Gruber, Christiane J. "Real Absence: Imagining God in Turco-Persian Book Arts, 1300–1600 ce." *Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Contested Desires*. Ed. Birgit Meyer and Terje Stordalen. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016. 132–152. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350078666.0015>>.

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Real Absence: Imagining God in Turco-Persian Book Arts, 1300–1600 CE

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O You who are Hidden in that which is hidden, You are more than all. All see themselves in You, and they see You in everything.

Farid al-Din 'Attar ('Attar 1954: 4)

Metaphysical and theological inquiries into the nature of God's divinity have been long-standing markers of the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Over the course of many centuries, thinkers, writers and artists have actively constructed various discursive models through which to describe and give shape to God and His transcendental nature. The paradigms of inquiry have fluctuated depending on time and circumstance, and thus provide us with a rich and textured picture of the diverse mechanisms, deployed through both text and image production, that have served to suggest a sense of the ineffable.

Metaphorical language and rhetorical abstractions have provided key figures of speech in conveying God's essence. Additionally, anthropomorphic descriptions have been harnessed, reflecting the generative power of the human template (Guthrie 1993: 92). Humans' general tendency to borrow from their perception and experience of the world around them has enabled them to articulate and affirm the presence of divinity, despite God's distant removal from intellectual knowledge and tactile experience.

As in other monotheistic traditions, in Islamic philosophical and speculative practices the question of God's identity or ipseity (*huwiyya shakhsiyya*) engendered fruitful discussions that sought to describe God's modality – that is, His 'whatness' or *kayfiyya* (Abrahamov 2002: 213) – and His pre-eminent status as not belonging to any genus in the natural world. Writers were particularly keen to emphasize God's capacity of summoning all of creation under the aegis of His deistic oneness (*tawhid*). Oftentimes, God is described through an epistemic process of idealization marked by imaginative verbal reconfigurations that seek to translate His transcendental properties through both anthropomorphic and paramorphic models (Schoen 1990: 137–8). In other words, God has been described in both human and supra-human terms in Islamic traditions, and these two distinct approaches reveal that, at least at the

conceptual level, God has inhabited an intermediary space defined by two diametrically opposed determinants: the pre-eminence of the human form and the necessity of its absolute negation.

This mediatory position, blending literalist anthropomorphic expressions with associative abstractions, contends that there must exist visible or traceable evidence of God's presence on earth, otherwise He would be confined to man's intellect rather than existing in Reality. As the prominent scholar al-Juwayni (d. 1085 CE) stated concerning this in-between stance, which came to be the normative or 'orthodox' position in Islamic philosophical inquiry:

Whoever stops at something which exists and which he is capable of conceiving is an anthropomorphist. Whoever stops at pure negation is an atheist. [...] The reality of *tawhid* is that you know that the power of God is in things without stating the means and that this occurs without His being mixed with them. Whatever you formulate in your imagination, God is not that. (cited in al-Yahsubi 1991: 133)

As al-Juwayni states, God is Visible through His signs on earth. However, despite His presence in all things and despite man's best cogitative efforts, He remains an all-unifying but non-graspable entity. God is thus Absent yet genuinely Present, His transcendental actuality unfathomable yet somehow perceivable.

Such epistemic formulations of divinity as found in Islamic speculative texts carried over into the visual arts, fuelled in part, it seems, by artists wishing to convey and engage in similar conceptual pursuits. By using the expressive lexicon of pictorial form rather than the semantic field of written language, calligraphers and painters active especially in Turco-Persian cultural spheres from ca. 1300 to 1600 CE contended with how to describe and depict God as well. The major 'methodological' question they faced was as follows: In what ways can God be the object of pictorial depiction using visual techniques that avoid the two extremes of crude anthropomorphism and the total rejection of form? Through grappling and experimenting with such complex concerns, artists devised multiple strategies to convey God's divine form (*sura*). As a result, practices of image making not only developed their own visual means to tackle the nature of divinity; they also actively contributed to articulating new – and often highly creative – inquiries into questions concerned with theomorphism.

Artistic practices that sought to express God's presence in Islamic traditions reveal a compelling intellectualization of the visual mode. Through multiple experimentations with pictorial forms, which included procedures of abstraction and synecdoche, painters made efforts to craft multiple modes to convey the sweeping totality of God's oneness – that is, His *tawhid* – while still retaining his most significant differentiating trait, namely His set-apartness or otherness (*mukhalafa*) vis-à-vis the created world and humankind (Watt 1990: 87; Williams 2002: 441). Because of such efforts, images of the divine emerged, depicting God as numinous and incorporeal yet bearing a sensorial presence. This rather challenging 'balancing act' came about through various visual stratagems, most important among them cloud, veil and light metaphors, celestial and angelic motifs and colour symbolism.

Divine scent and Holy Scripture

The idea that God is Present yet Invisible pervades the visual arts from ca. 1300 CE, at which time Persian pictorial traditions embarked on their long and rich history (Blair 1993). After the thirteenth-century Mongol conquests that swept across Eurasia, rulers of Turco-Mongol extraction, known as the Ilkhanids (r. 1256–1353 CE), settled and created their own dynastic empire in Iran, embraced Islam and became great patrons of the arts. During the first two decades of the fourteenth century, the Ilkhanid rulers of Iran commissioned the production of illustrated texts (Hillenbrand 2002). Some of these, like Firdawsi's epic tale of kings (*Shahnama*), related ancient Persian history and heroic deeds, while others, such as the animal fables of *Kalila and Dimna*, were used for entertainment and pedagogical purposes.

