

TRANSCENDING JERUSALEM: MUHAMMAD



Your Lord may well show mercy to you, but if you revert to your evil behaviour, We shall revert to chastising you. We have made Hell a prison for those who are thankless of God's bounties.

(The Qur'an, 17:8, Bani Isra'il—
The Children of Israel)

Some Israelis called the takeover of the West Bank following the 1967 war 'the Return to Repentance'. It set in train events that would lead to further wars. It is fair to say that it has been hard for Israelis to assess the religious significance of this event, which left Israel in control of the heartland of the biblical Holy Land, with Jerusalem at its centre.

However in 1999, the Israeli State Tourist Authority ran an advertisement that said: 'In the land where the Millennium began, the Dome has already been built.'

I like to think of this as an admission, although I accept that it may have been unconscious and unintentional. It represents an admission nonetheless, that there are two

omissions in Jewish theology and belief. These are: that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, and that the Dome of the Rock is the third temple, built as it is on the spot of Muhammad's ascension to the heavens from Jerusalem. I believe that this realisation is what the whole saga of the repeated expulsions and returns has been about; the final act in the (until now) apparently endless 'struggle with God'. This, this rendezvous with destiny, this squaring of the circle of the paradox of free will and predestination, this alone can explain the suffering that preceded and followed 1948, Jewish before, Palestinian (both Muslim and Christian) thereafter. Explain and thence, God willing, heal.

If this has not been, until now, an idea whose time has come, the same can also be said of the recognition of how the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, is referred to and described in the Bible.

The idea of such references is at first surprising, but some considerations need to be borne in mind. Firstly, in the course of translation from the Semitic languages of Hebrew and Aramaic (both of the same family as Arabic) obvious resonances and references are sometimes lost, either accidentally (because translators were not expecting to find the Final Prophet), or deliberately (they had found him and urgently needed to hide him). Secondly, most readers of the Bible are not Muslims, and hence are not looking for the Prophet Muhammad there. If they are Jewish, they are looking for a Messiah at the end of time. If they are Christian, they are looking to make prophecies point to Jesus, and to either his First or Second Coming.

If we consider these two factors together we can see that one reason for changing the Bible would be to project and protect this particular point of view. However, because of this focus it seems that scribes have ignored parts of the Bible which they saw as obscure or unimportant (because they were not looking for anyone beyond their own group) but which actually open up a whole new story if studied on their

merits. We have seen this earlier, particularly in the context of the books of Isaiah.

Thus, if we see that the whole vast pageant of monotheism is actually leading to the coming of a universal religion both after Jesus and beyond the land of Jesus, then these obscure or misapplied prophecies can be seen in a very different light. Again and again it seems that although attempts have been made to conceal the message that the Truth lies beyond the pages and the central people of the Bible, the evidence of that message, and sometimes its concealment, is found in the Bible itself. And then the work of a greater planner can be seen.

The first such prophecy comes as early as the Torah itself. At the end of the life of Jacob, the dying patriarch gathers his sons and blesses them, and tells them what will 'befall you in the last days' (Genesis 49:1). To Judah he says: 'the Sceptre shall not pass from Judah, and the Lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come, and to him belongeth the obedience of peoples' (Genesis 49:10). In a close analysis of the language and content of this verse Professor 'Abdu 'l-Ahad Dawud disagrees with the Christian assertion that 'Shiloh' refers to Jesus. Jesus in fact, he says, reasserted the Law of Moses rather than bringing any new laws himself, and he did not try to accept the 'Sceptre' of temporal power. He was also of the line of Judah, so, even if the sceptre is seen as his, it had not passed from Judah's line. Professor Dawud hence looks at possible meanings of 'Shiloh'. The word itself can signify either 'he to whom it belongs' or 'trustworthy', either of which would be appropriate in describing the Prophet of Islam.

The next such passage is the one we considered earlier in which Moses tells the people that the Lord had told him:

I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee [Moses], and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever

will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him.

(Deuteronomy 18:18)

There is also the passage when, before his death, Moses gives his blessing to the children of Israel:

The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from mount Par'an, and he came with ten thousands of saints; from his right hand went a fiery law for them.

(Deuteronomy 33:2)

The gentle, non-Israel, import of this message is emphasised by the words that follow: 'Yea, he loved the people; all his saints are in thy hand: and they sat down at thy feet; *every one* shall receive of thy words. Moses commanded of us a law, *even* the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.' (Deuteronomy 33:4-5) Unless we understand these words as referring to the Prophet Muhammad, they make very little sense.

