

The Isrā' and Mi'rāj Narratives and Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy: A Critical Study of Miguel Asín Palacios's Influence Hypothesis

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Abstract

Italy maintained close historical and civilizational ties with the Islamic world during the Middle Ages. It was therefore among the Western countries with the strongest links to the Near East. Arabic culture and Eastern languages received substantial attention through translation and publication. This exchange fostered an intellectual revival and an exceptional literary experience in Europe.

This study examines the Isrā' and Mi'rāj narratives in relation to Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy. It offers a critical assessment of Miguel Asín Palacios's hypothesis of influence. The discussion focuses on the three parts of Dante's poem: Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso. It rereads the work through the thesis advanced by the Spanish Arabist Miguel Asín Palacios. In particular, it considers whether Dante drew on the miracle of the Isrā' and Mi'rāj and on Islamic literary heritage, including the writings of Ibn 'Arabī and Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī. The study also provides a balanced critique of Palacios's method. It reviews the scholarly controversy surrounding his hypothesis and later discoveries, such as the Book of Muhammad's Ladder. It concludes by identifying directions for future research in this field.

Keywords: Isrā'; Mi'rāj; Divine Comedy; Dante Alighieri; Miguel Asín Palacios; Ibn 'Arabī; Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī; influence hypothesis.

Introduction

Relations between the Islamic world and Italy involved extensive cultural and intellectual exchange from the Middle Ages onward. Several geographical and historical factors supported this exchange. Italy's central Mediterranean position was particularly important. So was Muslim rule in Sicily for nearly three centuries (827–1091 CE). Sicily and al-Andalus also transmitted a significant part of the Arab-Islamic heritage to Europe through translation and scholarly and cultural exchange. This interaction facilitated the transfer of philosophical, scientific, and literary knowledge. It enriched European thought during a period of profound intellectual and cultural change.

Italian literature flourished within this historical and cultural setting. Its enduring works include the Divine Comedy by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321). The poem is one of the greatest epics in world literature. It combines a rigorous artistic structure with a profound religious and philosophical vision and a detailed representation of the afterlife. It has therefore attracted sustained scholarly and critical attention and has been translated into most of the world's languages.

Interest in the poem has not been limited to its literary and artistic value. Scholars have also investigated its intellectual and cultural sources, especially those related to the otherworldly journey

that forms its central structure. Several hypotheses have sought to explain the sources Dante used to construct his work. One of the best known was proposed by the Spanish Arabist Miguel Asín Palacios in his book *Islam and the Divine Comedy*. Palacios argued that the Islamic account of the *Isrāʾ* and *Miʾrāj* was among Dante's principal sources for imagining his journey through the afterlife. He based this claim on perceived similarities in narrative structure, descriptions of the other world, the sequence of the journey, and several intellectual and symbolic elements.

Since its publication, this hypothesis has generated extensive scholarly debate. Some researchers maintain that the similarities exceed coincidence and indicate genuine influence. Others regard them as insufficient evidence of direct borrowing. They argue that the parallels may reflect religious and cultural features shared across medieval literature or may derive from earlier Latin and Christian sources. The Asín Palacios hypothesis has therefore remained open to debate. It should be reconsidered through modern critical approaches and through a careful analysis of its historical and textual evidence. Such analysis must avoid exaggeration in either affirmation or denial.

This study addresses a major question in comparative literature: the relationship between Islamic heritage and the *Divine Comedy*. It does so by examining Miguel Asín Palacios's hypothesis and evaluating it critically. The study also clarifies the nature of cultural interaction between Islamic and European civilizations. It explores the possible limits of European medieval literature's use of Islamic heritage. In this way, it supports a critical method based on textual analysis and historical documentation rather than preconceived judgments.

The study has several objectives. It introduces Miguel Asín Palacios's hypothesis and the foundations on which it rests. It analyzes the historical and textual evidence he used to argue that Dante was influenced by the *Isrāʾ* and *Miʾrāj* narrative. It also considers the main objections raised against the hypothesis. Finally, it offers an objective assessment of Palacios's reasoning in light of modern critical scholarship.