A number of other illustrated texts described historical events from pre-Islamic times to the Mongol period and explained the life and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. Such texts helped Ilkhanid rulers transmit historical knowledge, promote official ideologies and encourage Islamic piety through word-and-image production. Arguably the most important illustrated historical – biographical manuscript of the time is Rashid al-Din's *Compendium of Chronicles* (*Jami' al-Tawarikh*), completed in 1314 CE and containing an estimated total of 540 paintings (Blair 1995; Hillenbrand 2002: 146). The manuscript contains a total of nine paintings depicting events in the life of the Prophet from the time of his youth to his many battles (Hillenbrand 2014). In the cycle of paintings that depict the prophetic character of Muhammad and his consecrated deeds, painters (who were conversant in or influenced by various artistic traditions spanning from East Asia to Europe) experimented with multiple devices to convey God's propinquity to His elected messenger. These devices included conveying both the visible and olfactory signs of his God-granted prophecy.

Although the Qur'an and other textual sources stress the fact that God has no co-partner, the Prophet comes closest to having been endowed with such a distinction. His proximity to the divine is substantiated by a number of paranormal occurrences and is marked by a number of visible signs. For example, Muhammad received the revelation (*wahy*) of the Qur'an through direct communication with God through his angelic messenger, Gabriel. He also was given the five daily prayers and other good tidings about his community on the night of his ascension (*mi'raj*), at which time he entered into an intimate conversation with God, of Whom he had a vision (*ru'ya*) either by means of his heart or through ocular perception (van Ess 1996: 38–42; idem 1999: 53–6). As God's elected Messenger (*rasul*) and Prophet (*nabi*), Muhammad also is the anointed one of God and thus a kind of Messiah figure, the term *masih* forming an honorific epithet derived from the Arabic verb *masaha*, meaning to be caressed or wiped clean (Van Ess 1989: 6).

Because of his prophetic ordination by God's touch, Muhammad thus bears the physical marks of his contact with the divine. Such traces, broadly referred to as the 'proofs of [Muhammad's] prophecy' (*dala'il al-nubuwwa*) or the 'signs of [his] prophecy' (*a'lam al-nubuwwa*), include most prominently a mark or protuberance known as the 'seal of prophethood' (*khatim al-nubuwwa*) located either between his shoulder blades, as the mark of God's touch on the night of his ascension, or on his torso, as the final

fastening of his chest cavity after it was split open and his heart purified by angels. On a more symbolic level, Muhammad's corporeal imprimatur pays tribute to his utmost status as the final, or 'seal', of all prophets within the Judeo-Christian line.

Many biographical and poetic sources also elaborate upon Muhammad's sweet-scented nature as emanating from his visit to paradise and contact with God. His body is described as smelling like the flowers of paradise, which include the rose, narcissus and anemone (Gruber 2014). He thus is thought redolent of God's presence in paradise, the latter described as His 'conserve of roses' (Nizami 1945: 110). Muhammad's contemporaries also specify that his 'seal of prophethood' was particularly ambrosial, as noted by his companion Jabir: 'The Prophet let me ride behind him, so I put my mouth on the seal of prophecy and it spread over me like musk' (al-Yahsubi 1991: 35). The Prophet's visible seal and his sensible aroma are praised by many writers because both evoke an aromatic heaven, made and inhabited by God, and also reminiscent of God's presence through the synesthetic potential of smell.

Ilkhanid painters, it appears, were keen to communicate the presence of God in Muhammad through a series of visible signs, much as artists in the medieval Christian world sought to depict Christ as a carrier of divinity by deploying choice devices like the gold halo, the mandorla and the veil (Kessler 2006: 423). In the series of paintings in the *Jami' al-Tawarikh*, for instance, Muhammad is depicted in the process of being anointed, first upon his recognition as a prophet by the Christian monk Bahira (Figure 7.1) and, later, during his battle against the Banu al-Nadir, a Jewish tribe that had been living in a fortress outside Medina (see Gruber 2009: 160, Figure 3). In both paintings, an angelic proxy emerges from or swoops down from the skies, carrying what appears to be a rose-water flask and either a scroll or a codex, both indicative of God's selection of His Messenger via anointment by scent and revelation by scripture. Through the double representation of divine smell and Holy Book, the presence of divinity becomes visually detected in the painting.

The first painting in Rashid al-Din's *Jami' al-Tawarikh* represents a well-known event from the childhood of the Prophet Muhammad (Figure 7.1). The episode is recorded in a number of early biographical texts, such as Ibn Ishaq's (d. ca. 767 CE) *Biography of the Prophet (Sirat al-Nabi)*, and universal histories, including al-Tabari's (d. 923 CE) *The History of Messengers and Kings (Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa'l-Muluk)*. Chroniclers tell us that, when Muhammad was sometime between nine and twelve years of age, he accompanied his uncle Abu Talib on a merchant caravan to Syria. When they and their entourage arrived in the Syrian town of Busra, they encountered in a cell a monk by the name of Bahira, who is described as particularly well versed in the so-called sacred books. It is in these Christian books that he found descriptions of Muhammad and his divinely decreed apostleship, and it is thanks to such books that he was able to recognize Muhammad as a prophet, even in his young age. Bahira thus essentially serves as a polemical witness and guarantor of the superiority of Islam over Christianity (Abel 1986: 922).

Islamic texts highlight the fact that natural phenomena and markers on Muhammad's body helped Bahira recognize his prophetic status. First, Bahira saw a cloud taking the shape of a shield and overshadowing the Prophet (and no one else) so that he would become protected from the heat of the sun. Second, the cloud caused a tree's branches

Figure 7.1 Muhammad as a young boy is recognized as a prophet by the Christian monk Bahira, Rashid al-Din, *Jami' al-Tawarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles), Tabriz, Iran, 1307–8 CE. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Main Library, Ms. Arab 20, folio 45v.

to bend and droop so that they, too, would shelter Muhammad from the elements. And third, once Bahira approached Muhammad and examined him closely, he noticed on his back the seal of prophethood between his shoulders, an indexical 'trace' of God's selection that had been recorded and described in the 'sacred books' (Ibn Ishaq 2004: 80–1; and al-Tabari 2002: 412). These specific textual details stress that Muhammad's awaited arrival was foretold according to previously revealed, uncorrupted texts, and that God's favour upon him consisted in a grand cosmic umbrage as well as discernible physical marks upon his body.

