

Roads to Paradise

Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam

VOLUME 2

Continuity and Change
*The Plurality of Eschatological Representations
in the Islamic World*

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BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

Contents

VOLUME 1

Foundations and Formation of a Tradition: *Reflections on the Hereafter in the Quran and Islamic Religious Thought*

Zum Geleit xv
Josef van Ess

Acknowledgments xxvi
List of Illustrations xxix
Note on Transliteration and Style xxxii
Abbreviations xxxiv
List of Contributors xxxvii

1 Introduction 1
Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY – CONFERENCE OPENING ADDRESSES *The Paths to Reality are as Diverse as the Souls of Humanity*

2 Paradise Lost 31
Tilman Nagel

3 The Path to Paradise from an Islamic Viewpoint 39
Mahmoud Zakzouk

PART 1 *Paradise, Hell, and Afterlife in the Quran and Quranic Exegesis*

4 Quranic Paradise: How to Get to Paradise and What to Expect There 49
Muhammad Abdel Haleem

- 5 **Paradise as a Quranic Discourse: Late Antique Foundations and Early Quranic Developments** 67
Angelika Neuwirth
- 6 **Paradise in the Quran and the Music of Apocalypse** 93
Todd Lawson
- 7 **Paradise and Nature in the Quran and Pre-Islamic Poetry** 136
Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila
- 8 **Dying in the Path of God: Reading Martyrdom and Moral Excellence in the Quran** 162
Asma Afsaruddin
- 9 **The Poetics of Islamic Eschatology: Narrative, Personification, and Colors in Muslim Discourse** 181
Sebastian Günther

PART 2

The Pleasures of Paradise

- 10 **“Reclining upon Couches in the Shade” (Q 35:56): Quranic Imagery in Rationalist Exegesis** 221
Andrew J. Lane
- 11 **Delights in Paradise: A Comparative Survey of Heavenly Food and Drink in the Quran** 251
Ailin Qian
- 12 **Strategies for Paradise: Paradise Virgins and Utopia** 271
Maher Jarrar
- 13 **Beauty in the Garden: Aesthetics and the *Wildān*, *Ghilmān*, and *Ḥūr*** 295
Nerina Rustomji

PART 3

The Afterlife in Sunni Tradition and Theology

- 14 “Are Men the Majority in Paradise, or Women?” Constructing Gender and Communal Boundaries in Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj’s (d. 261/875) *Kitāb al-Janna* 311
Aisha Geissinger
- 15 The ‘Eight Gates of Paradise’ Tradition in Islam: A Genealogical and Structural Study 341
Christian Lange
- 16 Temporary Hellfire Punishment and the Making of Sunni Orthodoxy 371
Feras Hamza
- 17 Paradise and Hell in the *Kitāb al-Jihād* of ‘Alī b. Ṭāhir al-Sulamī (d. 500/1106) 407
Niall Christie
- 18 Al-Ghazālī on Resurrection and the Road to Paradise 422
Wilferd Madelung
- 19 Sleepless in Paradise: Lying in State between This World and the Next 428
Dorothee Pielow

PART 4

A Wise Man’s Paradise – Eschatology and Philosophy

- 20 Paradise in Islamic Philosophy 445
Michael E. Marmura
- 21 The Orthodox Conception of the Hereafter: Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī’s (d. 793/1390) Examination of Some Mu’tazilī and Philosophical Objections 468
Thomas Würtz

- 22 'Being-Towards-Resurrection': Mullā Ṣadrā's Critique of Suhrawardī's Eschatology 487
Hermann Landolt
- 23 A Philosopher's Itinerary for the Afterlife: Mullā Ṣadrā on Paths to Felicity 534
Mohammed Rustom

PART 5

The Path beyond this World – Vision and Spiritual Experience of the Hereafter

- 24 Muslim Visuality and the Visibility of Paradise and the World 555
Simon O'Meara
- 25 A Garden beyond the Garden: 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī's Perspective on Paradise 566
Maryam Moazzen
- 26 Beyond Paradise: The Mystical Path to God and the Concept of Martyrdom in 'Aṭṭār's *Conference of the Birds* 579
Katja Föllmer