The principal research question is therefore as follows:

To what extent did Miguel Asín Palacios establish a scholarly hypothesis demonstrating that Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* was influenced by the *Isrāʾ* and *Miʾrāj* narrative? How persuasive are his historical and textual arguments when assessed in light of modern scholarship? Two subsidiary questions follow:

- What historical and textual evidence did Miguel Asín Palacios use to support his hypothesis that the *Isrāʾ* and *Miʾrāj* narrative influenced Dante Alighieri?
- How did later scholars respond to this hypothesis, and what were their principal criticisms?

These questions frame the present study, entitled "*The Isrāʾ and Miʾrāj Narratives and Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy: A Critical Study of Miguel Asín Palacios's Influence Hypothesis*." The study critically evaluates Palacios's argument and analyzes its historical and textual foundations. Its aim is to reach a balanced scholarly view of the issue within its historical and literary context. The discussion is divided into four sections:

- **Section One:** Dante Alighieri: His Intellectual and Literary Life.
- **Section Two:** The *Divine Comedy*: An Introduction and the Circumstances of Its Composition.
- **Section Three:** The Otherworldly Journey in the *Divine Comedy*.

- **Section Four:** A Critical Study of Miguel Asín Palacios's Hypothesis that the Divine Comedy Was Influenced by Isrā' and Mi'rāj Literature.

Section One: Dante Alighieri: His Intellectual and Literary Life

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) was one of the foremost European poets of the Middle Ages and one of the most influential figures in Italian literary history. He played a major role in establishing the Italian vernacular as a language of high literature. He is therefore regarded as a founding father of Italian literature and as a leading figure in the literary revival that prepared the transition from medieval thought to the early Renaissance.

Dante was born in Florence in 1265. He grew up in an environment marked by vigorous intellectual, religious, and political activity. He studied classical literature, philosophy, and theology. He was influenced by Latin and Christian traditions, especially the works of Virgil¹, as well as by the scholastic thought of his age. These influences are clearly reflected in his literary and intellectual production.²

Dante's activities were not confined to literature. He also participated in Florentine political life and belonged to the White Guelph faction. The city's political conflict resulted in a judgment against him in 1302. He was exiled from Florence, fined, and threatened with death by burning if he returned without complying with the sentence. He spent the rest of his life moving among several Italian cities. Exile left a deep mark on his character and writing, especially the Divine Comedy, which reflects his intellectual, religious, and political outlook.

Dante died in Ravenna in 1321 at approximately fifty-six years of age. His remains are still held there, despite sustained efforts by Florence to recover the body of the great poet whose stature and exceptional value the city recognized only after his death.³ He left a major literary legacy.

His most important works include *Vita Nuova*, which combines poetry and prose and expresses his emotional and intellectual experience;⁴ *Il Convivio*; *De Monarchia*; and several lyric poems. His worldwide reputation, however, rests chiefly on his epic poem, the Divine Comedy (*Divina Commedia*). It is one of the greatest works in the human literary heritage because of its philosophical depth, religious vision, and carefully constructed verse. For centuries, it has remained a major subject of study, research, and criticism.

Section Two: The Divine Comedy: An Introduction and the Circumstances of Its Composition

The Divine Comedy (*Divina Commedia*) is one of Dante Alighieri's best-known works and one of the greatest epics in world literary history. He composed it during his years of exile, from 1308 until his death in Ravenna in 1321. The poem represents the culmination of his literary and intellectual production. It is also a foundational text of Italian literature because of its philosophical depth, disciplined poetic structure, and comprehensive religious and ethical vision.

The poem consists of three principal canticles: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. It recounts Dante's symbolic journey through the afterlife. He is guided first by the Roman poet Virgil and later by Beatrice. The narrative combines Christian theology, philosophical reflection, and poetic imagination.

Dante wrote the poem in the Italian vernacular at a time when Latin remained the dominant language of scholarly and literary writing. His choice helped establish Italian as a literary language. The Divine

Comedy has been translated into most of the world's languages. Major Arabic versions include those by Hasan Uthman, Hanna Abboud, and Kazim Jihad. These translations introduced Arab readers to this landmark of world literature.

The Divine Comedy brings together literature, theology, and philosophy. It invokes historical, religious, and mythological figures⁵ and combines reality with imagination and history with symbol. The poem thus has multiple intellectual and civilizational dimensions. It has consequently become central to comparative studies of its literary and intellectual sources, including studies of its relationship to Islamic narratives, especially the *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj*.