The painting of Bahira recognizing the young Muhammad as the final messenger of God as included in the *Jami' al-Tawarikh* provides a visual confirmation of the various themes that are particularly salient to the legitimating discourse about Muhammad's divinely decreed arrival as promised in the 'good books' (*min khayr al-kutub*, as noted in Rashid al-Din's text located immediately above the painting). In the depiction, the monk Bahira stands in his elevated cell to the right, as he holds his robe and extends his right hand to point to Muhammad, who is standing on the left. All men and even the camels turn towards the Prophet, either bowing or (as in the camels) genuflecting as they encircle him. The young Muhammad stands upright, wearing a long red tunic and a white turban. Above him, an angel has distended the blue firmament as it reaches for Muhammad's head, endowing the Prophet with heavenly scent by means of a gold rose-water flask and transmitting God's logos through the scriptural metaphor of the inscribed parchment or scroll (Rice 1976: 99).

All movements – human, animal and even cosmic – rotate around the Prophet, who serves as the centrifugal protagonist in the composition. As a result, the painting stresses Muhammad's prophetic centrality by means of compositional arrangement. It also provides a visual amplification of the text's supersessionist rhetoric, which claims that Muhammad was foretold to man and that his predestination is recognizable to a Christian witness conversant in uncorrupted scripture. Just as importantly, the composition expands upon narratives that describe Muhammad's selection by God

through the protective shade of a cloud or branches. Rather than depicting God's favour through natural phenomena, the artist has stressed God's presence through the double process of *uranophany* (the appearance of the skies through the bend in the celestial arc) and *angelophany* (the appearance of an angelic being) into the world, two theographic techniques of representation found in contemporaneous European Christian paintings as well (Boespflug 1992: 15–17). The viewer of the painting is thus invited to partake not only in the visual recognition of Muhammad as prophet but, more importantly, to consider God's observable presence through His divine anointment of and scriptural revelation to His elected messenger.

Similar visual metaphors for God's symbolic propinquity to the Prophet are in operation in another painting included in Rashid al-Din's *Jami' al-Tawarikh*, which depicts Muhammad besieging the fortification of the Banu al-Nadir after the Jewish tribe had broken a treatise with him and had conspired to kill him (see Gruber 2009: 160, Figure 3). Accounts describing these sorts of military campaigns belong to the *maghazi*, or expeditions and raids, literary genre, a field of textual production that was very closely associated with works in the *sira*, or biographical, genre during the first two centuries of Islam (Hinds 1983: 63). Works in the *maghazi* genre were not just about narrating Muhammad's raids and conquests; they also were religiously inclined because military victories – and, by extension, religio-political ascendancy – are interpreted in Islamic (and other) traditions as overt signs of God's protection, intervention and election (Paret 1930: 169). Of paramount importance, *sira* and *maghazi* works make a point to stress that, for every military campaign that Muhammad and his followers undertook, Qur'anic verses were revealed to him. Such verses scripturally explain and consecrate his prophetic undertakings by literally inserting God 'into the picture'. In other words, a victory by the sword evinced the superiority of the Islamic faith by the manifest proof of God's favouritism and His presence – a presence described in the Qur'an as emerging from 'the canopies of clouds with ranks of angels' (Q 2.210 and 89.22).

Sira and *maghazi* texts inform us that it was during the expedition against the Banu al-Nadir that the entire 'Chapter of Confrontation' (*surat al-hashr*, Q 59) was revealed to the Prophet. The first verses of Q 59 describe how these Jewish 'people of the book' (*ahl al-kitab*) were pushed out of their homes and forced into exile because they 'had opposed God and His Apostle; and whosoever opposes God, then God is severe in retribution' (Q 59.4). Muhammad's biographer, Ibn Ishaq, explains these verses by stressing that it was by God's permission and decree that Muhammad and the believers were successful (Ibn Ishaq 2004, 438). Other authors point to other verses of *surat al-hashr* revealed on the occasion to highlight God's protection of the Muslim community (Q 5.11), the legitimacy of expelling traitors from their abodes, even if they are 'people of the book' (Q 59.2, 11), and the rules governing the allotment of war booty (Q 59.7) (Ibn Ishaq 2004: 438; al-Tabari 2002: 579–81; al-Waqidi 2011: 177–86).

In these texts, treason, rebellion and military resistance are not just explained as actions undertaken against the Prophet Muhammad but as against God Himself. God responds in kind by assisting His Messenger through military supremacy, itself backed by scriptural support. Such symbolic correlations between martial success and divine support are strongly reaffirmed by the Ilkhanid artists as they sought to expand the manuscript's visual programme so as to convey God's palpable presence at the side of

His Prophet. In the painting of the expedition against the Banu al-Nadir, for example, the Prophet Muhammad sits astride his mount, accompanied by his followers, as he approaches the stronghold of the Jewish tribe. Above him, an angel – most likely Gabriel – descends energetically, holding a gold rose-water flask above the Prophet's turban and a gold-brushed bound codex at the height of his waist. Above and to Muhammad's left, emerging as it were from the upper horizontal frame of the composition, appears a golden sun with shooting rays of light, towards which the members of the Banu al-Nadir perched atop their fortress raise their hands in what appear to be gestures of supplication.

