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Jacob's Ladder: Sa'ī

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Biographies

Abdulla Galadari is a Research Fellow at Al-Maktoum College and an Assistant Professor at Khalifa University. He has a PhD in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Aberdeen. His main research is in intertextual hermeneutics between the Qur'an and other scriptures.

Abstract

This paper looks at the symbolism of the traversing between the hills of Şafa and Marwah (*sa ʿ*) from the traditional Muslim stories pertaining to it, and its intertextualities with the Bible. A linguistic method is used to understand how the Qur'an uses polysemy in its language to symbolize some of its rituals. It is shown that the term "*sa ʿ*" in the Qur'an is used to symbolize the traversing between death and life. This symbolism is compared with Jacob's Ladder in Genesis, as Jacob sees the angels ascending and descending from heaven in a location that he later calls Bethel (House of God), which incidentally is what Muslims consider the Ka'bah. The pilgrims, during 'Umrah, may be symbolizing the angels ascending unto heaven, while the pilgrims, during Ḥajj, may be symbolizing the angels descending from heaven.

Introduction

The pilgrim wearing the "*iḥrām*" represents a funeral shroud, as the pilgrimage illustrates the soul's journey from death into life. Traversing between the hills of Şafa and Marwah is one of the pillars of the ritual of the major and minor pilgrimages (Ḥajj & 'Umrah) in Islam. Although early Muslim historians have associated this ritual with pre-Islamic Arabian culture, and the search for water by Hagar for her son Ishmael, this paper suggests the additional possible association is with Jacob's Ladder in Genesis.

Methodology

The hermeneutics method is based on a linguistic approach through the critical Arabic definitions of the words used for the ritual of traversing between Şafa and Marwah. This method is known as intertextual polysemy. These words are defined from the root word and compared to its other usages within the Qur'an, as well as in other Scriptures, such as the Hebrew Bible. After the

meaning of the root word is established, it is then analysed accordingly. To ensure that lost meanings have not been forgotten over time, a comparison of other Semitic words for the definitions are also analysed, as in Hebrew and Aramaic.

Linking different verses of the Qur'an that describe the rituals to each other is the main focus of this research. A literature review of scholarly work may be looked at as a base of comparison.

Emigration to God

According to Islamic tradition, traversing between the hills of Şafa and Marwah is a re-enactment of Hagar's search for water to quench the thirst of her dying child, Ishmael. This happened when Abraham left Hagar and his son Ishmael in the barren desert (Al-Ṭabarī, 2000, 17: 19-20).

According to the Book of Genesis, God commanded Abraham to leave Hagar and his son Ishmael in a barren desert, upon the request of his wife Sarah (i.e. Genesis 21:8-21). This is not dissimilar to a previous commandment that God asked Abraham to leave his country, people, and father's household to move to another land (i.e. Genesis 12:1). Such a commandment would become an embodiment of leaving everything behind (*hājar*) for the sake of God.

The root of the name Hagar (*hjr*) means to emigrate, to leave, and to abandon (Ibn Manẓūr, n.d., 13: 250-257). As such, traversing the hills of Şafa and Marwah by the pilgrim wearing a funeral shroud (*iḥrām*) is representing a dead soul that is abandoning the earthly world and emigrating (*hājar*) to God to seek the Water of Life, as Hagar searched for water. Noteworthy to state, Hagar did not seek water for herself, but for her son. This might represent the dead pilgrim to abandon (*hajr*) his ego by not seeking a drink of the Water of Life for himself, but to bring it down to all other dead and dying souls. While looking at a Jungian interpretation of the pilgrimage, Kazemian illustrates the symbology of the Zamzam water and the traversing of the pilgrim between the hills of Şafa and Marwah as also a search for the Water of Life (Kazemian, 2008, 57).

There are interesting linkages between Şafa and Marwah, which symbolizes a heavenly ladder, with Jacob's ladder mentioned in Genesis. In his vision, Jacob sees the angels of God ascending and descending on a ladder to heaven. This seems to be a similar depiction of Şafa and Marwah, as pilgrims traverse between them seven times, representing the seven heaven. They ascend to the

heavens while in “*iḥrām*” (funeral shroud) during “*sa‘ī*” of ‘Umrah and descend from it while not in “*iḥrām*” (funeral shroud) during *sa‘ī* of Ḥajj.