Later in the Bible, in a psalm attributed to David, the latter says: 'The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool' (Psalm 110:1). The repetition of the word 'Lord' as subject and object in the English translation fits the Christian interpretation of Jesus-as-God being spoken to by God-as-God but, as Professor 'Abdu 'l-Ahad Dawud has pointed out, in the original Hebrew the words used are 'Yahweh' and 'Adonai', which mean 'God' and 'my Lord'. David, he says, would not address a descendant of his own (i.e. Jesus) as 'My Lord', but as 'My son'. Even this may sound a little tendentious, but Jesus himself actually says this: 'If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?' (Matthew 22:44, Mark 12:36, Luke 20:42), a question that leaves the crowd speechless in Matthew, and 'glad' in Mark. Again, an apparently obscure and meaningless comment turns out to

have profound import in throwing light on what Muslim scholars say is the deepest message of the Bible. A further example of this is to be found in the *Song of Songs*, sometimes attributed to Solomon, which reads: 'His speech (or mouth) is most sweet, and he is altogether lovely (or desirable). This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.' (Song of Songs 5:16) What is amazing is that the word in Hebrew for 'lovely' (or 'desirable') is '*Muhammadeem*' and that, furthermore, a Hadith states that God said to the Prophet: 'O Muhammad, I take you as a friend, just as I took Abraham as a friend.'

Later still, in a study of the seventh chapter of the Book of Daniel, Professor Dawud describes Daniel's vision of the four beasts as being symbols of empires to come, the Chaldean, the Persian, the Greek and the Roman. The first three are bad but not described in detail because, Professor Dawud says, they are pagan. The most powerful and dangerous of these is the fourth, which has iron teeth and brass nails and grows horns. One of these—which corresponds to the Christian Constantine—grew and 'made war on the saints and prevailed against them; Until the Ancient of days came, and judgement was given to the saints of the most high; and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom.' (Daniel 7:21:22) Professor Dawud sees 'the saints' as being those who believe in one God, unlike the Trinitarian Constantine. The 'Ancient of days' is the Prophet Muhammad (upon him be peace), and his elevation is easily equated with the *Mi'raj*, the ascent into the heavens during the Night Journey to Jerusalem:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion,

91 CHAPTER FIVE

which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

(Daniel 7:13-14)

Immediately prior to this we read that ‘the judgement was set, and the books were opened’ (Daniel 7:10) where the Hebrew word used for ‘judgement’ is *dina*, a word that has exactly the same root as the Arabic word *din*.

The books of two later prophets of the Jewish Bible also contain prophecies that confirm the reversion of this *din*, the burden of Arabia, to the line of the elder of Ibrahim’s sons: ‘God came from Teman and the Holy one from Mount Par’an. Selah. His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise.’ (Habakkuk 3:3)

‘The Holy One’ refers to the Prophet Muhammad (upon him be peace); and in the Book of Haggai we read of the glory of two houses of God, the second of which is the greater:

And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of Hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, saith the Lord of Hosts. The glory of this latter house shall be greater than that of the former, saith the Lord of Hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of Hosts.

(Haggai 2: 7-9)

Finally, in the last book of the Jewish Bible, Malachi, which literally means ‘My angel’, we find a prophecy that seems to refer to the *Isra*’ of the Last Prophet (upon him be peace) that would take place between the two houses some centuries later:

Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall come suddenly to his temple, even the messenger of the

covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come,
saith the Lord of Hosts.

(Malachi 3:1)

This journey would be the seminal point in the history of the worship of one God, a point that would assert both continuity and transformation. On a practical level, one important achievement was the formalisation of the numbers of prayers to be prayed daily, a number that was arrived at with the help of Musa, as we shall see. This itself is appropriate, because in the Bible, Musa's practices in preparation for speaking with God are described more than any others, though they were practices that had always been performed by the Prophets. They included many practices that are part of daily prayer in Islam, such as bowing and prostration upon the ground: 'And Abraham fell on his face: and God talked with him' (Genesis 17:3), and 'they (Moses and Aaron) fell upon their faces: and the glory of the Lord appeared unto them' (Numbers 20:6).

