commentators allude to this connection too, informing us that al-Burāq was the riding beast of all the prophets³⁹ and that Muḥammad shall ride al-Burāq once more on the Day of Judgement.⁴⁰

Al-Burāq also exemplifies the blending of the familiar and the remarkable of the utopian travel rubric. Al-Burāq, although familiar from the context of the earlier prophetic traditions, is Muhammad's 'remarkable' ride. In this, he is like More's galleons, linked to those of the real explorer Amerigo Verspucci, which serve as the means of transport for his utopian traveller. However, al-Burāq's exceptional ability to cross vast distances renders him 'remarkable' as he breaks the mould usually associated with the animals of prophets (e.g., Jesus's 'ordinary' donkey which carried him into Jerusalem). The remarkable mount's special qualities prime audiences to expect an extraordinary journey.

Arabian Folklore

Muḥammad's and his mount's night journey is identified with the same lexical term (*isrā'*) that is commonly encountered in stories and poems of night adventures in pre-Islamic Arabian folklore (usually *isrā'*/*surā'*). This folklore, represented in both collections of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry compiled in the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries and in shorter poems and related anecdotes incorporated into *adab* compilations of the same period, such as al-Jāhiz's *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, connect the 'night travel' motif with connotations of heroism and the fantastic. Although the desert was the familiar home of the Arabians, the desert at night, when the clarity of the day gave way to uncertain shadows and dark horizons, became a symbol of foreboding power. The desert was imagined as the home of the *jinn*s, *ifrīts*, *ghūls* and *hātifs*, frightening predators looming large in the stories of heroic nocturnal adventure. For instance, Shamr ibn al-Ḥarith⁴¹ recounted the following meeting:

ونارٍ قد حضأتُ بُعَيْدَ هَدِيٍّ	بدارٍ لا أريدُ بها ومقاما
سوى تحليلِ راحلةٍ وعينٍ	أُكألُها مخافةً أن تناما
أتوا ناري فقلتُ ممنون قالوا	سُرأُ الجِنَّ قلتُ عموا ظلاما

I lit a fire once the night had deepened,
In a place, where I made a temporary home but did not want to be;
My mount needed a rest, and with weary eyes

I kept watch, fearful of sleep . . .

³⁷Suliman Bashear, 'Riding Beasts on Divine Missions', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 37 (1991): 57–58.

³⁸Ibid., 67.

³⁹See Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān al-Kubrā*, ed. Ahmad Ḥasan Basūj (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1994), 1: 170; and Muḥammad ibn Ahmad al-Qurtubī, *al-Ḥāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*, ed. Sālim Mustafā al-Badrī (Beirut: Dār al-Kuttub al-'Ilmiyya, 2000), 10: 135. Ibn Kathīr alludes to this tradition, noting that al-Burāq was stabled in Jerusalem where 'Prophets stable' (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 3:5).

⁴⁰al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān al-Kubrā*, 1: 171.

⁴¹Elsewhere named Sahm ibn al-Ḥarith. al-Jāhiz, 'Amr ibn Bahr', in *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, ed. Muḥammad Bāsil 'Uyun al-Sūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1998), 2: 499.

They approached my fire, I asked: 'Who is there?'
 'Night-travellers from among the Jinn!'
 I said, 'May [your] darkness pervade . . . !'⁴²

These wraiths, spectres and the danger imagined in the desert at night were foils to the gallantry of pre-Islamic heroes who often boasted of their prowess and abilities of their mounts in nightlong journeys. For example, 'Antara ibn al-Shaddād praised his camel who would saunter with tail raised high, even after running all through the night,⁴³ and al-Shanfarā boasted of his own brazen raids during cold, drizzly nights where the ordinary man would even set his own bow on fire to keep warm:

دعستُ على غطشٍ وبغشٍ وصُحْبِي سُعَاژٌ وإِرْزِيرٌ ووَجْرٌ وأَفْكَالٌ

I charge into the desert night: dark and drizzly,
 My companions: hunger, cold, anxiety and fear.⁴⁴