PART 6

Unity in Variety – Shi'ism and Other Muslim Identities

- 27 "And the Earth will Shine with the Light of its Lord" (Q 39:69): *Qā'im* and *qiyāma* in Shi'i Islam 605
Omid Ghaemmaghami
- 28 Paradise as the Abode of Pure Knowledge: Reconsidering al-Mu'ayyad's "Isma'ili Neoplatonism" 649
Elizabeth Alexandrin
- 29 Notions of Paradise in the Isma'ili Works of Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī 662
S.J. Badakhchani

- 30 **Apocalyptic Rhetoric and the Construction of Authority in Medieval Ismaʿilism** 675
Jamel A. Velji
- 31 **Just a Step away from Paradise: *Barzakh* in the Ahl-i Ḥaqq Teachings** 689
Alexey A. Khismatulin
- 32 **“Paradise is at the Feet of Mothers”: The Ḥurūfī Road** 701
Orkhan Mir-Kasimov
- 33 **Which Road to Paradise? The Controversy of Reincarnation in Islamic Thought** 735
Mohammad Hassan Khalil

VOLUME 2

Continuity and Change: *The Plurality of Eschatological Representations in the Islamicate World*

PART 7

Paradise and Eschatology in Comparative Perspective

- 34 **A Typology of Eschatological Concepts** 757
Fred M. Donner
- 35 **The “World” in its Eschatological Dimension in East-Syrian Synodical Records** 773
Martin Tamcke
- 36 **St. Ephraem the Syrian, the Quran, and the Grapevines of Paradise: An Essay in Comparative Eschatology** 781
Sidney H. Griffith
- 37 **Paradise? America! The Metaphor of Paradise in the Context of the Iraqi-Christian Migration** 806
Martin Tamcke

PART 8

Eschatology and Literature

- 38 The Characteristics of Paradise (*Ṣifat al-Janna*): A Genre of Eschatological Literature in Medieval Islam 817
Waleed Ahmed
- 39 “Roads to Paradise” in *Risālat al-ghufrān* of the Arab Thinker al-Ma‘arrī 850
Mahmoud Hegazi
- 40 Muslim Eschatology and the Ascension of the Prophet Muḥammad: Describing Paradise in *Mi‘rāj* Traditions and Literature 858
Roberto Tottoli
- 41 An Islamic *Paradiso* in a Medieval Christian Poem? Dante’s *Divine Comedy* Revisited 891
Samar Attar
- 42 Paradise, Alexander the Great and the *Arabian Nights*: Some New Insights Based on an Unpublished Manuscript 922
Claudia Ott
- 43 Paradise in an Islamic ‘*Ajā’ib* Work: *The Delight of Onlookers and the Signs for Investigators* of Marī b. Yūsuf al-Karmī (d. 1033/1624) 931
Walid A. Saleh
- 44 Expulsion from Paradise: Granada in Raḍwā ‘Āshūr’s *The Granada Trilogy* (1994–8) and Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995) 953
Suha Kudsieh

PART 9

Bringing Paradise Down to Earth – Aesthetic Representations of the Hereafter

- 45 Madīnat al-Zahrā’, Paradise and the Fatimids 979
Maribel Fierro

- 46 **The *Chār Muḥammad* Inscription, *Shafā'a*, and the Mamluk Qubbat al-Manṣūriyya** 1010
Tehnyat Majeed
- 47 **Visualizing Encounters on the Road to Paradise** 1033
Karin Rührdanz
- 48 **Images of Paradise in Popular Shi'ite Iconography** 1056
Ulrich Marzolph
- 49 **Where is Paradise on Earth? Visual Arts in the Arab World and the Construction of a Mythic Past** 1068
Silvia Naef

PART 10

Heavens and the Hereafter in Scholarship and Natural Sciences

- 50 **The Configuration of the Heavens in Islamic Astronomy** 1083
Ingrid Hehmeyer
- 51 **The Quadrants of *Sharī'a*: The Here and Hereafter as Constitutive of Islamic Law** 1099
Anver M. Emon
- 52 **Perceptions of Paradise in the Writings of Julius Wellhausen, Mark Lidzbarski, and Hans Heinrich Schaeder** 1127
Ludmila Hanisch

PART 11

Paradise Meets Modernity – The Dynamics of Paradise Discourse in the Nineteenth, Twentieth, and Twenty-First Centuries