The vision that Jacob sees can also be likened to the ascension of Muḥammad during the Night Journey, when he traversed up the heavens and then came back down. Jacob calls the place where he saw the vision Bethel, which literally means the House of God in Hebrew (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, 2000, 110-111). Jacob continues to say that it is God who will provide him with food, using the word “*lḥm*,” which means bread or flesh. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which literally means the House of Bread or Flesh. Such a parallelism with Jesus could be interesting, as the Gospels show Jesus symbolizing his body as the Temple of God in flesh (i.e. John 2:21) and also alluding to himself as Jacob’s Ladder (i.e. John 1:51).

According to Deuteronomy, it is prohibited to erect a stone pillar (i.e. Deuteronomy 16:22). Nonetheless, Jacob does it. Furthermore, Jacob calls the place Bethel, which is etymologically similar to the Semitic word Baetylus (Bethel) (Moore, 1903), which is a name for a sacred stone believed to be the place where God abides. Ancient Semites anointed Baetylias with oil as well and, therefore, Jacob has done nothing different from the Semitic culture at the time. Joshua also erects a stone pillar under an oak in violation of Deuteronomy (i.e. Joshua 24:26-27), and medieval Jewish commentators had difficulty rationalizing Joshua’s action (Sperling, 1987).

The word for stone shares the same root as son (*ibn*). Hence, Jacob sets the stone (son or *ibn*) as a pillar for the Temple of God. When applying Christian typology, the stone (*ibn*) that Joshua places as a witness might be an allusion to Jesus as the Son (*ibn*) of God. When Jesus claimed to be the son (*ibn*), it might simply mean that Jesus is the Temple of God in flesh (i.e. Luke 22:70).

As Jacob’s Ladder represents the heavenly ladder, the root word of Jacob (*Ya‘qūb*) is ‘*aqaba*. This is the same name of the first pillar that is stoned during Ḥajj just before sacrifice (*Jamarat al-‘Aqaba*). Its relationship with Jacob’s Ladder is also understood.

Jacob was later called Israel. The Qur’an describes a heavenly ladder with the word “*ma‘ārij*.” When combined, the root name of Israel and the root name for heavenly ladder is *al-Isrā’* (Israel) *al-Mi‘rāj* (Jacob’s Ladder). This is the name of Muḥammad’s Night Journey and Ascension, which

is described by the rituals of ‘Umrah. *Al-Isrā’ wal-Mi‘rāj* is Muḥammad’s Night Journey from Makkah to Jerusalem followed by his ascension to the heavens; as in Jacob’s Ladder.

Although Şafa and Marwah are mentioned only once in the Qur’an as the signs of pilgrimage, both Ḥajj or ‘Umrah, the word “*sa‘ī*” occurs a great many times. In ‘Umrah, the dead soul wearing its funeral shroud performs the “*sa‘ī*” between Şafa and Marwah. Afterwards he shaves or cuts his hair and then removes the funeral shroud, symbolizing resurrection. Qur’an 2:260 alludes to how God brings the dead to life, as the dead soul performing the ‘Umrah becomes resurrected.

When Abraham asks God to show him how He can resurrect the dead, He asks him to take four birds and put a portion of each on every hill. Then, when Abraham calls them, they will fly quickly (*sa‘yā*) to life. Abraham is considered to be the person to have called people to Ḥajj. Hence, when he called people to Ḥajj and as dead souls perform the “*sa‘ī*” between the hills, they become resurrected, just like the birds in Qur’an 2:260.

Conclusion

The term “*sa‘ī*,” which describes the traversing seven times between the hills of Şafa and Marwah symbolizes the pilgrim’s journey, during ‘Umrah, from death to life, as if ascending Jacob’s Ladder above the seven heavens in search for the Water of Life. The same symbolizes the pilgrim’s journey, during the major Ḥajj, bringing down the Water of Life from heaven to earth for others, as if descending Jacob’s Ladder. The ritual of the “*sa‘ī*,” though existed in pre-Islamic Arabia, does have connotations and allusions to the Judeo-Christian milieu, which exists within the backdrop of the Semitic people in the Ancient Near East.

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