Muḥammad's *Isrā'* hearkens at this panoply of Arabian folkloric heroes. For example, Muḥammad hears tempting voices calling to him (in the vein of the *hutāf*) and a beguiling woman beckoning (similar to the female *ghūl*) but pays them no heed.⁴⁵ Later, Gabriel explains that the voices belong to Christian and Jewish forces and the woman is the Devil, lurking in the dark just like the desert spirits of Arabian folklore. In an even more explicit reference, *al-Muwatta'* reports that Muḥammad came across an '*ifrīt*' during his *Isrā'* and was taught by Gabriel what to say in order to secure God's protection from such desert spirits.⁴⁶

These Arabian and Judeo-Christian motifs set *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* in a simultaneously familiar and remarkable milieu. By emphasising these aspects at the outset of their narratives, Arabic storytellers presented their audiences with a story that would not be immediately dismissed as utterly outlandish. They added new material around the Qur'ānic kernel which specifically uses the remarkable to negotiate the crucial balance between the real and the fantastic. The manner in which these motifs and other journey anecdotes are linked together in the narratives of the *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* stories further demonstrates the similarities with our utopian travel rubric.

The Fantastic in *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*

I have identified the tensions between the familiar and the fantastic in narratives of utopia and have shown that the former progressively gives way to the latter. *Al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* follows a similar itinerary.

Departure is ordinary. Narrators stress the 'normality' of Muḥammad's evening by inserting quotidian details that may otherwise seem superfluous. We are told that Muḥammad prayed in the usual fashion with his community then went to sleep.

⁴²Ibid., 3: 417.

⁴³See, for example, 'Antara's poem in *al-Mu'allaqāt*. al-Husayn al-Zūzānī, *Sharḥ al-Mu'allaqāt al-Sab'* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1972), 115.

⁴⁴al-Shanfarā, *Lāmīyyat al-'Arab*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm al-Ḥafnī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb, 1981), Ln 56.

⁴⁵Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 3: 6.

⁴⁶Vuckovic, *Heavenly Journeys*, 36.

Different narrators recorded different places where Muḥammad slept, either in his usual spot in the precinct of Mecca's sacred Black Stone, his house, or the house of his cousin, Umm Hānī'.⁴⁷

But, in common with the utopian travel rubric, the narratives hint at the fantastic from the outset. They usually begin with a reference to Qur'ān 17:1, translated above. Ibn Kathīr, like most authors, narrates the *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* stories as commentary on this verse.⁴⁸ The verse opens with the phrase '*Subhān [Allah]*' (Glory be to God/Exalted is God), a lexical marker for the extraordinary that signals something fantastic is about to occur. The reference to the event's foundational text invokes the unknown. The extraordinary tones in which it is set pave the way for the fantastic anecdotes to coalesce in the story (expressed in Arabic with the word "*ajab*"). This was not lost on Arabic storytellers. The earliest commentators such as Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (c. 180/796) note this wondrous connotation,⁴⁹ and so does Ibn Kathīr.⁵⁰

True to the utopian travel rubric, the early stages of Muḥammad's journey are set in reality. Narrators include express mention of real places. One account attributed to the famous hadith scholar al-Nasā'ī even plots the journey's basic itinerary, naming Ṭayba (al-Madīna), Mount Sinai, and Bethlehem. These specific, familiar locations resonate with religious significance and also bestow plausibility by tracing the route through 'real' geography. Ibn Kathīr also reports an anecdote of Muḥammad's outward journey in which he is described as passing a caravan heading for Syria from which a camel bolts when hearing al-Burāq.⁵¹ This reads like a natural reaction of a camel, sensitive and sometimes a little jumpy, to the supernatural pace of al-Burāq. On Muḥammad's return, the caravan's members are still searching for the camel, and, having become thirsty, Muḥammad quickly stops at their camp and drinks water from their supplies. References to the quotidian details of caravan life are not idle: they tether the remarkable and the fantastic to the realm of the familiar for audiences whose reality is grounded in desert life.