- 53 **Islam and Paradise are Sheltered under the Shade of Swords: Phallogocentric Fantasies of Paradise in Nineteenth-Century Acehnese War Propaganda and their Lasting Legacy** 1143
Edwin P. Wieringa

- 54 **Eschatology between Reason and Revelation: Death and Resurrection in Modern Islamic Theology** 1187
Umar Ryad
- 55 **Between Science Fiction and Sermon: Eschatological Writings Inspired by Said Nursi** 1222
Martin Riexinger
- 56 **Notions of Paradise and Martyrdom in Contemporary Palestinian Thought** 1267
Liza M. Franke
- 57 **Crisis and the Secular Rhetoric of Islamic Paradise** 1290
Ruth Mas
- Bibliographical Appendix** 1323

Indices

- Index of Proper Names** 1395
- Index of Geographical Names and Toponyms** 1414
- Index of Book Titles and Other Texts** 1417
- Index of Scriptural References** 1427
- Ḥadīth Index** 1440
- Index of Topics and Keywords** 1442

Images of Paradise in Popular Shi'ite Iconography

Ulrich Marzolph

In the visual expression of the Muslim world, paradise is the pivotal notion of bounty and happiness untroubled by the concerns and worries of human existence. As such, it is the ultimate reward for the true believer.¹ Meanwhile, Shi'ite Muslim imagery in general is dominated by the event of martyrdom, in particular the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Ḥusayn and his followers at Karbala.² Undoubtedly, Shi'ite imagery has undergone a certain development over the centuries. Today, few images could represent the modern Iranian interpretation of Shi'ite identity more specifically than, say, the depiction of Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya's troops parading Ḥusayn's severed head at Karbala, such as shown in a drawing illustrating the scene in a nineteenth-century lithographed edition of Sarbāz Burūjirdī's martyrological book *Asrār al-shahāda* (The spiritual realities of martyrdom)³ or Iranian artist Maḥmūd Farshchiyān's famous modern painting of Ḥusayn's wounded horse returning to the wailing women at the camp without its master, a large version of which was temporarily installed in 2008 at the street crossing north of Tehran's Lālah Park.⁴ Considering the impact of Ḥusayn's fate as the quintessential expression of martyrdom for Shi'ite Islam, there is little surprise that the Shi'ite imagery of paradise, in both learned and popular contexts, is no exception to the above mentioned rule: martyrdom is a direct way to paradise, and paradise is the ultimate reward for the martyr.⁵

The two areas of popular Shi'ite Islamic imagery I wish to consider briefly in the following both illustrate this belief in different, though ultimately connected ways. First, I discuss the depiction of paradise as part of the cumulative representation of the battle of Karbala (in 61/680) produced in the Qajar

1 Blair and Bloom, *Images of paradise*.

2 Aghaei, *Martyrs*; Newid, *Der schiitische Islam*; Varzi, *Warring souls*; Flaskerud, *Visualizing belief and piety*; see also Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a revolution* 44–65.

3 Marzolph, *Narrative illustration* 101, fig. 37; see also Marzolph, *Pictorial representation*.

4 See Puin, *Islamische Plakate* ii, 458–60, and iii, 860, no. G-16.

5 On historical and contemporary notions of martyrdom in Islam see, e.g., Khosrokhavar, *L'Islamisme*; Khosrokhavar, *Les nouveaux martyrs*; Mayeur-Jaouen, *Saints et héros*; Neuwirth, *Blut und Mythos*.

period. My examples include the tilework installed on commemorative buildings such as the Ḥusayniyyah-yi Mushīr, erected in 1876 by the wealthy philanthropist Mīrzā ʿAbd al-Ḥasan Mushīr al-Mulk (Fig. 48.1), or the Imāmzādah-yi Ibrāhīm in Shiraz⁶ and the large canvasses that used to serve as prompts for professional storytellers performing in the streets and marketplaces well into the twentieth century.⁷ Second, I discuss images of paradise incorporated into modern murals, many of which have been installed in recent years on the windowless walls of large buildings in the Tehran cityscape.⁸ The extent to which any of these areas may or may not be adequately termed “popular” is open for discussion. The depictions of the battle of Karbala, on the one side, may be regarded as “popular” since they satisfy the demand of large gatherings of people from various strata of society commemorating the tragedy of Karbala by listening to, watching or actively partaking in live performances, whether recited or acted on stage. The murals, on the other side, might be regarded as a kind of “intentional folklore” (often termed “propaganda”) insofar as they have been installed by state-subsidized institutions such as the powerful Bunyād-i shahīd (The Martyr’s Foundation). Their aim is to keep alive and firmly root the memory of recent martyrs within present and future society, predominantly the memory of those men that lost their lives during the so-called “imposed” war of defense against the neighboring country of Iraq, as model characters of true Shi’ite behavior.