The Origin of the Title “Divine Comedy”

The poem was originally entitled *Commedia*, in keeping with the literary genre to which it belonged. That genre rested on two basic principles. First, it employed an accessible middle vernacular that ordinary people could understand. Second, its events moved toward a happy ending. The Italian poet and writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), who lived about a quarter-century after Dante, is credited with adding the adjective “Divine” (*Divina*). The work thereafter became known as the Divine Comedy. Dante chose the term “Comedy” because, in his view, the course of life begins in a bleak, dark forest and ends in divine happiness.⁶

Florence was then experiencing a severe political and economic crisis. Dante represented the interests of his party, the Whites. His opponents in the Black faction therefore brought him to trial on false charges that included bribery, political corruption, and conspiracy against the Church. The judges issued an unjust sentence of permanent exile. They also declared that he could be killed and burned if he defied the judgment and returned to Florence. This sentence caused Dante lasting pain.

After his exile, Dante spent his final years moving among Italian cities. He eventually settled first in Verona and then in Ravenna. There he lived under the patronage of its rulers and with the respect of its notables until his death.

Section Three: The Otherworldly Journey in the Divine Comedy

The Divine Comedy is a distinctive work in which Dante gave concrete and vivid form to an imagined reality. The poem centers on the condition of souls after death. It asks how human beings are judged by divine justice after their earthly lives and according to the virtues or vices they have displayed.

To embody this theme, Dante transfers living figures and events from the earthly world into the afterlife. He first passes through *Inferno* and portrays the punishments endured by tormented souls. He then ascends to *Purgatorio* and observes how the repentant atone for their sins in pursuit of purification. His journey ends in *Paradiso*. There, absolute bliss is revealed, and he witnesses the forms of happiness enjoyed by the righteous and sincere.

1. Summary of Dante Alighieri's Epic Poem, the Divine Comedy

The Divine Comedy is an imaginative epic poem by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri. It consists of 100 cantos containing 14,233 lines of verse. The poem follows Dante on an imaginary journey through the three realms of the afterlife: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.

Dante divided the poem into three main parts. Inferno contains thirty-four cantos, including an introductory canto for the poem as a whole. Purgatorio and Paradiso each contain thirty-three cantos. The entire poem is written in terza rima and follows a precise pattern. Each canticle ends with the word “stars.” According to the narrative, the journey lasts a full week: two days in Inferno, four days in Purgatorio, and one day in Paradiso.⁷

The contents of the three canticles may be summarized as follows:

1. Inferno

Inferno is the first canticle of Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* and the best-known part of the epic. It presents a journey through the afterlife that begins at the entrance to Hell and descends to its deepest point. In Dante’s conception, Hell has a graduated structure consisting of an entrance and nine circles. Different forms of sin and punishment are assigned to these circles. The structure is divided into Upper and Lower Hell. Upper Hell comprises the second through fifth circles. Lower Hell, also called the City of Dis, comprises the sixth through ninth circles.

Dante travels through this realm with the Roman poet Virgil. As he moves from one circle to another, he witnesses the punishments prepared for sinners. The journey ends at the deepest point of Hell, before he proceeds to the next stage of his otherworldly journey: Purgatory⁸.

Dante completed Inferno in 1314. He finished the remaining canticles by 1317, after moving to Ravenna.

2- Purgatorio

After two days in Inferno, Dante reaches Purgatorio, where he spends four days. In Dante’s dramatic conception, Purgatory is a towering mountain in the Southern Hemisphere opposite the summit of Hell. The setting is marked by serenity, gentle sorrow, and gradual release from the burdens of earthly memory. Purgatory consists of seven terraces where sinners atone for their transgressions. Its inhabitants differ from those of Inferno because they have repented. Their hope of salvation opens the way to bliss. Each purified soul rises to the eternal realm of Paradise.⁹

3. Paradiso

Dante’s portrayal of Paradise is both magnificent and philosophically enigmatic. The blessed appear in the divine presence and together form the “Mystic Rose.” They occupy places in a vast amphitheater according to their degrees of righteousness and their heroic deeds. They may also appear in the celestial spheres of the Moon, Mars, and other planets¹⁰.