The familiar, along with the 'remarkable' borrowed from the Judeo-Christian tradition and Arabian folklore, escalates into the fantastic but generates the same plausibility comprehended in western utopian narratives. Understandably, given their different contexts, there are differences between Muḥammad's journey to Heaven the and later western 'scientific utopias': in Muḥammad's case, the 'familiar' is based primarily on motifs borrowed from Judaeo-Christian traditions and Arabian folklore, which allude to the 'theological reality' of his day, whereas the 'familiar' of More and Bacon refer to the reality of maritime voyages of discovery, a 'technological reality'. Nonetheless, the ways in which the narratives of Muḥammad's journey to Heaven negotiate the tension between the familiar and the fantastic show affinity in the techniques employed by both

⁴⁷Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* 3: 8, 9 and 21. The tradition that Muḥammad was sleeping in the house of Umm Hānī' may have been influenced by subsequent ideological persuasions, as she was the sister of the later Caliph 'Alī. In any event, all locations were essentially adjacent, as al-Ṭabarī in his *Tārīkh* notes that Muḥammad's tribe, the Quraysh, all slept around the sacred precinct. Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Beirut: Rawā'i' al-Turāth al-'Arabi, n.d.), 2: 308.

⁴⁸In his historical work, *al-Bidāya*, he also cites the verse at the outset of his discussion of *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* (Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya*, 3: 107).

⁴⁹Muqātil, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, 2: 513 and 516.

⁵⁰Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 3: 22.

⁵¹Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya*, 3: 108.

Arab and western storytellers to capture the imagination of their audiences in order to take them on a fantastical journey, all in the realm of the plausible, by sufficiently grounding their story in reality in the beginning, then embarking on to inaccessible places in the end.

The Heavenly Sphere in *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*

In the western narratives of utopia, two landmarks appear as the fantastic accelerates. The first represents the 'end of the world' located at the very edge of the contemporary geographical imagination (the South Sea in More, Bacon and Swift as noted above), and the second is the entrance to utopia at a point beyond this edge. A similar itinerary structures *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*.

To the Edge of the World

Muḥammad sets out from Mecca, his home, crosses a desert familiar to his people, signposted as we have seen with real place names. The journey progresses, however, beyond Arabia where *al-Isrā'* terminates at the Holy Mosque in Jerusalem. This destination is significant, not only as a Holy City, but also as a remote location with some of the remarkable mystique of More's South Sea.

The Qur'an establishes distance by describing the Holy Mosque with the elative adjective '*al-masjid al-aqṣā*' (17:1), the 'farthest mosque'. While the Qur'an does not specifically state that this is in Jerusalem, and modern scholars have questioned the link,⁵² the storytellers have been unanimous in interpreting it as Jerusalem in *al-Shām* (ancient Syria).⁵³ Semantically, '*al-aqṣā*' locates the destination of Muḥammad's *Isrā'* at a point as far as anyone can go, at the edge of the 'geographical imagination' of Muḥammad's people, in a fashion similar to western narratives of utopia. Jerusalem and *al-Shām* in the context of the geographical knowledge of the 7th-century Arabians were located at the very edge of their known world where the natural began to mix with the supernatural.

The extent to which the Arabians ventured outside of Arabia in the decades leading up to Muḥammad's mission is the subject of scholarly debate, and while Arabia clearly experienced periods of frequent contact with the Mediterranean World through regular trade connections (a fact amply attested by the findings of Roman and Greek artefacts in the Arabian Peninsula),⁵⁴ the decline of the Classical Roman world and the curtailing of the incense trade from the 3rd and 4th centuries following the Roman adoption of Christianity negatively impacted regional trade, compelling Arabian trading networks to look more inwards than outwards,⁵⁵ rendering foreign zones (such as Byzantine Syria) more peripheral.

Although pre-Islamic Arabians are noted to have travelled to *al-Shām*,⁵⁶ the region has mythical and religious significance according to the classical Arabic sources. For

⁵²See Colby, *Narrating Muḥammad's Night Journey*, 15–16.