In the images of the battle of Karbala prepared in the Qajar period, both the scenes on tilework and on canvas depict a number of the battle’s well-known scenes, such as Ḥusayn lamenting the death of his son ʿAlī Akbar, Ḥusayn bidding the women farewell while holding his son ʿAlī Aṣghar, and Ḥusayn attacking the enemy. In addition, the depictions regularly feature a vision of the hereafter. While in the tilework images considered here, this vision is placed in an arching area above the battle scenes, in the images on canvas it is regularly put on the image’s upper side. The images on canvas concentrate on the battle scenes that are usually displayed around a central image of Ḥusayn attacking the enemy, and depict the image of the hereafter, sometimes in a truncated version, showing hell below and paradise above, separated by the *pul-i širāt*, the narrow bridge that the dead must cross in order to be directed to either

6 Humāyūnī, *Ḥusayniyyah-yi Mushīr*; Ansari, *Malerei* 254, no. 54; Fontana, *Ahl al-Bayt*, fig. 58; And, *Ritüelden drama* 310; Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a revolution* 62–3; Chelkowski, *Patronage and piety* 95; Newid, *Der schiitische Islam* 250; see also Mīrzāʾī Mihr, *Naqqāshihā*.

7 Sayf, *Naqqāshī*; Ardalan, *Murshidān*; see also Floor, *Theater*, particularly 119–23.

8 Marzolph, *The martyr’s way to paradise*; Chehabi and Christia, *The art of state persuasion*; Gruber, *Mural arts*; Karimi, *Tehran’s post Iran-Iraq war murals*.

hell or paradise according to their respective merits. Full versions of this scene, such as those depicted on tilework or single images on canvas, include an array of dead people clad in white shrouds and waiting for their deeds to be evaluated. Paradise is here placed at the upper left or the upper right side of the image, relying on a small but fairly regular set of components (Fig. 48.2).⁹

In the lower center of the image representing paradise there is a small water basin, sometimes with a gushing fountain. This basin represents *kawthar*, the paradisaal spring or well of water. Behind the water basin there is a tree in whose top branches we see a large bird with a female head wearing a crown. A legend sometimes identifies the bird as *murgh-i silm*, “the bird of peace.” The surrounding landscape depicts a green lawn framed by groups of trees. In the distance there are, at times, also outlines of man-made structures such as a pathway, a bridge or a pavilion. While paradise is thus portrayed as the ideal garden, the image is dominated by two human characters placed in the foreground. The person seated on one side of the basin can reliably be identified as the Prophet Muḥammad by the halo around his head and, sometimes, the green turban he wears. By presenting a small vessel with water from the basin, Muḥammad welcomes a second person to paradise. This person stands on the opposite side of the basin and is clad in full armor, at times still wearing his sword. In his analysis of the tilework images of the Ḥusayniyya-yi Mushīr in Shiraz, Ṣādiq Humāyūnī identifies this person as ‘Alī, the Prophet’s son-in-law and the first Shi‘ite *imām*.¹⁰ Even though this assumption is tempting, in Shi‘ite iconography ‘Alī is usually depicted with his sword, known as *dhū l-fiqār*. Historically, this sword is known to have two cutting edges (*shafratān*) on both the upper and the lower side.¹¹ In popular Shi‘ite iconography it is represented as a sword whose blade branches into two separate points. No other warrior is ever depicted bearing this sword, and thus it has become an unambiguous iconographic marker for ‘Alī. Meanwhile, the sword of the warrior to whom the Prophet Muḥammad hands the water does not have such an iconographic marker. In fact, the figure does not betray any particular characteristics at all. On the contrary, his dress is the same as that worn by the caliph’s troops. A legend sometimes supplied on the images clearly identifies this person as Ḥurr, Ḥurr-i shahīd (The martyr Ḥurr) or Janāb-i Ḥurr (Our master Ḥurr). Surprising as the presence in paradise of a warrior from the enemy’s party might be at first sight, the historical events perfectly justify this identification.¹²