The removal of shoes and washing before prayer are also described: 'And He (God Almighty) said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground' (Exodus 3:5), and 'Moses and Aaron and his sons washed their hands and their feet thereat: When they went into the tent of the congregation, and when they came unto the altar, they washed as the Lord commanded Moses' (Exodus 40:31-32).

Following the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE relations between the followers of Jesus and the Jews who had rejected him deteriorated as Jews ceased to be a political power. Moreover, for Christians, the destruction seemed to be a decisive punishment for ignoring prophecies out of pride. However, Jesus himself brought tidings of the coming of another that, as we have seen, had their roots in the Jewish Bible and disqualified trinitarian Christians from declaring that they, once and for all, were the new Chosen People.

Significant information concerns John the Baptist (Yahya in the Qur'an). Jesus praises him highly, and it is his baptism (and hence authorisation) of Jesus that begins the latter's ministry. In Matthew we find:

Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

(Matthew 11:11)

Here 'the least' can only be a prophet who is still in the kingdom of heaven, and who is 'the least', the last. When John the Baptist was asked who he was, 'he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they [the priests] asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No.' (John 1:20-21) 'That prophet' can only be the one who has been spoken of since Deuteronomy 18:18.

The most striking example of looking forward is to be found in the Gospel of John where Jesus consoles his disciples about his imminent departure:

Let not your heart be troubled, ye believe in God, believe also in me [...] And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth.

(John 14:1,16-17)

The Comforter, in other words, will be a man, like Jesus, and there will be no more after him, and he will be a trustworthy man, the Spirit of truth. 'But the Comforter, which is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance' (John 14:26).

The writer seems wrongly to equate the Spirit of truth with the 'Holy Spirit', that which had been with David and

Jesus. That being so, it seems illogical that Jesus would need to ask God to send him. And it has already been said that the Comforter will be human. 'Hereafter I will not talk much with you: for the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me' (John 14:30).

Here the Comforter is equated with the Spirit of truth, an entity distinct from Jesus, and in the following this is further emphasised by the prophecy that the Comforter will speak well of Jesus, again as of a distinct entity. The numerous references to 'Isa in the Qur'an and Hadith testify to this.

'But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me.'

(John 15:26)

Chapter 16 has Jesus speaking of the nature of the mission of the Comforter, as well as of the conditions of his coming:

'Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgement.'

(John 16:7-8)

To reprove could carry a notion of 'testing again', or restating, the moral limits of man: defining sin, defining righteousness, and judging between the two. He would be able to do this because he would be a pure instrument of divine transmission, and an example in his conduct:

'But when he, the spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you in all truth: for he shall not speak of himself but whatsoever he shall hear [from God] that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come. He shall glorify

95 CHAPTER FIVE

me: for he shall receive of mine and shall show unto you.'

(John 16:13-14)

The words in English seem strongly to signify the coming of the Prophet Muhammad (upon him be peace), but if we look at the translation of the word 'Comforter' from its original Greek, *parakletos*, this sense only becomes stronger. 'Paraclete' means, more than a comforter, an advocate, a word with a legal sense to it. The Prophet ﷺ was both the bringer of a 'fiery law' and bearer of the role of our advocate on the Day of Judgement when, *insha'Allah*, he will save people from the fire. A Hadith states that on that day he will say: 'Go and take out of Hell all those who have faith in their hearts equal to the weight of [...] a mustard seed' (Bukhari). When we consider that the Greek word *Periclyte* means 'the Praised One' we are as close as we can be to the Qur'anic verse that states that 'Isa brought 'news of a Messenger who will come after me, whose name is the Praised One.' (61.6) 'The Praised One' in Aramaic, Jesus' language, is '*Hamad*', and in Arabic 'Ahmad'. As Sulayman Shahid Mufassir says, it is possible that they were *both* written, but in the process of copying one was omitted, something that has happened with other words and sentences. As he says:

There is no one else in all history that John 14:16 *et seq.* could refer to but Muhammad bin Abdullah, peace be upon him [...] Only one man stands as Counsellor and Advocate (*Paraclete*) for mankind for all the ages to come, Praised (*Periclyte*) by God and some 800 millions of the human family.

