

Windows on the House of Islam

*Muslim Sources on Spirituality
and Religious Life*

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* Ritual and Creed in Moses' Conversation with God

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Moses' conversation with Muhammad is well known, but Moses is still more renowned as the *Kalim Allah*: the one who conversed with God. The Swahili *Epic of Moses* (*Utenzi wa Musa*) is the first literary work yet discovered in northern Mozambique, evidence that a lively Islamic culture existed far from the major cities of East Africa long ago.⁵ Tentatively dated to the late nineteenth century, the text may have been written in Kenya. About 330 stanzas in length, the poem recounts an intriguing conversation (*munajat*) between the prophet Moses and God, offering important insights into both the spirituality and theological views of early modern Muslims in East Africa. Topics include the full range of basic religious duties and elements of the creed, as well as a rare "first-person" description of how God created the world. It opens with Moses slaughtering a goat, possibly recalling Leviticus 9:3, but here the prophet seems motivated by a desire to receive a revelation; God obliges. We have here a rare example of a Swahili text that describes a most intimate spiritual experience, similar to but less mythical in tone than accounts of Muhammad's Ascension (see part 7 below). In this story, even the prophet Moses needs encouragement to perform the fundamental religious observances. After a brief invocation, the poet continues:

One day when Moses was in a state of ritual purity [after ritual ablutions], he heard a voice in the air and he knew it was a sign from God. It gave him strength and he fasted for forty days in the mountains. Then he heard again the voice of God: "O ye mountains! Today I need Moses the son of Amram. I am the Lord without equal. Moses, hasten to come to me! I want you so that we may see each other and speak words to each other."

God's voice shook the mountains, but the Prophet Moses went up and climbed higher and higher. Up to the Mountain of Tur [i.e., Sinai] he climbed, thinking only of God. He made great efforts climbing the steep rocks until he reached the summit at the end of the path. There he prayed a salat of two cycles of prostration, and God on his throne saw it. Moses heard God's voice; it was like thunder and already he received insight. God spoke to his prophet: "I am your God. I am alone. There is no other.

Listen to me, Moses my messenger, I am God the Absolute, I am the First and the Last. Listen to me, beloved of my heart, I will give you my words."

Moses heard God's words while he was in the act of prostration, and he increased the intensity of his prayers. Then the Lord spoke: "Rise from your prayer. I am the Knower of all secrets: I can hear the date palms rustling in the orchards, I can see all that happens in the shadows of the night." While God spoke the earth shook, and Moses fainted for a long hour. When he came to, he stood up and prayed: "O merciful Lord!" God answered [with a phrase uttered by pilgrims to Mecca]: "At your service!" When Moses heard this he fell down on his face, and God asked him: "When I answer you, you fall down! What is the matter, my prophet?" Moses gave the Lord his answer: "O my Lord, when you answer me with 'At your service,' I feel I am falling and losing my senses." God answered: "My prophet! Hear my words: Every day, when a servant of mine calls me, mentioning my name with true intentions and a pure heart, I answer quickly: 'At your service,' I answer. Whenever a person calls me, I can hear him wherever he is; even if there are many, I will hear their prayers at once. Now, Moses, if you have a wish, speak!"

Moses spoke to his Lord: "My Lord! I wish to see you!" And Moses saw what seemed like a valley of bright light. He fainted again, so strong was the light; he heard hundreds of angels calling him: "Moses! You have sinned! The Lord God cannot be seen!" And Moses felt as if the mountains were crumbling and the earth was sinking away. But on the third day God relented and restored his brain to complete consciousness and light. The Lord gave him grace because he had become humble.

And Moses spoke to the Lord: "Lord, next time please warn me, may I receive right guidance in time, that I may continue to be humble." The Lord spoke to him: "Avoid the wrath of your Lord. Speak: There is no god but God, and adhere to that conviction. Have no doubt nor any alternative views ever! Doubt will make you want to see, and doubting God is sin. Repeat 'There is no god but Allah' with reverence. When the heart is upright, the soul will not be condemned on the Day of Reckoning. With my mercy you will be carried across to the Garden of Bliss, there to live

forever. Until the end of time repeat: There is no god but Allah. Mercy comes after wrath.* Make your prayers numerous at every hour. Pray also for my final prophet Muhammad the Intercessor for his community. Remember to keep the fast and make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Do not neglect to pay the zakat [alms] regularly."