9 For the following analysis see, particularly, Sayf, *Naqqāshī*, nos. 25, 30, 51, 63, and 65.

10 Humāyūnī, *Ḥusayniyyah-yi Mushīr* 43.

11 Halm, *Schia* 16, n. 20.

12 Kister, al-Ḥurr. Al-Ḥurr’s (like al-Ḥusayn’s) name is given in Arabic with and in Persian without the definite article.

Ḥurr, whose full name in Arabic is al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd al-Riyāhī, played a special role in the battle of Karbala. He was an army commander originally sent by order of Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya (d. 64/683), the second Umayyad caliph, to prevent Ḥusayn and his followers from reaching their eventual destination, the city of Kufa. According to Shi'ite legend, Ḥurr soon recognized Ḥusayn's rightful position and pitied him for the outrageous treatment he received from the caliph's troops. Consequently, Ḥurr switched sides, joined Ḥusayn's companions in their fight against the caliph's troops and died as a martyr at Karbala. Considering his story, Ḥurr thus is not just a randomly selected exemplary character but the quintessential martyr. Even though at first he was loyal to the caliph, he acknowledged Ḥusayn's justified claim to lead the Islamic community. Consequently, he became one of Ḥusayn's followers and died a martyr's death serving the just cause. His presence in paradise is the model of a true Shi'ite believer's destiny, since Ḥurr represents a *shahīd* in the double sense of the word: He is both a witness to Ḥusayn's martyrdom and a martyr himself, whose self-sacrifice for the Shi'ite and, in fact, for the Islamic community is endorsed by the Prophet Muḥammad. Furthermore, Ḥurr's martyrdom is particularly noteworthy because it is linked to his meritorious conversion to the Shi'i branch of Islam shortly before his death.

The images from the Qajar period form part of the visual memory of Shi'ite culture, and their impact extends well into the present. In this manner, they also lie at the basis of the visual interpretation of paradise on murals in contemporary Iran, where after the revolution of 1979 a specific Shi'ite identity was cultivated. Murals have been a regular phenomenon in Tehran since the 1980s, and even though the agenda guiding their installation continues to develop with changing political trends, new murals appear occasionally. Direct depictions of paradise are not frequent on the Tehran murals, even though paradise was promised to Iranian soldiers slain on the front as their immediate reward, and many fighters wore the plastic key to paradise on a string around their neck.

It is probably not by coincidence that the most prominent depiction of paradise in a modern mural has been installed on the wall of the courtyard bordering the headquarters of the Foundation of Martyrs in central Tehran (Fig. 48.3). In its older version, the mural depicted an anonymous martyr who, after taking off his boots and putting aside his machine-gun, stood at the entrance to paradise, wrapped in a white shroud. The depersonalized image was supplied with a caption reading *shahīd avval kasī-st ki bi-bihisht vārid mīshavad*, "The martyr is the first one to enter paradise." This dictum is attributed to Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989), the charismatic leader of the revolution, and is quoted fairly often on Tehran murals. The mural's previous version was originally executed in a style reminiscent of traditional miniature painting. Since its colors were fading away, it was eventually replaced by a new image in bright colors.

The new image essentially depicts the same scene. Meanwhile, it emphasizes even further the lack of individuality of the person depicted and reduces the martyr's presence in the scene to a pair of worn boots placed in front of a field of red tulips. Yet, the martyr's body is still there. His bare feet are dangling below his swaying white shroud that is enveloped by a huge pair of white wings. His head is barely discernible in the center of the image where a hand holds his head while a second one loosens the red ribbon qualifying him as a martyr ready to sacrifice his life. The general applicability of the mural's message is further validated by a quotation from the *maqām-i mu'azzam-i rahbarī*, the Supreme Leadership of the Islamic Republic, stressing the fact that society will never forget the martyrs.

