

Lesson: Muhammad's Night Journey

This lesson is accompanied by a handout,
Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art.

Essential Questions: What is the meaning and significance of prophethood in Islam? How is Muhammad's Night Journey important to the Islamic concept of prophethood? How did Muslim artists depict experiences transcending the realm of everyday life?

Learning Experience: Students will deepen their understanding of Islam by evaluating a painting depicting Muhammad's famous Night Journey.

Anticipatory Set: For thousands of years the visual arts have taken people to places where they are normally unable to go and have allowed them to see things they are normally unable to see. Have films, television, and video games made painting and other kinds of visual art obsolete?

Context: Around the year 621 when the early Muslim community was suffering great hardship in Mecca, Muhammad went on a miraculous Night Journey. First he traveled from Mecca to the [Al-Aqsa mosque](#) ("The Farthest Mosque") in Jerusalem. (This became the third holiest site in Islam and is part of al-Haram al-Sharif—"Noble Sanctuary"—in the Old City.) He then ascended to heaven from the [Dome of the Rock](#), also in al-Haram al-Sharif. The rock covered by the dome is believed to be the place where the heavenly journey began. A passage in the Qur'an alludes to this event:

Glory be to Him, who carried His servant by night from the [Holy Mosque](#) to the Farthest 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 (Qur'an 17: 1).

The trip to Jerusalem is called "*Isra*" (Arabic for "night journey"), the ascent to heaven is called "*Miraj*" ("ladder"). The Night Journey is important because "there was no event in the Prophet's life that had so triumphantly indicated his claim to be 'the Apostle of God and the seal of the Prophets'" (Qur'an 18: 110, 41: 5) (Arnold 1965: 120).

The combined *isra-miraj* story, a tale indicating Muhammad's superior status among all the prophets of the Abrahamic faiths [Judaism, Christianity, Islam], his ability to receive revelations from God, and his witnessing of events in the hereafter has occupied a key position in Islamic religious and biographical literature (www: Gruber 2008: 251).

Over the centuries there has been much debate as to whether the journey was physical or spiritual, nevertheless

Sunni orthodoxy maintains that both the night journey and the celestial ascent took place physically and in a state of full consciousness. This interpretation establishes the exclusive and miraculous nature of the prophetic *miraj*. . . if the Prophet had not been physically transported, and moreover in an awakened state, this event would not furnish proof of his prophetic mission (www: Amir-Moezzi 2010).

There are many versions of this story and there is disagreement concerning details, but the basic events are as follows:

- Muhammad was visited by the angel [Gabriel](#) who “had green wings which covered the east and the west. Upon his head was a crown inlaid with pearls and jewels. Written on the front was, ‘There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God’” (Calder 2006: 20).
- Gabriel was leading Buraq, “a beast unlike any other, something between a donkey and a mule. It had a face like that of a human and its body was that of a horse. It was a finer beast than any other on earth” (Calder 2006: 21).
- The night journey to Jerusalem.
- As a kind of initiation, Gabriel offered Muhammad three drinks: milk, wine, and water. Muhammad took the milk. He drank all of it.

“Gabriel said to me, “You took all of the natural disposition which is Islam. If you had taken the wine, your community would have gone astray. If you had taken the water, your community would have drowned. Since you drank all of the milk, no one from your community will enter the fire” (Calder 2006: 21).

- Muhammad ascended and saw the seven heavens, paradise and hell. He met many of the prophets (Abraham, Moses, and Jesus are the most frequently mentioned) and talked to God. God said “I have placed a religious duty on you and your community of fifty prayers every day and every night.” Muhammad said, “We hear and we obey” (Calder 2006: 24).
- Moses repeatedly [advised](#) Muhammad to go back and implore God to reduce the number of prayers: “Return and ask Him to lighten this for your community, the final community of time. Their bodies are frail and their lives are short” (Calder 2006: 25). God obligingly reduced the prayers from fifty to five. The five daily prayers, of course, are still a pillar of Islam.
- Muhammad returned to the world (Calder 2006: 19). Upon his return to Mecca, he was questioned about the journey. His answers (such as describing Jerusalem accurately) caused some of his adversaries to accept Islam.

The seventeenth-century Indian painting studied in this lesson is one of many depicting the beginning of Muhammad’s ascent. In Iran and Ottoman Anatolia such paintings appeared in the prefaces to poetry collections and romances.

These compositions most often function as pictorial eulogies to the Prophet, since they depict angels offering platters containing jewels, incense burners, a crown, and flames. . . they depict Muhammad unveiled ascending over the Ka’ba in Mecca (www: Gruber 2009).

Muhammad wears a veil in this Indian work, a practice that only emerged in Iran during the early sixteenth century (www: Gruber 2009). The Golconda sultanate, where this painting originated, was host to many Iranian artists.

Although figurative art existed in Islam from early times, it is almost always

restricted to a private context. Figurative art is excluded from the decoration of religious monuments. This absence may be attributed to an Islamic antipathy toward anything that might be mistaken for idols or idolatry, which are explicitly forbidden by the Qur'an (www: Islamic Art).

The [earliest surviving image](#) (c. 1315) of Muhammad on Buraq is from Iran during the period of Mongol rule (the Ilkhanids, 1256-1335). This work is one of many depicting Muhammad's face.

Studying the Night Journey and its rich world of symbols will help students think about Islam in a more nuanced way. It also provides a key to understanding the profound connections between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the three Abrahamic religions.

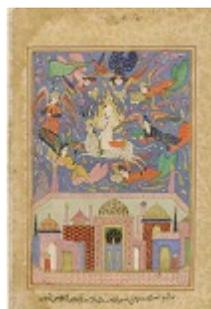
Rationale: Although students frequently know about the Five Pillars, basic facts about the life of Muhammad, and Sunnism and Shi'ism as the major sectarian divisions in Islam, they seldom go into greater depth about how Muslims experience their faith and what symbols and images are important to them.