Several elements in this painting are worthy of note. First and foremost, the angel Gabriel recalls Christian pictorial conventions of representing the Holy Spirit as God's hand or as a bird, both synecdochal and metaphorical representations of the divine that appear to have been known to Ilkhanid artists (Hillenbrand 2002: 145). Moreover, Muhammad's selection occurs via unguent anointment and revelation by scripture – the latter being all the more significant since the entirety of *Sura* 59 of the Qur'an is said to have been transmitted to the Prophet during his campaign against the Banu al-Nadir. The consecrated nature of the military undertaking is further expanded by visual means via the inclusion of an incandescent gold sun, here best understood as the symbol of God's immanent presence and the revelation of portions of the Qur'an – an enlightened or luminous book (*kitab munir*)² – to Muhammad on this particular occasion. That the besieged members of the Banu al-Nadir turn to the sun in gestures of imploration substantiates the pictorial interpretation of God as theophanous light emitted into the sensible world, a theme that pervades both speculative theology and artistic expression in Islamic traditions.

Within and beyond the clouds

When a companion of the Prophet asked Muhammad where God was located before He created the earth and heavens, Muhammad answered: 'He was in a mist with air above Him and air below Him' (Gimaret 1997: 61; al-Jawzi 2006: 84). The Arabic term used for mist – *ama* – also signifies heavy clouds or a fog. Derived from the verb 'to obscure, be blinded, render cryptic or enigmatic', *ama* literally means 'to not be seen' or to 'remain hidden to someone'. Within the context of this particular Hadith (Saying of the Prophet), then, God is understood as inhabiting the sky, itself an empyrean anagoge for His utmost rank (Gimaret 1997: 63, 66–9). God is associated with cosmic phenomena. Moreover, His association with aerial cumuli serves to symbolically describe Him as a spatially and intellectually nebulous entity. After all, clouds are qualitatively similar to the nature of divinity: perceptible and hence real, yet incorporeal and therefore ungraspable.

As noted previously, a number of textual accounts, such as the monk Bahira recognizing the young Muhammad as a prophet after a cloud formed above him to provide him with protective shade, stress the emergence of nebula as indexical signs for God's ineluctable presence. Such figures of speech, equating God with divine effluvium, are echoed within the pictorial arts as well. In Persian paintings dating from

the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, it becomes clear that the depiction of a heavenly haze is intended to articulate a metonymy for God. In such paintings, God's miasmic co-presence with Muhammad serves to frame and thus consecrate his prophetic endeavours. In addition, the cloud motif allows for a breaching of the firmament and therefore facilitates the Prophet's levitation and eventual entry into the trans-mundane abode of divinity.

Returning to the illustrated *sira-maghazi* genre, the symbolic formula of God-as-cloud is used by Ilkhanid artists within the pictorial cycle in Rashid al-Din's *Jamī' al-Tawarikh*, especially in a painting representing the Prophet embarked on his successful campaign against the Banu Qaynuqa', another Jewish tribe who also lived in a redoubt close to Medina and who also broke their agreement with Muhammad (Figure 7.2). Rather than representing the battle scene per se, the composition is framed around the Prophet as a rider, striding forward with confidence in his divinely ordained mission. Muhammad is encircled by a sky-blue mandorla framed with white clouds curling around its perimeter. Interestingly, this pictorial motif is reminiscent of the *imago clipeata*, a framing device used in medieval Christian painting to suggest Christ's presence in heaven (Kessler 2000: 128–9).

All around the billowing aperture appear legions of angels, God's mercenary angels (*ghaziyan*) sent as Muhammad's seraphic helpers during his expeditions and raids. The angels surrounding Muhammad join his ranks as he embarks on his military campaign; simultaneously, they provide a clear indication of God's intervention in an event that is once again construed as not just belonging to the realm of worldly matters but, more importantly, as a religiously consecrated enterprise.

Figure 7.2 The Prophet Muhammad, accompanied by soldiers and mercenary angels, embarks on his campaign against the Banu Qaynuqa', Rashid al-Din, *Jamī' al-Tawarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles), Tabriz, Iran, 1314 CE. London, Nasser D. Khalili Collection, mss. 727, folio 67r.

At the same time as the angels serve to buttress Muhammad's mission, they also pay tribute to the revelation of scripture. For example, during the Prophet's expedition against the Banu Qaynuqa', some writers, like Muhammad's biographer Ibn Ishaq, state that the fifty-sixth verse of the 'Chapter of the Table' (*surat al-ma'ida*, Q 5.56) was revealed, stating that 'those who take God and His Prophet and the faithful as their friends are indeed men of God, who will surely be victorious'. Ibn Ishaq elaborates on this verse, clarifying for his readers that military victory is nothing more than an act of God (Ibn Ishaq 2004: 363–4).

According to the early historian al-Waqidi (d. 822 CE) – best known for his *Kitab al-Maghazi* (Book of Raids), which is entirely devoted to Muhammad's expeditions and conquests – two other verses were revealed during the campaign against the Banu Qaynuqa'. The first verse, Q 3.183 (followed by Q 3.184), speaks of Muhammad as belonging to a long line of messengers who come bearing clear signs or manifest proofs (*bayanat*) of their prophecy, as well as enlightened books (*kutub munir*).³ The second Qur'anic revelation consists in Q 2.103, which warns that those who do not listen to God will suffer the consequences (al-Waqidi 1882, 95).

These verses are germane to an analysis of the Ilkhanid painting, which represents Muhammad framed by the opening of the sky and surrounded by God's angels as twin marks of the 'clear signs' of his prophecy. Likewise, the mention of an 'enlightened book' points to the Qur'anic verses that were gradually revealed by God to the Prophet. Such verses inscribe Muhammad's *maghazi* into a consecrated chronicle of the Islamic faith, in which God is imagined to serve as supreme activator and divine actor. By abiding to the metaphorical concept of God as existing in a brume, the Ilkhanid artists in this case use the motif of parted clouds to suggest God's immaterial substance while also forwarding the postulate that He is perceptibly Existent. Although essentially 'vaporous', the pictorial insinuations of the divine's entry into worldly affairs are clear to the picture's viewers.