(Sulayman Shahid Mufassir, *Muhammad in the Bible*)

It is for all of these reasons that, as the Qur'an says, the Jews were expecting a Prophet from Arabia, and it is because of this that many fled there after the destruction of Jerusalem in

70 CE. In Arabia they established large communities in the area of Madina where they eventually exercised considerable power, though by the time of the Prophet (upon him be peace) they were more like a balancing power between the Arab tribes of the Aws and the Khazraj. There were no Jews living in Mecca but the Ka'ba was venerated by Jews as an outlying Temple that had been raised by Abraham. One notable Jew, Al-Hayyaban, had migrated from the relative luxury of Syria to Madina precisely because of what had been foretold, but died at the time of the Prophet's first revelation. He said, 'His hour is close upon you. Be ye the first to reach him, O Jews.'

However, if the Children of Israel could be said to have thought Jesus had had the right faith but the wrong message, their attitude to the Prophet Muhammad could be seen as something opposite: the right message (Prophet for all humanity) but the wrong faith (Gentile). Once again, their willingness to submit was to be tested, in a different context. The result, except in the case of 39 souls, was to be the same. Bahira, a learned Christian who recognised Sayyidina Muhammad's prophethood (upon him be peace) before it had been revealed, warned him specifically that the Jews would be against him, a warning that proved mostly accurate.

Once the Prophet (upon him be peace) began his call to God, the attitude of the Jews can be described as 'in favour of the message but against the messenger', as Martin Lings puts it in his biography of the Prophet (upon him be peace). When the Quraysh asked the Jews of Yathrib (Madina) what they, having knowledge of Scripture and Prophets, thought of the veracity of the new Prophet's message, the rabbis told them to ask three questions. 'If he tell you of them, then he is a Prophet sent by God.' The questions concerned 'the young men who left their lands in days of old and what happened to them'; 'the traveller who went east and west to the ends of the earth'; and 'the Spirit, and its nature'. Though the Prophet (upon him be peace) was able to answer

the questions through revelation, many still did not believe him. Or rather, they *would* not.

This became increasingly clear as time passed. During the Prophet's life, it has been calculated that only 39 Jews actually embraced Islam. One of these was Safiyya, the wife of Kinanah. She was a pious woman who was offered freedom or marriage to the Prophet (upon him be peace) after her husband was killed at the battle of Khaybar. She chose the latter. One of the reasons for this was that she had overheard her husband and another of the Jews of Khaybar, Huyayy, talking about the Prophet (upon him be peace) before meeting him, saying that he could not be what he said he was. On their return they had been deeply troubled, because they had realised that he *was* a Prophet, though their opposition did not cease.

Another outward Jewish denial of this truth was when Abu Sufyan of the Quraysh met with Jewish leaders actually within the Ka'ba and asked them which group they believed had the better *din*. The Jews said, in that holy place: 'You Quraysh have the better *din*.'

It was not that the Holy Prophet did not know all this. Nonetheless, in Madina he established a covenant with the Jews of mutual loyalty and protection. The two faiths had equal status: Jews would only be required to follow their own laws, and there was no requirement on them to recognise the prophethood of Sayyidina Muhammad (upon him be peace). They were taken at their word. 'If they incline to peace, then make peace with them and put your trust in God' (8:61), an injunction that still stands. It was only if they acted treacherously against the Muslims that they would face the consequences.

One Jewish group chose to do this. After the Muslims' victory at Badr they taunted the Prophet (upon him be peace) that had he been fighting real warriors (i.e. themselves) he would not have been so successful. The Prophet said nothing, but walked out. A few days later, an argument between a Muslim and a Jew in the market that led

to deaths on both sides could have been arbitrated by the Prophet (upon him be peace) under the terms of the covenant. However, the Jews chose to make a fight of it and withdrew to fortified positions, sure that their skills and the promised reinforcements would be more than adequate to dispose of the Muslims. Unfortunately for them, no reinforcements came and eventually they surrendered unconditionally. It is important to note that despite the Qur'anic injunction: 'If thou overcomest them in war, then make of them an example, to strike fear into those that are behind them, that they may take heed' (8:57), the Jews were only banished rather than executed.

The Prophet's approach (peace be upon him) to the Jews can be seen as one of patience in the face of hostile intentions, and action in the face of hostile acts. Typifying this was the execution he decreed of Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, a poet who satirised the Prophet (upon him be peace) and his message, and who called on the Quraysh to take violent revenge for Badr. When the Jews of the Bani Nadir tribe complained to him (upon him be peace), he said: 'If he had remained as others of like opinion remain, he would not have been executed.'¹ He then invited the Jews to make a special treaty in addition to the covenant, which they did, though a later plan to murder him led to declaration of war, siege, surrender and their banishment. Under the terms of the treaty, the Jews were only allowed to keep what their camels could carry, but with their camels in single file, their curtains thrown open to reveal the enormous scale of their owners' wealth, the Jews marched out to the tune of fife and drum. Such arrogance was noted, as was the potential booty, should defeat catch up with the Jews again.