When the Lord had finished speaking to his faithful prophet, Moses suddenly saw how his arms were growing wings, seven on each side, beautiful wings decorated with pearls, and holy scripture was engraved on the feathers: the Torah and the Psalms. But when Moses heard the Lord praise his final prophet, Muhammad, Moses' heart was spoiled by envy and anger as well.[†] Jealousy entered his heart so that he lost all reason. Strength left his hands and the lovely wings disappeared from his arms. So Moses asked God the Compeller: "That Muhammad, what kind of person will he be?"

The Lord answered him: "I have given him beauty and I have given him the world, for the entire world will one day accept Muhammad's word and the religion of Islam. I swear by me that he will be mentioned after my name is mentioned in the *shahada*.[‡] If it had not been for Muhammad, I would not have created the world,[§] there would be no moon, nor a sun to give light, nor a sky nor an earth, nor paradise nor hell, nor life nor death, if it had not been for my favorite Prophet whom I decided to create first. The prophets would not have existed, nor the animals nor birds, nor the waters, salt or fresh, Adam and Eve would never have been created, nor the forbidden fruit nor any tree or plant, not even the angel Jibril, if it had not been for the Intercessor.

"Now Moses, I tell you, choose between this world and the next. If you choose this world you will surely regret it. Choose between God and the world, Moses; meditate and reflect, avoid hellfire, it has dangerous snakes on every floor. Beware! Every serpent is as long as a year's walk. These terrifying snakes are everywhere in the houses of the wicked, the

* Inverting a sacred hadith; later in the conversation, God says the opposite.

† Swahili literature provides many examples of one prophet "envying" another's loftier state.

‡ "There is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

§ A near quotation of a popular sacred hadith.

oppressors, those who worshipped false gods as well as the eaters of forbidden food, the wine drinkers and drunkards. I have placed snakes ready for the man who rebels against his father and lies with his mother.

"And for the merchant who does not give alms when breaking the fast and for the fornicator I have lit a great fire in hell. Do not doubt it: those who cut their beards and those who pray while weeping will receive no pardon. Amru Rabani, the angel of the fire, will have their trembling souls to roast. The drunkard will not be able to pronounce the confession of faith in the grave, so my snakes will creep all over him.⁶ I warn all people, do not be tempted to slander others; fear me! Do not increase my wrath by even thinking about atheism [*kufr*]. An angry heart without faith [*iman*] will follow the Devil.

"The gift for those who long for me," thus spoke the kind Lord further, "is knowledge of the divine qualities, the lauding words by which I am praised. He that fears me with goodness, I will fill him with mercy and I will decide in his favor on Judgment Day. Night and day I observe everyone, and whoever repeats my name while doing good things, I will fill him with mercy, and punishment will be removed from him. Remember death day and night: it may come at any time, and when it comes there is no delay. My messenger of death will take his soul, so a person has no other worry in life than to think of the last hour. If a person makes his thoughts pure, I will forgive his sins. The digger of graves will live in heaven, and the one who buries his mother with love will live in a palace in paradise. The one who carries the bier with a heart eager to please, his sins will be forgiven. And the one who pays for the funeral and feeds the poor need not worry and will avoid all suffering later.

"Give meals to the poor and let them be good meals. Feed also my fakirs* and do not despise them." At that point Moses asked: "Lord, what is a fakir?" God the Giver spoke: "A fakir is a lonely man who is disliked by the people; he is never treated like a neighbor, people take no notice of him. They will invite a rich man to their homes, but they will ignore a fakir. If you invite my fakir with honor and give him a good

* From the Arabic *faqir*, lit. mendicants, beggars, perhaps referring to Sufis; one of many Arabic terms used in Swahili, like *iman* and *kufr* above.

meal, then on the Day of Resurrection I will remove your sins from your record.

"Furthermore, never be angry because in your anger there is Satan's footprint. Every dead body must be buried, even the slaves; it is honorable to be buried by all people together. Do not dwell in the company of a miser, nor of a greedy man, for he will not leave you your house. Avoid liars and do not speak evil of people nor reveal their disgrace. Never lie. Beware of adultery. On the day when the souls emerge there will be anxiety and pain, and the rich will be reduced.

"Moses! Your people must always repeat my name and my greatness, then an angel will come [at Judgment] and purify all the people with compassion, those who have remembered me all their lives with gratitude. Their sins will be removed."

Moses spoke and asked the Generous One: "What did you do to Adam? What were his sins?" The Rich One spoke: "Adam rebelled against me to follow the Devil instead of what I had told him. I placed him in the Garden; he could not eat from all the trees, but he ate from the forbidden tree knowingly. A quarrel does not end soon. I had to expel him from heaven. My commandments must never be questioned. I am the Giver. Wrath comes after mercy."