An emotionally moving martyr mural from the 1990s, replaced in 2002 by a mural relating to the fate of the Palestinian people, used to be on a building adjacent to the Mudarris freeway leading from the crowded business districts of southern Tehran to the quiet middle and upper-class residential areas in the north.¹³ It showed a little girl wearing a black *chādūr* and holding a red rose in her hand. The girl was mourning her dead father lying in front of her with the words: *Bābā-yi shahīdam – hīch gulī khushbūtar az yād-i to nīst*, "My martyr father – no rose smells sweeter than your memory!" While the mural's Tehran version did not specify the martyr's name, another version in the city of Sirjan gave his name as Jamshid-e Zardusht. The lack of individuality in the mural in Tehran elevated the martyr's fate to a normative level whose appeal would arise from its general applicability. In addition, the image was supplied with a number of stars containing invocations addressed to the group of five persons (*panj tan*)¹⁴ representing the holy family revered by Shi'ite Islam: Muḥammad, his daughter Fāṭima (here called by her cognomen al-Zahrā', "the Luminous"), 'Alī, and their sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. To this was added the hidden twelfth *imām*, al-Mahdī, who in the Shi'ite worldview is the only rightful ruler of the world. The upper right corner contained what looked like a crack in the sky that allowed a glimpse of paradise, the future home of all martyrs. Though the exact components of this image of paradise were difficult to identify, one could make out a cypress tree to the left, another tree with large white blossoms on the right, and a bird amidst a landscape that appeared to be an abode of peace. In its particular composition, this mural raised the anonymous martyr's individual fate to a Shi'ite believer's obligation, and the little girl's personal grief became a general appeal to applaud the martyr's dedication.

In a similar manner, other Tehran murals join in the call for martyrdom by emphasizing that it leads to paradise. Many of the murals have been refur-

13 Marzolph, *The martyr's way to paradise* 95; Bombardier, *La peinture murale iranienne*.

14 See Fontana, *Ahl al-Bayt*; Newid, *Der schiitische Islam* 189–204.

bished over the past few years, as authorities obviously took into account the fact that straightforward didactic or homiletic messages did not appeal to the general audience, much less the younger generation. Even so, images of paradise continue to appear in a number of new murals. One such mural has been installed on the wall bordering the courtyard of the Najmiyya Hospital on Tehran's Jumhūrī Avenue (Fig. 48.4).¹⁵ At first sight this mural is a fairly surrealistic image dominated by a large wall that suggests the separation of two worlds. The world to this side of the wall appears to be the world we live in, since a spiral staircase starts in the courtyard right at the bottom of the image. The staircase leads up and over the wall, where its single steps gradually disintegrate and then fade altogether. The world on the wall's other side is only visible on the mural's left side, where spectators are permitted a glimpse into a scene of fertile fields and green trees. This world, however, is unreal and probably beyond human comprehension, since the trees are floating in the air, and the whole scene is mirrored upside down. Regarding the composition of this part of the image there is no doubt that the scene depicted on the wall's other side is paradise. This interpretation is further corroborated by the two popular symbols of the martyr's soul that have been integrated into the image. On the right, we see a group of white doves flying toward the other side of the wall, while on the left, a swaying fold of the wall has generated a line of balls floating in the air. These balls, once fully matured, open up to reveal white butterflies that also head for the Promised Land. In this manner, the mural revalidates the Shi'ite concept of martyrdom by reducing it to a set of symbols that have been propagated on and through the Tehran murals for many years, such as the white dove or the butterfly as a symbol of the martyr's soul. The essential message is thus retained, even though in terms of artistic representation it has been adapted to modern requirements.

In spring 2009, another new mural was installed on a building next to the Tehran Mudarris freeway. This mural, replacing the previously installed image of the Palestinian suicide bomber Rīm Ṣālīḥ al-Riyāshī,¹⁶ is exceptional because it was executed in a style reminiscent of traditional Persian manuscript illustration (Fig. 48.5).¹⁷ It is installed on a windowless wall facing the freeway, the wall being separated into two equally large halves by an emergency staircase. The dominant, and in fact only, background color is a blue so pure and untainted that it risks outdoing the impression of a blue cloudless sky against the backdrop of the natural color of Tehran's sky that is often veiled by heavy pollution. The same is true for the lower side of the image,