⁵³Even the earliest extant text makes no indication of competing conceptions of the Qur'an's spatial reference (Muqātil, *Tafsīr al-Qur'an al-'Azīm*, 2: 515–516).

⁵⁴Most spectacularly, the finds at Qariyat al-Faw in southern Saudi Arabia. See A.R. al-Ansary, *Qariyat al-Faw: A Portrait of Pre-Islamic Civilisation in Saudi Arabia* (Riyadh: University of Riyadh, 1982).

⁵⁵Lawrence I. Conrad, 'The Arabs', in *The Cambridge Ancient History Volume XIV: Late Antiquity*, ed. Averill Cameron et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2000), 687–8.

⁵⁶The existence of Meccan trade with *al-Shām* alluded to in the Qur'an (106:1–2) seems to have been definitively proved by Victor Sahhāb in *Ilāf Quraysh* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, 1992).

instance, al-Ramla is known as the refuge of the Prophet Ṣāliḥ when he fled the disaster God brought down upon Thamūd's city in northern Arabia.⁵⁷ In general, *al-Shām* is described as the place of origin of Hubal, an important pre-Islamic Meccan idol,⁵⁸ the home of a special soothsayer who resolved disputes amongst Arab tribes,⁵⁹ a place where migrating tribes that would later disappear from history are said to have travelled,⁶⁰ or a refuge of social outcasts.⁶¹ Meccan trade with *al-Shām* appears to have terminated in Buṣrā and Gaza⁶² located on *al-Shām*'s borders with the Arabian Desert. Buṣrā in particular is frequently mentioned in mythically potent anecdotes. The young Muḥammad, for example, met a monk in Buṣrā who identified him as the final prophet prophesied in the Bible.⁶³ Buṣrā also appears as a symbol for 'far away' lands; for instance, 'the castles of *Buṣrā al-Shām*' are mentioned as the farthest point the arc of light shining from Muḥammad's body reached at his birth.⁶⁴ Such mentions of Buṣrā appear not to be intended to give the exact geographical coordinates of the reach of Muḥammad's holy light; rather, they connote the farthest reaches of the world at the time.

The 7th-century Arabian worldview conceived of *al-Shām* as remote, partially familiar and partially mythical. The latter is where a certain element of supernatural, prophetic power is believed to be located. Jerusalem, in the interior of *al-Shām* lying at the very edge of their 'geographical imagination', is a place where a hero would plausibly dismount from a fantastical beast and ascend to the Heavens.

Beyond this world

The journey then proceeds to a place Bacon would describe as 'beyond both the Old World and the New'.⁶⁵ This occurs in the *Mi'rāj* segment, the ascent from Jerusalem to Heaven where Muḥammad met important past Prophets and angels, and encountered fantastical heavenly sights.⁶⁶ What Muḥammad was shown in Heaven is described as 'that which no eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor has ever occurred in the mind of man'.⁶⁷ Three places mark the end of this world.

The first is the *sidrat al-muntahā*, the 'Jujube Tree of the End', mentioned cryptically in the Qur'ān in an uncertain context,⁶⁸ but unequivocally associated with *al-Mi'rāj* in

However, as set out below, their trade largely centred around market cities located at the very edge Syria, or its borders with the Arabian Desert.

⁵⁷ al-Mas'ūdī, 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, ed. Charles Pellat (Beirut: al-Jāmi'at al-Lubnāniyya, 1966), §935.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, §1372.

⁵⁹ Al-Ballādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf*, 1: 86.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1: 21; and Muḥammad ibn Makram Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār Sādir, 1990), 8: 70.

⁶¹ Al-Ballādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf*, 1: 70.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 1: 67.

⁶³ Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *al-Sirat al-Nabawiyya*, ed. Mustafā al-Saqā et al (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifat, n.d.), 1: 180.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1: 158.

⁶⁵ Bacon, 'New Atlantis', 108.