In the Qur'an, it is stated that, 'it is not for any mortal that God should speak to him except by revelation (*wahyan*) or from behind a veil (*min wara hijabin*)' (Q 42.51–2). This particular Qur'anic proclamation hastened a number of exegetical exercises concerned with explaining the 'veiled' nature of God, with an interest in understanding whether it is He Himself who is veiled from humans or whether humans themselves are veiled from viewing Him because of their own intellectual and spiritual limitations (Gimaret 1997: 73). Theologians tended to concur that humans are the ones to be veiled from viewing God: ergo, they described divinity as inhabiting a zone located behind innumerable layers of veils – the term veil functioning as a semantic tool to denote God's existential removal from human visibility and comprehension.

Besides describing God as inaccessible behind such cosmic veils, authors were nevertheless keen to emphasize that God is also the Beneficent Opener (*al-Fattah*) to the door of provision and mercy as well as the spiritual Opener of human hearts and eyes by gnosis of the Truth (al-Yahsubi 1991: 128–9). In other words, God is not just shut away, jettisoned to the outer limits of the galaxy, but rather a divinity who, at times, allows for entrance into His secret mysteries. This ostensive paradox of closing versus opening was one that mystics, especially Persian Sufi authors, found useful to exploit in trying

to explain God as beyond material and spatial contingencies but nonetheless present in Reality. For example, in his *Niche of Lights* al-Ghazali describes God as elevated beyond the perception of senses (*idrak al-hiss*) and imagination (*al-khiyal*). However, al-Ghazali continues, God always remains the ultimate Opener of Eyes (*fatih al-absar*), the Unveiler of Mysteries (*kashif al-asrar*) and Lifter of Coverings (*rafi' al-astar*) despite His removal from the sensible and notional world (al-Ghazali 1998: 1, 26).

A number of later Sufi Persian poets – most prominent among them Nizami (d. 1209 CE) and Jami (d. 1492 CE) – continued to develop the veil metaphor to describe God as stationed beyond the cosmic curvature of the firmament. By means of rhyming distiches included as encomia to God in the prefaces to their epic and romantic tales, these Persian poets also lauded God as a divine Revealer, or literally the ultimate Spreader of the Veils (*parda-gusha*) that separate heaven from earth (Nizami 1945: 89, verse 5). During the sixteenth century in Iran, during the rule of the Shi'i-Sufi Safavids (r. 1501–1722 CE), a great number of illustrated manuscripts were produced of Nizami's and Jami's text, and it is precisely within these texts' preliminary eulogies to God, the Prophet and his ascension, that painters further developed the pictorial language of divinity. Consequently, the pictorial conventions to represent God as found in Ilkhanid illustrated histories expanded under the aegis of the Safavids' patronage of illustrated mystical texts.

The metaphorical crossovers between the pictorial language of Safavid paintings and the figures of speech used in Persian mystical poetry are easily detectable, and such links therefore necessitate an inter-arts approach to the materials. Through a text-and-image analysis, it becomes clear that Safavid painters drew upon Sufi poetic idioms to help them formulate their visual presentations of the divine, all the while diversifying the discourse over God's nature. For instance, the artist – quite possibly the famous Safavid painter Sultan Muhammad – who depicted the Prophet's *mi'raj* in the preliminary laudatio of Nizami's *Makhzan al-Asrar* (Treasury of Secrets) has experimented with new motifs (Figure 7.3).⁴ The most important of these is the opening in the sky, around which angels stand, looking down upon Mecca and awaiting Muhammad's entry into the domain of the Lord.

In the preface to his *Mazkhan al-Asrar*, where the ascension painting appears, Nizami describes the Prophet's ascension as a breaching through the covering of the fixed stars (*satr-i kavakib*) and a rending of the curtain of physical creation (*parda-yi khalqat*) so that Muhammad may reach the abode of the Lord. Furthermore, in Nizami's text, Muhammad's lifting of the head towards God is described as going beyond the veil of nature (*giriban-i tabi'at*) at the same time as the hand of union (*tawhid*, i.e., God) draws back the curtain (*parda*) or veil (*hijab*) that is the firmament. Nizami also tells us that God Himself is the door of mystery (*dar-i raz*) and that He has veiled His threshold with doorkeeper angels (Nizami 1945: 101–2; Ranjbar 1952: 27–30). These many poetic metaphors found in Nizami's text stress Muhammad's arrival in the realm of the Lord as a rending, breaking and pulling open of a covering, curtain or veil – that is, as a piercing through the skies to reach a space freed from temporal boundaries and unshackled from earthly causalities.

In the Safavid painting, the opening of the skies pays tribute to the poetic figures of speech repeatedly iterated within Nizami's text. The celestial oculus also points to a kinetic interaction between human and divine spheres, becoming in the process both

Figure 7.3 The Prophet Muhammad ascends through the heavens on the back of his human-headed flying horse, named al-Buraq, and accompanied by angelic troops as he approaches an opening in the sky, Nizami, *Makhzan al-Asrar* (The Treasury of Secrets), Tabriz, Iran, 1505 CE. Dallas, Texas, Keir Collection (on loan to the Dallas Museum of Art), III.207.

an outlet for divine effulgence and an inlet for prophetic ascent. In other words, it functions as a conduit between the profane world of mankind and the heavenly domain of God, itself the *sanctum sanctorum* that usually remains ‘veiled’ or shut off. Within the painting, the perforation of the veil-firmament thus serves as a visual motif that situates God in a place that is defined by its invisible illocality (*la-makan*). Through a

possible unstitching of celestial seams, it also suggests God's ubiquity (*fi kulli makan*) and limitlessness (*la hadd lahu*). This harmonization of epistemic opposites within the confines of the picture plane reflects general trends found in both Islamic speculative theology (Gimaret 1997: 29) and Persian poetic works.