15 See Marzolph, *The martyr's fading body*.

16 Gruber, *Mural arts* 34.

17 For a detailed discussion of this mural, see Gruber, *Images of Muhammad*.

which ends in a darkish green of lawn and bushes merging with the heavily watered vegetation that covers the concrete structure framing the freeway. If one follows the artist's presumed original intention, both the sky and ground sections of the image intend to continue their natural surrounding, suggesting that the scene takes place in a manner known as *trompe l'œil*. Numerous other murals in a similar, though often more realistic manner have been installed in Tehran in recent years; these include, to give but one example, a mural on the eastern side of the Maydān-i Vanak on Valī-yi 'Aṣr street to the north of the city center.¹⁸ Though this image does not intend to illustrate paradise, it incorporates a somewhat paradisaical vision in that it depicts two fathers with their sons on their shoulders wandering off into a landscape of lush green hills that form a visual break in the concrete jungle of urban Tehran.

In contrast to realistic images such as the one on Maydān-i Vanak, the mural to the side of the Mudarris freeway depicts a scene that even without specialist knowledge can easily be identified as depicting the Prophet Muḥammad's *mi'rāj*, or voyage to the heavens. The Prophet is riding his fabulous steed Burāq on the mural's upper right side. He is clad in a green cloak and his head is surrounded by a halo of flames. The mural's left side suggests fragments of tilework on the upper side of an imaginary building together with the heads (and, in one case, the upper side of the body) of heavenly beings. The inscription on the tilework spells the phrases of the Islamic profession of faith, namely *lā ilāha illā llāh*, "There is no god but God," and *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*, "Muḥammad is God's messenger." A third inscription placed above the prophet's head on the mural's upper right side reads in large letters *'Alī valī Allāh*, "Alī is God's close friend," thus adding the specific Shi'ite component of the *shahāda*.¹⁹ Except for the dominant sky, the landscape is almost devoid of other physical phenomena but for the lower right foreground that depicts a heavenly being plucking a branch from a small tree heavily loaded with large white blossoms. Moreover, there is a link between the mural's overall fictional atmosphere and contemporary reality. Stretching out his arms to take the branch is a man dressed in ordinary clothes who might well be taken for a living person, such as someone passing by on the adjacent street. What makes this image of paradise so exceptional is the fact that its components are exact, although isolated and rearranged copies from illustrations in a ninth/fifteenth-century manuscript of the *Mi'rājnāma* (The book of the ascension) that is today preserved in the Paris National Library.²⁰

18 Karimi, Tehran's post Iran-Iraq war murals 57, fig. 5.

19 See Eliash, On the genesis and development.

20 Séguy, *Miraculous journey* 41, plate 40; Gruber, *El Libro de la Ascensión* 160, fol. 49r; Sims, Marshak, and Grube, *Peerless images* 169, fig. 83 (image mirrored sideways).

Whatever the artist's intention in executing this mural might have been, it is a new attraction that fits into the recent strategy of the Tehran murals, a strategy in which the formerly prominent life-like and somewhat gruesome realistic depiction of actual martyrs has been abandoned in favor of a mythical and transcendent vision of the hereafter as the martyr's ultimate goal.

Whether we consider the depictions on tilework or canvas from the Qajar period or those on contemporary murals in Tehran, it is clear that the dominant image of paradise in popular Shi'ite iconography is inseparably linked with martyrdom. While the characteristics of paradise as a true believer's ultimate destination are outlined in rather vague terms – allusions to general images of bounty and peace such as a lush vegetation – the message of the images is unambiguously clear: self-sacrifice in the service of a just cause remains the pivotal concept of the current interpretation of Shi'ite Islam in Iran and the gate through which the true believers have to pass in order to attain the Promised Land.

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FIGURE 48.1 *Tilework on the Ḥusayniyyah-yi Mushūr in Shiraz; from Humāyūnī, Ḥusayniyyah-yi Mushūr, folding page between 18 and 19.*



FIGURE 48.2 *Painting on canvas, from Sayf, Naqqāshī 127, no 30.*



FIGURE 48.3 *Mural on the courtyard adjacent to the headquarters of the Bunyād-i shahīd, Tehran.*

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FIGURE 48.4 *Mural on the courtyard of the Najmiyyah Hospital, Tehran.*
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FIGURE 48.5 *Mural on a building next to Mudarris Freeway, Tehran.*
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