⁶⁶ In the *Tafsīr* we encounter honey-sweet Heaven water (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 3: 7), pearl and emerald palaces (3: 4), rivers of mercy and purification (3: 19). Fantastic punishments are also recorded, gnashing of teeth, scratching of faces and disgusting food is served to the wrong-doers (e.g. 3: 5 and 17).

⁶⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 3: 13.

⁶⁸ Qur'ān 53:14, where its association with the Night Journey is only implicit, although accepted by the Muslim tradition.

the Arabic stories where it is described as possessing incomparable beauty, enormous leaves like the ears of elephants, vast branches spanning the length of the world and boughs on which angels perch like flocks of birds.⁶⁹ The tree's exact position is unclear—medieval commentators place it either in the Sixth Heaven, with its branches reaching the Seventh (highest Heaven), or entirely in the Seventh.⁷⁰ Whatever the case, the adjective *al-muntahā* (the end) unambiguously marks it at end of the Heavenly Spheres. The second and third fantastic landmarks are situated near *sidrat al-muntahā*: the *jannat al-ma'wā*, 'Garden of the Refuge',⁷¹ is a beautiful garden for the souls of the pious and/or holy martyrs of Islam;⁷² and *al-bayt al-ma'mūr*, 'the Heavenly House' (lit. the inhabited House), is their dwelling place where 'each day seventy thousand angels enter it, never to come back to it again'.⁷³

The narrative now gives its final signpost, which, critically, points to physical impossibility. The Jujube Tree, Garden of the Abode and the Heavenly House are located in the farthest reaches of the sky to which travel is impossible and beyond which the universe ends.⁷⁴ The climax of *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*, Muḥammad's audience with God where he is taught the obligation of ritual prayer, occurs after Muḥammad crosses this 'final space' beyond the landmarked end of the Universe. Significantly, Muḥammad experiences this space alone: whereas Gabriel accompanies him from Mecca, he remains by the Jujube Tree and Heavenly House. The presence of God is locatable in 'no place', accessible not by travel but through faith.⁷⁵ The Arabic stories of *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* transport Muḥammad to the presence of God much like the way western narratives of utopia deliver the travellers to utopia. Western utopia is 'no-place', or beyond space, to which travel is impossible, and likewise the presence of God in *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* is beyond the reach of the most miraculous means of travel.

Al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj and Utopia

The didactic intention of *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* brings the Arabic stories even closer to western narratives of utopia. Narratives of utopias are meant to persuade the readers of the plausibility of the utopian ideal. The motif of the utopian gift reinforces this. In the case of More's Raphael Hythloday, the gift is a map (included in the printed edition of *Utopia*). In the Age of Discovery, a map was all an intrepid traveller would need to strike

⁶⁹Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 3: 4 and 9.

⁷⁰al-Qurṭubī, *al-Ĵāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*, 17: 63. In modern scholarship, some have deemed it to be a much more prosaic, earth-bound garden near Mecca. This view is roundly refuted by Van Ess (50), and, in any event, for our purposes the association of the tree with '*al-muntahā*' (the end) clearly intends to conjure conceptions of the *furthest*, the most distant possible point of travel. Joseph van Ess, 'Vision and Ascension: *Surat al-Najm* and its Relationship with Muḥammad's *Mi'rāj*' *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 1 (1999): 47–62.

⁷¹Qur'ān 53:15.

⁷²For the identification of *jannat al-ma'wā* with the paradise promised to devout Muslims and martyrs, see commentaries on another verse of the Qur'ān: ﴿فلهم جنات المأوى نُزُلًا مما كانوا يعملون﴾ (32:19).

⁷³Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 3: 9.

⁷⁴A zone the Qur'ān declares thoroughly beyond all reach of mortals, unless divinely assisted. See, for example, Qur'ān 52:38 and 55:33.