The motif of the parted cosmic vinculum is a hallmark of medieval Christian painting as well. Therein, the firmament acts as a kind of curtain that shields the living God from human eyes. It therefore functions all at once as celestial barrier, divine threshold and ineluctable 'cloth of blindness' (Kessler 2005: 296). In Persian paintings of the sixteenth century, similar concerns are discernible through the leitmotiv of the parted firmament, sometimes peeled open by a single angel (Figure 7.4). Within visual and textual domains, the 'cloth of blindness' that is the celestial firmament is understood as impeding a full comprehension of divinity, a nexus-cum-barrier through which only the Prophet Muhammad is allowed to travel on the night of his celestial ascension.

Divine lights and majestic colours

As can be seen from these kinds of paintings, the story of the Prophet's *mi'raj* served as the primary thematic arena in which to meditate upon God's secret nature since the ascension tale describes Muhammad's breaching through the celestial veils as he approaches the domain of the Lord (van Ess 1999). Once he arrives at the place of proximity (*maqam al-qurba*), Muhammad is allowed to enter into an intimate colloquy with and is granted a vision (*ru'ya*) of God. Questions about the nature and modality of Muhammad's beatific vision sparked a great number of speculative and exegetical texts that sought to explain how God manifests Himself through a process of epiphany (*tajalli*) and, by consequence, in what ways a human being might be able to perceive Him (Williams 2008). The combined story of the Prophet's *mi'raj-ru'ya* thus provided the archetypal narrative to explain how to approach and comprehend the numinous, and it is within illustrated manuscripts that depict Muhammad's encounter with God that further visual elaborations on the nature of divinity unfold.

Persian and Turkish paintings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries contributed in their own ways to the discourse on divine ipseity as luminous flux. The idea that God exists as radiant light, however, can be traced much further back in time to the beginnings of Islam. For instance, the Qur'an describes God as an illuminating, cosmic lamp, as well as a blazing heap of light upon light (*nur 'ala nur*) in the famous verse of light or *ayat al-nur* (Q 24.35). Similarly, a Hadith elaborates upon this topic, recording that the Prophet Muhammad stated that, 'God has seventy veils of light and darkness; were He to lift them, the august glories of His face would burn up everyone whose eyesight perceived Him' (cited in al-Ghazali 1998: xvii).

The Prophet's biographers, historians, exegetes, and mystical writers developed the metaphysical concept that God does not possess a form, or *sura*, per se. He nevertheless has a body, or *jism*, that consists in a purely physical sense as a mass of light without limbs (Van Ess 1989: 8). This interpretation was further strengthened by God's names and attributes that made use of light metaphors: for example, two of his names are

Figure 7.4 The Prophet Muhammad ascends through the heavens on the back of al-Buraq, as he approaches an opening in the sky pulled apart by an angel in the upper left corner, Jami, *Yusuf va Zulaykha* (Joseph and Potiphar's Wife), Qazvin, Iran, ca. 1550–1600 CE. London, British Museum, Or. 4535, folio 8v.

The Light (*al-nur*) and The Possessor of Light (*sahib al-nur*), and He is described by various authors, including Muhammad's biographer al-Yahsubi (d. 1149 CE), as The Illuminator of the heavens and earth and The One Who illuminates the hearts of believers with guidance (al-Yahsubi 1991: 127). In these many textual elaborations, God is portrayed as a detectable, albeit incorporeal, mass of light that emits rays as a means of revelation and perception (Van Ess 2000: 343).

Much as they expanded the 'veil' metaphor, Persian mystical poets also embraced and developed a metaphysics of light to describe the divine in their eulogistic encomia to God. Nizami and Jami once again emerge as leaders in the genre. For example, in his *Haft Paykar* (Seven Thrones), Nizami informs us that Muhammad ascended through the heavens, 'rending the veil of a thousand lights [until] that unveiled Brilliance reached his sight' (Nizami 1995: 9). Further describing God as the Eternal Light that is not meant for ocular perception (Nizami 1945: 192), Nizami further describes in his *Makhzan al-Asrar* Muhammad's encounter with the Lord on the night of his ascension:

He saw the sign of that Light (*ayat nuri*) that knows no decline,
 With eyes which were beyond imagination (*khiyal*)
 The vision of Him is free from accident and matter (*bi-ard va jawhar*)
 Because He is beyond accident and matter
 He saw God as the Absolute, and this is acceptable;
 [...] Whoso was permitted to see behind that curtain,
 Went on a path which is not a road
 He exists, but is not limited to any place
 He who is bound by space is not God
 Do not deny His permanence; it is blasphemy
 Do not limit Him to space; it is ignorance

(Nizami 1945: 103, 200–2)

Nizami's stanzas offer a poetic picture of God as limitless light, freed from the bonds of accident and matter. They also issue a warning against those who may attempt to limit God to spatial and temporal dimensions.

Such caveats did not go unheeded by Persian and Turkish painters, who were faced with the arduous task to depict an unrestricted, permanent and incorporeal God by means of pictorial devices. Artists who depicted Muhammad's encounter with God appear to have turned to the Persian poetic texts they illustrated, such as Nizami's *Makhzan al-Asrar* and Jami's *Yusuf va Zulaykha*, for help and guidance into what visual 'figures of speech' might be best employed to convey the ineffable qualities of the divine. As they developed their own rhetorical means to portray God, Safavid painters symbolically associated God with effulgent light.

Within the corpus of Safavid paintings, one composition that embraces this specific interpretative mode stands out because the artist overtly tackles the problem of depicting God (Figure 7.5). In this scene, the Prophet Muhammad, whose face is covered by a white facial veil and whose body is encircled by gold flames, kneels against a lapis sky. He faces a large bundle of gold flames, while light 'tentacles' reach the outer perimeter of the painting's frame. The large bundle of gold flames must be understood as a metaphorical representation of God as light, encountered by Muhammad upon his arrival at the highest horizon. That the Prophet genuflects and faces the gold blaze lends further support to this interpretation. Likewise, it recalls God's fire-like appearance to Moses on Mount Sinai as represented in European Christian manuscript illustrations of the twelfth to sixteenth centuries (Boespflug 1992: 14–15).