A further campaign was launched by the Jews and Quraysh. Although this threatened to annihilate the entire Muslim community, it was thwarted at the Battle of the

¹ In a similar way, after the Second World War, enemy propagandists such as 'Lord Haw-Haw' were executed by the Allies.

Trench. Following this the Bani Qurayza, a Jewish clan which had secretly conspired with the Quraysh, was besieged by the Muslims and finally surrendered. Although the charge against them was that of high treason, they were offered Islam and five accepted, three having known al-Hayyaban in their childhoods. The Prophet (upon him be peace) then received a deputation from the clan of Aws asking for clemency for these Jews who were former allies. 'Will it satisfy you, men of Aws, if one of yourselves pronounce judgement on them?' he asked, and they agreed. Sa'd ibn Mu'adh, their chief and Qurayza's traditional ally, was appointed, and the Prophet formally agreed to be bound by his decision. After hearing the evidence, Sa'd elected to follow ancient Jewish practice (Deuteronomy, 20:12): that the men should be executed for high treason. On hearing this the Prophet (upon him be peace) said: 'Thou hast judged with the judgement of God from above the seven heavens,' apparently referring to the Biblical decree; however after Sa'd's death, he said that Sa'd had been punished in his grave, before God forgave him. Huyayy, one of the estimated seven hundred executed, said to the Prophet (upon him be peace) before his death: 'I blame not myself for having opposed thee, but whoso forsaketh God, the same shall be forsaken', which was perhaps a way of saying that in the eyes of God either you or we are wrong.

It is important to note that, though stern retribution is permitted, and was the norm of the age, this was rarely the choice of the Messenger (upon him be peace). The law was applied when the threat was to the Muslim community as a whole or to its allies, but when only the Holy Prophet was endangered, he frequently waived any punishment. In this way, in another instance of an attempt being made on the life of the Prophet (upon him be peace), when magic was used by Labid, a Jewish resident of Madina (undone, literally, by the recitation of the last two Suras of the Qur'an), the Prophet forgave him. Nor was any action taken against the Jewish woman who poisoned the Prophet after the Muslim

victory at Khaybar, which was the last confrontation between the Muslims and Jews in Arabia. The Prophet simply forgave her.

Khaybar itself presents many of the distinctive features of other Muslim-Jewish confrontations. The Jews were numerically superior and confident of victory: their fortifications at Khaybar were regarded as impregnable. However, they argued among themselves, and were let down by the failure of promised reinforcements to appear. As the Qur'an says: 'Ill feeling is rife amongst them. Thou countest them as one whole, but their hearts are divided.' (59:14) The Muslims, by contrast, fought 'in ranks as if they were a close-built block' (61:4) and took one fortress after another. In defeat it was agreed that the Jews would go into exile—there was no execution for treason—but this time they would leave without possessions (as many recalled the over-proud display of before). The Prophet (upon him be peace) added the further clause that anyone found violating these conditions would be executed. Kinanah, the Jewish chief agreed.

It seems that the prevailing attitude among the Jews was that they were defeated, and that the Prophet (upon him be peace) really was who he said he was. However, they insisted on following only Moses and the Torah, and the Prophet (upon whom be peace) supported them in doing so. Their crimes were political, not religious. Nonetheless, the leader of the Jews, Kinanah, insisted on trying to conceal his riches, angrily dismissing the counsel of his own people. This seems to have been a suicidal form of pride, and indeed he was discovered and executed.

However there was no general expulsion of Jews. Following Khaybar, the Prophet (upon him be peace) allowed some of the Jewish date farmers to stay, on the understanding that if he later ordered them to leave, they would do so (and this, in fact, happened). Two further Jewish settlements at Fadak and Wadi l-Qura, which had been in league with Khaybar, were also sent into exile, but

following Tabuk, the Prophet (upon him be peace) made a treaty with the Jewish and Christian settlements to the north of Arabia in the Aqaba region that gave them protection and religious inviolability.

This final act shows that there was no general policy of hostility, nor any malice, in the Prophet's treatment of the Jews. As far as events of that time went, the Jews were enemies as long as they behaved as such. Their punishment was for their crimes or actions, not for their religion.

