

Two ascension stories

When the Ascension coincides with *Lailat al-Mi'rāj*, perhaps Christians and Muslims can spare a sidelong glance.

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [May 13, 2015](#) issue



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As I write this, it is Palm Sunday. Christ has entered Jerusalem on a donkey. A strange king, this, who makes his triumphal procession only to be anointed with death—and a strangely privileged donkey. Augustine says we should all wish to be Christ's donkey, carrying Christ, a weight that exalts and a burden that sets free, into every situation. A rarely sung verse of the "All Glory, Laud and Honor" processional hymn for Palm Sunday echoes this point: *Sis pius ascensor tu, nos quoque simus asellus* . . . ("Be thou, O Lord, the Rider, / And we the little ass: / That to God's holy city / Together we may pass.")

As you read this it is Ascension Thursday, or thereabouts. Christ has entered the heavenly Jerusalem, ascending by means of a divine cloud rather than a humble donkey. The disciples who watch him disappear are understandably awestruck. Two men in white robes—angels, who are always on hand for revelatory events—rebuke them: Why are you standing there staring stupidly at the sky?

The Feast of the Ascension is overshadowed by Easter, which it fulfills, and Pentecost, which it anticipates. But a case could be made that when the disciples caught their last sight, then lost sight, of the living God (a moment touchingly portrayed in Christian art as two departing feet just visible beneath the cloud), both Christianity and its rebel child atheism were born. Doubters and believers alike, we are left staring stupidly at the sky.

In the Wakefield mystery play for the Feast of the Ascension, the apostle Philip calls out to Christ: “Lord, if it be thi will, / shew vs thi fader we the pray; / we have bene with the in good and ill, / and sagh hym neuer nyght ne day.” To which Jesus points out that whoever sees him sees the Father—but a moment later Jesus is gone, and Mary keens, “All myghty god, how may this be? / a clowde has borne my childe to blys; / Now bot that I wote [know] wheder is he, / my hart wold breke, well wote I this.”

If it is fitting for the disciples and Mary, it is fitting for us to be puzzled by the ascension. As John Henry Newman puts it in an Ascension Day sermon, “This, indeed, is our state at present; we have lost Christ and we have found Him; we see Him not, yet we discern Him.” There are no footprints in the sky, but, as Newman says, the ascension of Christ “is a sure token that heaven is a certain fixed place, and not a mere state.” By the same token, the ascension means that embodied human nature—Christ’s donkey—has a place in heaven. However strange a picture, however stupidly it causes us to stare at the sky, Christ’s promise to prepare a place for his members means nothing less than this: a future life in which, as Dylan Thomas puts it, we “shall have stars at elbow and foot”—and the whole universe (or multiverse, if you prefer) will reveal its secrets, confess its lord, and give us welcome. Hard to believe? The idea was no more probable for ancient science than it is for modern; yet with a robust view of the Creator’s authority over creation, it is just barely conceivable.

This year, Ascension Thursday nearly coincides with its Islamic counterpart, *Lailat al-Mi’rāj*—the festival of the night journey (*isrā’*) and heavenly ascension (*mi’rāj*, literally “ladder”) of the Prophet Muhammad—which begins at sundown on Friday. On this night, according to tradition, the Prophet was miraculously conveyed from Mecca to Jerusalem (Qur’an 17:1); from there, with the angel Gabriel as his escort, he ascended upon the winged steed Burāq to the seven heavens and the throne of God. My son John has shared with me an account, in the 15th-century Turkish poem *Mevlid-i Şerif* (“Noble Birth”), in which Burāq, though a creature of paradise, wastes

away with longing to meet the Prophet and bear his weight. Persian and Turkish miniatures show Burāq with a human face, his longing fulfilled, and Muhammad with a face wreathed in holy fire, outshining even Gabriel. At each heaven, Muhammad is greeted by the prophets who preceded him, beginning with Adam and including Jesus, Moses, and Abraham; in the heaven of heavens, he has an audience with God. For believers, the whole journey confirms Muhammad's status as the "seal of the prophets" and the supremely beautiful model for believers to follow; no joy could be greater than to be a beast of burden for such a messenger.

Christ's donkey, meet Muhammad's steed. The two ascension narratives have profoundly different implications; yet in these days when Muslims and Christians alike raise their eyes to heaven, perhaps we can spare a sidelong glance—acknowledging a common wish to bear the weight of loving service, and a common trust in God's promise to prepare a place for those who love him.