The painting's location within Jami's eulogy to God, Muhammad, and the *mi'raj* as included in his *Yusuf va Zulaykha* also confirms the identification of the gold bundle

Figure 7.5 The Prophet Muhammad kneels as he speaks to God, represented as a large flaming bundle, Jami, *Yusuf va Zulaykha* (Joseph and Potiphar's Wife), Qazvin or Shiraz, Iran, 1570–1 CE. Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Library, H. 1483, folio 42r.

as a stand-in for the divine. In the painting's accompanying text, the author Jami warns his readers that 'God's essence is exempt of quality, quantity and all spatial attributes. Intellect stands baffled before the essence of God: it is quite inept to pursue Him along that path' (Jami 1980: 2). Jami further informs us that God is 'free of the bonds of appearances' (Jami 1980: 4) and that He is like a bundle of blazing light: 'one spark from it flashed forth and set heaven and earth alight. Angels were dazzled by it, and sang its praises to the point of distraction' (Jami 1980: 5).

The flaming gold bundle depicted in this painting heralds God as primordial light emitted into the world as creative and igniting force. It also eulogizes God's sum total of 'light upon light', as mentioned in the Qur'an (Q 24.35). This iconographic device allows the artist to convey the notion of revelation-as-light while also reaffirming God's body as an unobservable form, a theme that is well developed within Persian encomiastic poetry. In this case, God is neither bound by the limits of space – including the picture plane, which appears ablaze with the swelling rotation of gold flames – nor is He entirely comprehensible by the faculty of ocular perception.

This conjunction of antipodal elements, positing mass against form and visibility against invisibility, is negotiated and resolved by means of a pictorial metaphor that, in a deliberate and calculated fashion, seeks to show God's epiphanic form (*mazhar*) as that of a large bundle of blazing light. To convey the radiance of God, the Safavid artist has utilized gold paint. His purposeful selection points to yet another concern that has marked Islamic painterly practices, namely how colour symbolism helped express or hint to the presence of divinity. In order to gauge how colours might have been understood, it is important to examine their use in paintings with an eye towards their various cultural and religious connotations as well as their synaesthetic qualities.

As noticeable in this and other Persian paintings of Muhammad's ascension and his encounter with God, shimmering gold and lapis blue dominate. Gold and lapis lazuli were the most expensive luxury materials essential to the production of organic and inorganic pigments used in manuscript illustrations (Porter 1992: 87). Gold was so expensive that even 'gold imitations' were devised to cut down on costs, while lapis lazuli, extracted almost exclusively from the mountains of Badakhshan, is a most rare and precious commodity (Porter 1992: 86, 94). While pigment-makers pulverized lapis and moistened it through a water solution, they frequently preferred to use gold leaf, rather than gold paint, crushed on demand in order to reduce waste to a minimum.

Beyond the economic aspects of the gold and lapis trade, both materials carried powerful symbolic connotations within Turco-Persian cultural contexts. These associations are certainly embedded within sixteenth-century manuscript illustrations of Persian poetical texts. One quick glance at the Persian words used to describe gold and lapis reveal the extent to which both luxury materials could gain new figurative meanings, especially with regards to notions of the divine.

In Persian, the word for gold is *zar*, a term that describes not only the metal itself but also money, riches and wealth. Sun metaphors also are constructed by adjectival expressions that include the word for gold; most important among these are *zarrin-sadaf* (gilt oyster or gilt mother-of-pearl), *zarrin-kasa* (gilt goblet) and *zarrin-humay* (gold phoenix). Furthermore, the Persian expression for 'profusely gilt' is *zar andar zar*, or literally 'gold upon gold' – a figure of speech that is conspicuously analogous to the Arabic metaphor of God as 'light upon light' (*nur 'ala nur*). The analogies between gold and God expand even further within Persian phraseology: for instance, the verb *dar zar giriftan*, which means 'to gild' or 'cover or overlay with gold', also figuratively signifies 'to overwhelm with benefits or favors', while the noun *zartusht* (also the name for the prophet Zoroaster) denotes supreme intelligence, divine light and first created entity (Steingass 2000: 613–17).

In Turkic cultures and languages, the term for gold (*altın*) is associated with the divine as well as royalty and luxury. Like dynastic pedigrees, including most especially the golden lineage of Chengiz Khan, gold's status reigns supreme due to its qualities as an incorruptible, pure and immaculate substance (Allsen 1997: 60, 68–9). As can be seen in these examples of Persian and Turkic terms and expressions – of which there exist many more – gold denotes wealth and blessing, the irradiant and enlightening heat of sun, divine favours and replenished blessings, and primordial being and creative intellect. These many associative connotations function as metaphors for God, echoing the Islamic theological and poetical texts that were penned over the course of centuries.

If gold provides a synesthetic proxy for spiritually sensing the presence of divinity, then blue tones best convey the metaphor of heaven. This is especially the case within a Persian literary context, in which the words for turquoise (*firūza*), lapis (*lajvard*) and azure (masc. *akhzar*; fem. *khazra*) are frequently employed to symbolize the empyrean and paradisiacal realms. The term for turquoise, or *firūza*, is linguistically linked to the words *firuz* or *firuzi*, which mean victorious, successful, happy and glorious (Steingass 200: 944). It is also used in adjectival constructs that describe heaven as a 'turquoise throne' (*firūza-takht*) or a 'turquoise vault' (*firūza-saqf*).