★ ★ ★

That the Prophet ﷺ was not troubled by the Jews was because he was able to rise above their hatred of him. After all, he had literally risen above their holy city. Muhammad (upon him be peace) and Jerusalem are intimately connected for two reasons. Firstly, Jerusalem had served as the direction of prayer, the *qibla*, for all Muslims until the first year of the *Hijra*, 622, twelve years after Muhammad's prophethood began. Then the Prophet received a revelation that changed it to the Ka'ba in Mecca. This did not take place, however, until one year after the second most significant night in the history of Islam: the night of the *Isra'*, the Night Journey to Jerusalem. So Jerusalem was central, then superseded as the centre, but it nonetheless remained, and remains, a place of profound importance for Muslims, for whom it is the third holiest place on earth.

Glory to God who did take His Servant for a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Furthest Mosque whose precincts We did bless, in order to show him some of Our Signs: for He is the One Who heareth and seeth all things. (17:1)

The tale is a dramatic one. One night, before the *Hijra* to Madina, the Prophet went to visit the Ka'bah as he often did. While there he felt tired and fell asleep. In a Hadith he tells how Gabriel shook him awake and led him to a winged white beast named Buraq that was part ass and part mule. With Gabriel's guidance they flew to Jerusalem where he was met by a company of Prophets, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus. When he prayed on the site of the Temple they formed a congregation behind him and followed him in prayer. After the prayer he was offered two vessels to drink from, one containing wine, the other milk. He took the milk but left the wine, after which the Archangel said: 'Thou hast been guided unto the path primordial, and hast guided thereunto thy people, O Muhammad, and wine is forbidden you.'

Muhammad (upon him be peace) was then taken from the rock in the centre of the site of the Temple up to the heavens in the same way as Elijah and Jesus before him. As he passed through each of the seven heavens he again saw the Prophets he had prayed with in Jerusalem. He had prayed with them before in their earthly forms but he saw them now in their 'celestial reality,' as Martin Lings describes them in his biography. Joseph had the splendour of the moon at its full, having been given more than half of the existing beauty of the world, and he particularly praised the beauty of Aaron, too. The beauty of the smallest piece of Paradise was better than the whole world, he afterwards recalled, and a woman from Paradise 'would fill the space between Heaven and here below with light and fragrance.'

Above the seven heavens he reached the Divine sphere about which nothing is said except that he reached the 'Lote Tree of the Uttermost End' (*sidrat al-muntaha*). According to a commentary based upon the sayings of the Prophet, the Lote Tree marks the end of all knowledge, whether human or angelic. Beyond is the hidden mystery, the unknown and the unknowable Presence, known to God alone.

When there enshroudeth the Lote Tree that which enshroudeth, the eye wavered not nor did it transgress. Verily he beheld there the greatest of all the signs of his Lord.

(53:16-18)

The Divine Light descended upon the Lote Tree and covered it and everything else, and the Prophet beheld it without looking away. It was here too that Muhammad (upon him be peace) received the command of fifty prayers a day, and also the creed of Islam, which contains the essence of the nature of Prophethood:

The messenger believeth, and the faithful believe, in what hath been revealed unto him from his Lord. Each one believeth in God and His angels and His books and His messengers: We made no distinction between any one of His messengers. And they say: we hear and we obey; grant us, Thou our Lord, Thy forgiveness; unto Thee is the ultimate becoming.

(2:285)

On their descent, the Prophet and the Angel passed the same Prophets. As Muhammad (upon whom be peace) said:

‘On my return, when I passed Musa—and what a good friend he was unto you! —who asked me: ‘How many prayers have been laid upon thee?’ I told him fifty prayers every day and he said: ‘The congregational prayer is a weighty thing, and thy people are weak. Return unto thy Lord, and ask him to lighten the load for thee and thy people.’ So I returned and asked my Lord to make it lighter, and He took away ten. Then I passed Musa again and he repeated what he had said before, so I returned again, and ten more prayers were taken from me. But every time I returned unto Musa he sent me back until finally all the prayers had been taken from me except five

for each day and night. Then I returned unto Musa, but still he said the same as before, and I said: 'I have returned unto my Lord and asked him till I am ashamed. I will not go again.' And so it is that he who performeth the five in good faith and in trust of God's bounty, unto him shall be given the meed of fifty prayers.'