God the Giver spoke: "I will always stay close to my believers. My visiting will be in their hearts. There I will stay. I am as close as that which throbs in your throat" [50:16].

Then faithful Moses asked: "How can I know who is a believer?" Spoke the Exalted One, answering his good prophet: "The one who abandons the forbidden and does what is allowed and loves the law for my sake." Further Moses inquired: "Where do you live? What is your true abode?" The Lord God the Giver revealed to him: "I live up there above all else on the Throne. But there is more that I will disclose: even though I reside on my throne, it is not there alone that I live. My existence spreads across the skies" [see 2:255]. And Moses asked: "Who are you? Please explain yourself to me." The Powerful One answered: "I am I, with the angels."

Then Moses asked: "Who is righteous [*salih*]?" The Lord spoke: "A righteous person keeps my commandments by night as well as by day.

He is my beloved and I shall recognize him [on the Day of Judgment]." Then Moses asked: "Where is your abode? If it is not only on the Throne, where are you?" The Majesty spoke: "You want to know my first existence? Then listen: In the beginning I created something with the likeness of an egg, and the whole creation in one, the very first, but it was invisible. It was a hundred thousand years long and as much in width. Then I made the elements: light, fire, water, and earth. I created the earth out of foam. I created the rocks, and I placed one rock in Jerusalem as a good gift. It will await the Resurrection when the masses meet there. The throngs of the risen will converge there. * That will be the moment of luck or disgrace and joy for the good. I accompany the clouds, I reveal by my power, I am my power, there is nothing that can stop it." The Lord spoke: "All things people wish for will be given to them in this life and the hereafter."

All the Majesty spoke further: "You want to know my first? Hear, we will tell you: My first is to love the thing I begin to do, and that is creating the heart of a human being, for what is more useful than the heart? The length of a human heart is eight finger breadths across, and yet I dwell inside it.⁺ Every heart, trustworthy one, is rounded, soft and weak, more so than any other thing on earth. These hearts, my prophet, a mustard seed of faith inside one will be sufficient for salvation. Each heart, my prophet, I give it a soul inside it, like a little bird with green feathers. When you die that bird will fly back to me. It will show me if there was a mustard seed of true faith in a person's heart at the time of his death, so that he did not have to fear death. No one has to fear death and yet they cry when death approaches, but I do not prolong their lives. The body dies. I created all souls out of the first light. Half of this light in my hand I made into the soul of my prophet Muhammad. I placed this light-substance in front of my face for a thousand years until it began to spread and the soul worshipped me. Then it rose up and stood before me.

"Ten thousand angels prostrated themselves worshipping the light,

* An apparent reference to the Dome of the Rock (see fig. 23).

+ An allusion to a sacred hadith that says that although heaven and earth cannot contain God, the human heart can.

performing the salat of noon. Only then did I create my throne of light, the lesser angels, the human souls, and many other things: the wind that carries voices, the palanquin of the starry sky, the bright light of the sun and the full moon. The skies with their mists, the clouds and the earth, and the ocean full of waves. I created mountains, my prophet, and the true paradise full of good things. I adorned it with jewels, pearls and gemstones, with red gold and fine silver.

"I will place all human souls in it who have not worshipped idols but have followed the truth of God, thus keeping sin away from themselves. This paradise, Confessor, I will place in it the Muslims who have worshipped me unceasingly, praying the good prayers; and those who have kept the vigils, who have never harmed other people nor envied anyone, nor coveted anything they saw. But everyone who rebels and follows the devil, the seducer of souls, will go into the fire forever. Having created all those things, I then created the jinns and placed them in the wells; there they live.

"After that, Confessor, I created Adam, who would rule the jinns and make them his subjects. Listen carefully: this is not *your* Adam who was your ancestor, it was not the same person. This Adam lived for a thousand and ten years, then I took him away and replaced him with another king of the jinns. Many years later I created the human Adam and his wife, Eve. All their descendants will die at an unknown time, so remember to repent your sins daily, keep the fast in Ramadan, pray to the Lord day and night, love your parents, respect your neighbor, be generous to the poor and to the orphans, and live in peace with all people. I will reward you later.

"Let there be no corruption, accept the commandment to pray, submit yourselves to my law, purify your souls, and read my book. Contemplate my mercy: on the Day of Resurrection your sins will be forgiven. The one who worships me sincerely according to my religion of praying, I will reduce his pain on the day his soul is taken."

Think, human being! Be honest, never lie! Pray God that he lighten the suffering in the afterlife and forgive you your sins. God of grace! Help us with your power. Be merciful toward us obedient Muslims! This is my last wish in this life.