⁷⁵Gabriel is narrated as accompanying Muḥammad from Mecca to Jerusalem with al-Burāq, and then to the Heavens without al-Burāq, and in the Heavenly Spheres, Gabriel acted as Muḥammad's guide until the Jujube Tree and the Garden (Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, 3: 110).

out on his own to find, explore and perhaps even think of colonising utopia.⁷⁶ But as More's Utopia does not physically exist, this map is clearly of no use. However, in addition to towns, seas and continents, the map includes illustrations of various figures, such as Raphael, and a boat of travellers near Utopia. A close examination of these figures reveals that the travellers are actually looking at the figure of Raphael himself, not at the illustration of Utopia. This indicates that by acting upon Raphael's *words*, and not by visiting the *place* he discovered, we can forge utopia ourselves.⁷⁷ The utopian gift can be interpreted as the means by which a reader can partake in enjoying the fruits of the fantastical journey related to him and, more important, recreate utopia himself.

Muḥammad also returns with a gift from God: he brings back the institution of ritual prayer. Ordinary Muslims will never ride the back of al-Burāq nor ascend to the Highest Heaven; however, ritual prayers can secure Heaven for the rest of humanity. It is through prayer, the most essential ritual expression of faith, that a Muslim would be able to lead the ideal life for which he will be rewarded with permanent residence in Paradise.

Conclusion

The utopian travel rubric, as I have shown, may help to explain the process by which *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* took shape over the centuries. Arabic storytellers expanded on the Qur'ānic verse and generated longer narratives by adding anecdotes and borrowing motifs from other traditions. The fantastical terms in which they describe Muḥammad's attaining sacred knowledge demonstrate its unique value, but their emphasis on the familiar at the outset retains an air of plausibility, very much in the way advocated by More later. Modern scholars have tended to reject that any pre-More texts can be analysed as utopias on various grounds, including the fact that utopia is fictitious whereas Heaven is real for the storytellers.⁷⁸ I do not argue that *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj* narrates a utopian journey; rather, I have shown that a common 'utopian travel rubric' serves as a means of 'plausible fiction' in both western narratives of utopia and *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*.

Al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj is an unusual episode in the Prophet's biography— never again would traditionalists portray Muḥammad in such fantastical terms—and it is so by virtue of the gift Muḥammad brings home to his community. The ritual prayer is the ultimate, tangible key to unlocking the gates of Heaven. Muḥammad is no longer required to return to Heaven for any additional sacred knowledge, but is instead tasked with spreading the message of Islam. Similarly, Raphael Hythloday never returns to Utopia. Instead More writes:

⁷⁶Not long after More's Utopia was published, the English began a considerable colonisation of Ireland as a precursor to the New World. The important role maps and diagrams played during this process of colonisation and conquest has been discussed elsewhere. See Christian F. Feest, 'John White's New World', in *A New World: England's First View of America*, ed. Kim Sloan (London: British Museum, 2007); and Jesus Carrillo, 'From Mt Ventoux to Mt Masaya—The Rise and Fall of Subjectivity in Early Modern Travel Narrative', in *Voyages and Visions: Towards a Cultural History of Travel*, ed. Jas Elsner and John-Pau Rubies (London: Reaktion, 1999), *passim*.

⁷⁷For analysis of More's map of Utopia, see Leslie, *Renaissance Utopias*, 42–3.

⁷⁸Kumar, 'Aspects of the Western Utopian Tradition' (26–7) and Pircher ('On the Construction of Worlds', 68) stress that utopias must be scientific projects *à la* More. For a critique of the perceived scholarly bias against non-Western utopias, see Longxi Zhang, 'The Utopian Vision: East and West', in *Thinking Utopia: Steps Into Other Worlds*, ed. Jörn Rüsen, Michael Fehr and Thomas Rieger (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

if these unbelievers will not believe [my story], let them go to Hythloday himself; for he is not yet dead. I heard lately from some who came from Portugal, that on March 1st last he was as hale and sprightly as ever.⁷⁹

The bearer of the knowledge of the ideal must remain on earth. After narrating Muḥammad's return from *al-Isrā' wa-l-Mi'rāj*, Arabic storytellers devoted the remainder of the Prophetic biography to the stories of how Muḥammad and the first generation of Muslims tried to build their ideal community in the 'here and now'.

⁷⁹More, 'Letter to Peter Giles', 252.