(Ibn Ishaq)

When they had made their return to the Rock—tradition has it that there is a footprint there still—they returned to Mecca by the same route, arriving back beside the Ka'ba the same night. The Prophet returned to the house of his cousin where he had been staying and, after leading them in the dawn prayer, told the household where he had been. At this stage, the Prophet had many enemies among the leaders of Meccan society, the family of the Quraysh, so his cousin implored him to tell no-one of what had happened because it would lead to even greater persecution of him and his community. Perhaps there was a hint here that she doubted him in some way; but the Prophet's response was to say: 'By God, I will tell them.'

As his cousin had feared, many of the Quraysh were delighted with the news, because to them it proved finally that Muhammad (upon him be peace) was indeed mad. They all knew full well that it took a month at least to travel to Jerusalem. With mischievous intent, some men went to see Abu Bakr, one of the first, and certainly one of the most respected, converts to Islam, and they asked him what he thought. Suspecting a trick he at first accused them of lying, but they assured him that he was in the Mosque at that very moment speaking about the journey. In an instant Abu Bakr showed the trust that he felt for the Prophet by retorting: 'If he so saith, then it is true. And what is so surprising about it anyway? He telleth me that Tidings come to him from Heaven to earth in one hour of the day or night, and I know him to be speaking the truth. And that is beyond what you joke at.' (Ibn Ishaq)

God knows how important this public expression of belief at this time was, and Abu Bakr sensed that it was, for he went to the Mosque to repeat his words: 'If so he saith, it is true.' Because of this the Prophet gave Abu Bakr the name *as-Siddiq*, which means 'the great confirmer, or witness, of the truth'.

The obvious mocking response to the story began to look shakier still over the coming days because, in the course of its telling, the Prophet would describe the camel caravans he had overtaken on the way, predicting when they would arrive in Mecca. When they duly started to arrive as predicted and as described, any disbelief or lack of faith seemed unfounded. At first the Prophet only told Abu Bakr and his close Companions of the ascent into heaven, confining his public telling to the actual journey itself but over the coming years people learned more of the details. This was often in response to questions, questions that would indicate a readiness to hear answers that, if they had been told initially in the story, would have been too hard to take in all at once.

This event gave a transcendent dimension to the Prophet's Message, a connection with the chain of Prophets and the importance of this other Holy City and this other Holy Land. But the return to Mecca emphasised that our closest earthly proximity to God lay in the Abrahamic city beyond Jerusalem. The return metaphorically put Jerusalem behind Muhammad (upon him be peace), who now had to focus on his increasingly insecure position in Mecca and on protecting what, with God's grace, he had created. And it was because of this that Muhammad (upon him be peace) and his followers made the *Hijra*, the migration, to al-Madina formerly the city of Yathrib, the City of Light (*al-Madina al-Munawwara*), most commonly known simply as Madina.

It was here that Muhammad (upon whom be peace) was to put Jerusalem behind him literally as well as metaphorically. The City was still revered, but it was part of a revered past when the message of One God, *Allah*, had

been the primary responsibility of one people. Muslims would now look to the future and to Mecca, the centre of the universal faith, while acknowledging the sanctity of the past and of Jerusalem, the centre of the particularist Judaic faiths. Since the time of Jacob, the worship of One God had been carried most visibly by the Children of Israel, who were Ishaq's line, and then by their self-proclaimed successors, the new 'Children of Israel', the Christians. Through God's will they had, respectively, been expelled twice from the Holy Land for failing to live according to the Laws of God, and created a religion that, for all its goodness and love for the 'heart' of Jesus, was, with its Trinity and its veneration of graven images of Jesus and Mary, a veil between human beings and the direct experience of God. With patience, the line of Isma'il would now step forward and take its place, sealing the city's epic story.

Until this time, the Prophet had always taken great care to face the correct direction when praying. When he had been in the Mosque in Mecca he had faced the direction of the *Mihrab*, the prayer-niche, in the Jerusalem wall, and had set his direction by sun or stars when outside. Now, after the Hijra, living in Madina and on the eve of hostilities with the pagan city which had driven him out, the centrality of that place, rebuilt centuries ago by Isma'il and his father Ibrahim, was confirmed by a Revelation:

We have seen the turning of thy face unto the sky; and
 now We shall turn thee a way that shall well please thee.
 So turn thou thy face towards the Inviolable Mosque;
 and wheresoever ye may be, turn ye your faces towards
 it.

(2:144)