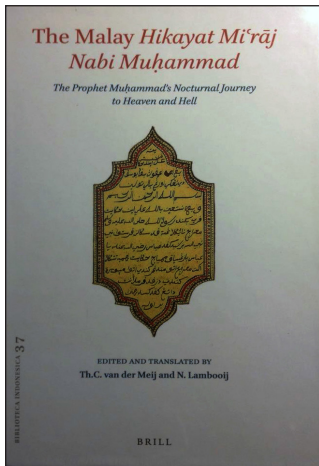


Dick van der Meij and N. Lamboij (eds), with the assistance of Oman Fathurachman, *The Malay Hikayat Mi'raj Nabi Muhammad; The prophet Muhammad's nocturnal journey to Heaven and hell: text and translation [from the Malay] of Cod. Or. 1713 in the Library of Leiden University*. Leiden: Brill, 2014, x + 210 pp. [Bibliotheca Indonesica 37.] ISBN 9789004277618. Price: EUR 98.00 (hard cover).



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The ascension of the Prophet Muhammad to Heaven (*mi'raj*, Ar. *mi'rāj*) is an event Muslims believe occurred during Muhammad's own lifetime, and it was an intrinsic part of his prophetic missions. Malay-Indonesian Muslims refer to this event as *Isra Mi'raj*, encapsulating Muhammad's journey to Jerusalem (*Isra*) from where was borne to Heaven (*Mi'raj*). Some ritual activities are still observed to

commemorate the event, which falls on 27 Rajab in the Islamic calendar. In fact, in Indonesia, this day is deemed so important that it has become one of the Islam-oriented national holidays. The greatest significance of the *Isra Miraj* for Muslims is that it was during the period of his ascension to Heaven that the Prophet Muhammad received instructions to perform the prayers performed five-times a day (*shalat*), one of the five basic pillars of Islam.

As touched upon briefly in the book under the review, issues arising from the story of *Isra Mi'raj* are still a significant component in the Islamic learning taught in *pesantren* (traditional Islamic schools) and they have also been dealt with quite extensively in recent Islamic printed materials. In a large number areas in Indonesia, many published versions - in a variety of local languages and scripts - of the story of the Prophet Muhammad's *Isra Mi'raj* - have appeared to take their place alongside the Islamic book (*kitab*) *Sharḥ Qiṣṣah al-Mi'raj* (Explanation of the *Qiṣṣah al-Mi'raj*) by al-Dardīr which is still used in *pesantren*.

This book is a study of a Malay *hikayat* which presents the story of the said journey of the Prophet Muhammad. As a philological study, it is based on a manuscript kept in Leiden University Library (Cod. Or. 1713), entitled *Hikayat M'iraj Nabi Muhammad*, and the authors claim is "one rather early Malay version of the text" (p. 7). Written in the Malay language in Jawi script, this 114-page manuscript contains some indications that it was once the property of the *Delftse Akademie* before this institution was transferred to Leiden and

incorporated into the university. The transcription of the manuscript is presented in Part 2 of the book, followed by the English translation in Part 3. Some information on the distribution and circulation of the manuscripts in Indonesia is provided in the Appendix.

As the title suggests, the ascension to Heaven of the Prophet Muhammad is the principal content of the manuscript. "This is the story of the ascent to heaven of the Messenger of Allah", so the text begins. It continues by stressing the benefits to those who either read or listen to the story in the text. Mentioning a *hadith* transmitted to Ibn Abbas *radiyallahu 'anhu*, the text states: "Whoever reads my story of my ascent, or listens to it, or writes it down from start to finish, will attain the favor of Allah the Highest and all his sins will be forgiven by Allah the Highest. He will be much like a tree that has shed all its leaves from its twigs and not one of them will remain. In the same way all his sins will have dropped from his body" (p. 113).

The text goes into detail about the process through which the Prophet Muhammad was invited to enter the abode of God (Allah) in Heaven and permitted to appear in His presence. The action begins with the visit to the Prophet Muhammad of the angels Jibra'il and Mika'il bearing a command from Allah. Bringing with them the best *burak* - a mythical winged steed which could fly and would bear the Prophet Muhammad to Heaven- the angels (Jibra'il and Mika'il) convey the summons and escort the Prophet Muhammad, first to Jerusalem and then to Heaven. In the course of his journey, the text depicts the spiritual experiences Muhammad underwent. After having met three prophets of Allah - Ibrahim, Musa, and Isa - in Jerusalem, he continues his journey upwards to ascend into Heaven. In each level of Heaven, seven in number, Muhammad is subjected to different experiences, at the outcomes of his observations of and even physical contact with its inhabitants. Besides meeting the prophets of Allah and the angels, Muhammad also sees the people in hell who are being tortured the sins they had committed during their lives on earth.

However, the climax of the journey is what Muhammad experiences as he enters the abode of Allah in Heaven. This text describes the event beginning with the statement: "Then I heard the wonderful voice of Allah - the Highest. It was indeed very melodious and mysterious and it said, 'Oh, My beloved Muhammad. To me you are the dearest of all. Lift your head from prostration'". The text continues with the words of Allah, "O Muhammad. Do you see any name of the prophets written alongside My names on My walls, but yours?" (p. 147). It is obvious that in this description the aim of the text is to emphasize the very close relationship between the Prophet Muhammad and Allah, a bond much greater than that of any of the other prophets. In another segment, the text depicts this relationship with the following statement: "That is My secret for you Muhammad. Although there are many others among My prophets whom I am very fond, only with you is there no distance between us" (p. 149). This statement reminds us of the spiritual unity between the Prophet Muhammad and Allah, which was later adopted by Sufism as its

central doctrine. Therefore, Allah not only invites Muhammad to "come inside My walls", He also grants him permission "to sit down in My chair" (p. 147).

The *mi'raj* of Muhammad is viewed by many scholars (*ulama*) as a spiritual journey. The process of his ascension is believed to have been a progression through spiritual stages which ends in the final and the highest stage as he enters the abode of Allah. Besides all these points described above, the spiritual aspect of the *mi'raj* can also be discerned in the fact that the text describes Muhammad's encounter with Allah in the form of a light (*cahaya*). "It was there", the text states, "that I saw the Light of Allah and I saw His sparkling radiance and I saw the flashing and everything was glittering. The beams were shining and sparkling but they did not go anywhere. They all returned to the Light of Allah - the Highest - which is the ultimate brightness". The text then relates, "I [Muhammad] felt completely at ease (*maha luas*) and enlightened (*amat terang*)" (p. 148).

In the context of the Malay-Indonesian world, it goes without saying that this spiritual dimension has a special significance. As the editors of the text demonstrate, the idea of Islamic spirituality or Sufism has been an important public discourse in the Islamic intellectual tradition in Malay-Indonesia. Therefore, perhaps for this reason, the ideas in the text of the *Mi'raj Nabi Muhammad* are still very much alive in various forms of Islamic publications in Indonesia today. Muslims in the area are still convinced that the story of the *mi'raj* of the Prophet Muhammad is the one which should be transmitted to the younger generation. This book makes a great contribution to this aspiration, because it provides us with an older written form of the *mi'raj* story which might be the actual source of the same story which has continued to be revered up to the present.

What is still missing, albeit outside of the scope of the philological study, is a comparison between this older text and those more recently circulated and with the extant oral tradition still very much alive among Muslims in Malay-Indonesia. A point for the agenda of future research.