Time: Three or four forty-minute sessions, depending on how much of the lesson is assigned as homework.

Instructional Resources: Painting of "The Prophet Muhammad's Night Ride on Buraq and the Aqsa Mosque"; handouts: *Fact Sheet: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (there is also a teacher key); "Worksheet: Prophets"; *Visual Analysis: Four Steps Toward Critically Thinking About Art*.

The observations below are meant to be a partial teacher's guide.

"The Prophet Muhammad's Night Ride on Buraq and the Aqsa Mosque"
India, Golconda, Deccan
c. 1610-1630
(KHAL.2006.0024)



(A) The Prophet's Night Journey Iran, Tabriz, Safavid 1539-1543	(B) The Prophet's Night Journey Iran, Safavid 1548
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- The Deccan is a plateau in central India. When this painting was made it was ruled by the Muslim Golconda Sultanate (1518-1687).
- This work shows the influence of [Hindu painting](#) styles, especially in the way the buildings are rendered.
- Muhammad is accompanied by a host of angels. In heaven he also encounters many thousands of them. In Islam, angels are made of light. The angel following Buraq is holding a case that probably contains the Qur'an.
- Gabriel (Jibril) is the most important of the angels. In both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament he is a messenger of God. In Islam he was responsible for revealing the Qur'an to Muhammad. In this painting Gabriel is holding a banner and going just ahead of Buraq.
- [Buddhist images](#) are believed to have inspired the type of flaming halo surrounding Muhammad's head. Also, [apsaras](#), celestial beings in Buddhism and Hinduism, may have influenced the way Islamic artists rendered angels. The Prophet's halo is called the "light of Muhammad." Some sources say "whenever he went in darkness, [the Prophet] had light shining around him like the moonlight" (www: Gruber 2008: 303-304).
- Buraq is related to the [sphinx-like](#) creatures frequently depicted in Islamic art. [This image](#) of Buraq, also from Golconda, depicts her as a [composite creature](#) made up of an elephant, fish, birds, and other animals.
- Notice the green in all three paintings (Muhammad's clothing, Gabriel's banner in the Deccan work, the angel's garments). Green is the color of

life-giving water and of the plants that appear as signs of life. It can therefore be legitimately connected with resurrection or paradise, where the blessed rest on green pillows and wear green silk. "The ones who wear the green". . .are either the inhabitants of paradise and the spiritual world or the angels who convey good tidings to human beings (www: Schimmel 2009).

- In comparison painting (A) Muhammad and the angels soar above a sea of Chinese-style clouds. At lower right the earth, surrounded by a halo of mist, recedes in the distance. The Prophet doesn't wear a veil in this work. The background of painting (B) is entirely covered with similar cloud-scrolls in gold. It looks much like a carpet. How do the cloud scrolls in the Deccan painting differ from those in (A) and (B)?

Procedure: The lesson has two parts: The first is on basic facts about Islam, the second discusses the painting. Depending on time constraints, some parts of the lesson can be done as homework.

(1)

- Hand out the “*Fact Sheet: Judaism, Christianity, Islam.*” Have students work in groups and fill in information about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and then do the vocabulary. Have one reporter from each group circulate to the other groups to compare responses and check with her original group to see that all have accurate information.
- In full class discussion, have students discuss all they know about Islam with the teacher writing on the board. What questions do they still have about Islam?
- In small groups have each group compose a story about what they know. Each group then shares with the entire class their interpretation of the story of Islam.
- Give each student the prophets worksheet. Have them read the definitions, the passages from the Qur’an, and the passages about Muhammad either out loud or silently. Have each student answer the questions and have a full class discussion of their responses.

(2)

“The Prophet Muhammad’s Night Ride on Buraq and the Aqsa Mosque”

- Give each student a visual analysis worksheet. Of the seven design elements, do some stand out as more important than others? Can you make a general statement with respect to the design issues that the creators of these works regarded as important?
- Study the basic artistic principles—balance, unity, emphasis, contrast, pattern, movement, and rhythm in terms of the two paintings. Do some of these principles stand out as more important than others? Can you make a general statement with respect to the artistic principles that the creators of these works thought important?
- Have students read, all or in part, one of the three accounts of the Night Journey (below). The longer ones are filled with interesting detail, perhaps they can be divided up.

["Hadith of the Night Journey and Ascension"](#) This version, abridged from the next reading, is the shortest and least detailed of these three accounts. (From *The Online Guide to Al-Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem*.)

["Night Journey of the Messenger"](#) This narrative is from *Sahih Muslim*, one of the six major collections of *hadith* in Sunni Islam. *Hadith* relate the acts and sayings of Muhammad. Students have to scroll down to Ch. 75. Sections 309 and 314 have long accounts of the Night Journey. (From the International Islamic University of Malaysia.)

["The Collated Hadith of Isra' and Mi'raj"](#) This version is long and adds commentary by various scholars. Unlike the other two selections, it also tells about Muhammad’s return to Mecca. (From the As-Sunnah Foundation of America.)

(Also, Norman Calder’s *Classical Islam—A Sourcebook of Religious Literature* translates an influential early account of the Night Journey on pp. 19-26.)

- Questions: Why is this ride important to Muslims? Was this experience a dream or reality? How does it connect to Judaism and Christianity?

Whole Group Reflection: Have students gather all their information and compile a list of what they have learned, what they would like to research further, and how their ideas about Islam have changed or been confirmed. In a full class discussion, have students explain how the art enhanced their learning.

Instructional Modification: Students can write a short paragraph for each painting explaining what they have learned from each.

Application: Students can research other miraculous/mystical journeys in world religions.

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