In their Persian eulogies describing Muhammad's approach towards God on the night of his ascension, Persian poets elaborate upon the concept of the heavenly vault as turquoise, lapis or azure in colour. For example, Nizami speaks of the sky as a 'lapis vault' (*lajvardi-saqf*) and informs us that Muhammad was 'passed on like a rose from hand to hand up this turquoise (*firūza*) carpeted stair until he reached the foot of the Throne' (Nizami 1945: 101) and that 'God creates the azure vault (*qubba-yi khadra*) without pillars' (Nizami 1945: 93). Moreover, in Turco-Mongolian cultures, God is referred to as the Sky God (*gök tanrı/tengri*), the term *gök* pointing to the celestial realms and associated with the Turkic adjectives for agreeable (*gökçe*) and beautiful (*gökçen/gökçek*) (Beffa 1978, 272). Relatedly, the Turkic term for turquoise (*firuze*) is closely aligned with *firuzi*, a word that means both victory and prosperity. These cerulean metaphors – ranging from muted azure to bright sky-blue and turquoise – are used as poetic tropes that describe the glorious celestial dwelling place of God. Just as importantly, in Persian and Turkish paintings they are deployed through blue pigments that seek to represent the locus of divinity, and hence to firmly ensconce God's presence within the picture plane.

In both Persian and Turkic cultural contexts, furthermore, the colour red has held pride of place in describing God's nature and power. Persian poets such as Nizami exploited the rhetorical potential of this particular hue, calling attention to God's luxuriousness through gem and floral analogies. For example, Nizami informs us that God adorned paradise with roses (*gul*) and narcissus (*nargis*) and mountains with rubies (*la'l*); that He created the richness of the ruby (*yaqut*) from fire and water; that He placed the blood (*khun*) of the heart in the earth; and that, upon Muhammad's arrival in the highest heaven, He prepared for the Prophet a wine (*sharab*) for him to drink. This sacramental wine, Nizami further tells us, acts as an indexical mark of God's eternal grace (*lutf-i azal*) and His mercy (*rahmat-i haqq*) upon Muhammad (Nizami 1945: 90–1, 104). In these Persian poetic descriptions, vermilion functions

as a colour-based metaphor for God's precious, life-inducing, primordial and, even, Eucharistic encounter with mankind.

In Turkic cultural spheres, the colour red (*qızıl*) stands for volatility and outburst, and it can carry both positive and negative implications, revealing the extent to which certain colour values can fluctuate. In the affirmative, red is a colour for love and passion, while in the negative it stands for sedition, fury and madness, as in the Turkish expression *qızıl deli*, or 'red (raving) mad' (Beffa 1978: 250–2). The fusion of these two colour-encoded meanings – that is, ardour plus ferocity – serve as double descriptors for the passion of man's encounter with an extraordinarily powerful Deity. Thus, the colour red, along with its various connotations within Turkic cultural spheres, can help explain why the Timurid artist who painted Muhammad's encounter with God in the *Mi'rajnama* (Book of Ascension) of ca. 1436–7 CE decided to use in this particular composition – and in no other painting in the manuscript – an overwhelming amount of red, combined with billows of gold clouds, to suggest the overpowering presence of the divine (Figure 7.6).⁵ Here, Muhammad genuflects in God's presence, itself made visibly real through the use of red and gold. The language of colour, its synesthetic perception, and its semiotic connotations thus help broaden the spectrum of colour metaphors used in Turco-Persian painterly practices in order to suggest God's presence within the composition.

Real absence

Much as Islamic speculative and poetic texts offered word-based disquisitions on the nature of the divine, paintings produced especially in Persian and Turkish spheres from ca. 1300 to 1600 CE likewise provided working definitions or 'searching images' (Guthrie 1993: 98) that attempted to explore and provide a number of visual equivalents of mental cognitions. The image world, too, functioned as testing grounds to convey God's ineffable presence within the circumscribed boundaries of pictorial form. As a result, artistic practices in eastern Islamic lands aimed at representing God must be seen as visual speculations in metaphysics and as powerful mechanisms for persuading viewers to engage in spiritual contemplation of the divine in its multiple forms and dimensions. In other words, texts and images assisted in prompting conceptual imaginations – that is, what the theologian Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209 CE) calls perceptions or picturations (*tasawwurat*) – for exploring God and His many attributes (Abrahamov 2002: 219).

As Muslim artists took part in the dialogue over the nature of the divine, they were successful in at least partially determining its course via the harnessing and intellectualization of the pictorial mode. By synecdoche and metaphor, they sought to strengthen the unknowability of God's essence and attributes, as well as to reaffirm His absolute difference or *mukhalafa*. This 'set-apart' quality of the sacred is one that is not particular to Islamic traditions; rather, it has been deployed in many religious contexts in order to establish both accessible and forbidden zones of interactions (Evans 2003: 35). Within Turco-Persian pictorial traditions, more specifically, artists aimed to depict God's *mukhalafa* by calling attention to the divinity's esoteric presence

Figure 7.6 The Prophet Muhammad genuflects in the highest heaven while in the gold-and-red presence of God, anonymous, *Mi'rajnama* (Book of Ascension), probably Herat, modern-day Afghanistan, ca. 1436–7 CE. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, suppl. turc 190, folio 44r.

and exoteric absence, between His absence in the visible realm and His presence in the supra-formal world. It is this seeming paradox – that is, the strong affirmation of God by means of analogy combined with the visual declaration of His absolute otherness – that artists wished to underscore and promote by their own creative means.

In doing so, Turco-Persian painters used calculated devices and visual cues to convey the deistic sum (*tawhid*) of God in pictorial terms. Through such stratagems,

they were successful in visually asserting that a numinous presence can be marked as much by its omnipresent reality as by its ostensible absence. As a result, images produced in premodern eastern Islamic lands developed their own sensorial regimes and domains of speculative theology in order to tackle and meet some of the most challenging questions with which man has engaged since time immemorial: namely, how God can be existentially and sensibly real, and yet so far removed from spiritual, intellectual and visual comprehension.