Section Four: A Critical Study of Miguel Asín Palacios’s Hypothesis that the Divine Comedy Was Influenced by Isrā’ and Mi‘rāj Literature

Since its appearance, the *Divine Comedy* has held a distinguished place in European literary and intellectual circles, especially in Italy. It has been regarded as one of the greatest epics in Western literary history because of its philosophical depth, religious vision, and disciplined artistic construction. Scholars traditionally viewed it as the product of Dante’s genius and literary creativity. This view was challenged by the Spanish Arabist and Catholic priest Miguel Asín Palacios (1871–1944),¹¹ who devoted much of his life to the study of Arab and Islamic heritage. In 1919, he initiated

a major controversy when he published the thesis he had presented upon his election to the Royal Spanish Academy. It was entitled *Islamic Eschatology in the Divine Comedy*.¹²

In some Arabic translations, the book is entitled *Islam's Influence on the Divine Comedy*.

1. Sources of Miguel Asín Palacios's Thesis

Palacios's thesis generated major controversy in Western literary and historical criticism.¹³ He argued that the principal elements and structural foundations of the *Divine Comedy* were drawn directly from accounts of the Prophet Muhammad's *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj*. He further maintained that Dante used details of the Ascension and scenes of Paradise and Hell as a basic model for constructing his otherworldly journey.

Palacios based this claim on striking similarities in artistic structure, the progression of events, and the precise description of the otherworldly realms in Islamic narratives and Dante's poem. He asserted that the poem's intellectual and aesthetic sources had wholly Arab-Islamic roots and circulated in European cultural and religious circles during the Middle Ages.¹⁴ This position underscores the extent to which Islamic civilization influenced the formation of modern European literature.

2. The Earliest Formation of the Idea: From Ibn Masarra and Ibn 'Arabī to the Prophet's Mi'rāj

In the introduction to his thesis, Asín Palacios explains how the idea first developed. In an earlier study of the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Masarra, he had argued that Ibn Masarra's Neoplatonic theories influenced not only Franciscan theologians and the school of Thomas Aquinas but also Dante Alighieri.¹⁵

Palacios then observed a striking similarity between the general outline of Dante and Beatrice's ascent through the heavens of Paradise and another symbolic account. The latter describes a Sufi philosopher's ascent to heaven in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* by the great Andalusian mystic Ibn 'Arabī, a disciple of Ibn Masarra's school.¹⁶

The most important methodological shift in Palacios's research came when he examined Ibn 'Arabī's text more closely. He concluded that Ibn 'Arabī's symbolic story was itself a Sufi adaptation of a broader and older religious and literary tradition in Islamic heritage. This tradition was the Prophet's *Mi'rāj*, preceded by the Night Journey from Mecca to Jerusalem.¹⁷

At this point, Palacios formulated his central idea. He proposed that the entire corpus of Islamic narratives and writings on the *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* formed the original model from which Dante derived his conception of the afterlife.

This methodological move gave the thesis considerable depth. Palacios shifted from a single textual source, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, to a broad corpus of *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* literature and Islamic eschatological beliefs. At the same time, the expansion weakened the argument for any one specific source.

Asín opens his book by stating that the *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* narrative, like most religious narratives, arose from the Qur'anic verse: "Exalted is He who carried His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose surroundings We have blessed, so that We might show him some of Our signs. He alone is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing."¹⁸ Exegetes and transmitters later expanded their

explanations of this verse. A rich body of narratives formed around it, which Palacios divided into three groups:

- **The first group** comprises Isrā' narratives dating from around the ninth century CE (third century AH).
- **The second group** comprises narratives focused on the events of the Mi'rāj.
- **The third group** comprises later narratives in which the Isrā' and Mi'rāj accounts became intertwined.¹⁹

Asín then traces the exegetes' comments and explanations. He extends the analysis to symbolic Sufi narratives derived from the account, beginning with Ibn 'Arabī's experience. He next considers literary works adapted from it and concludes with a concise summary of practical comparisons between these works and the Divine Comedy.

2. A Comparison of the Divine Comedy with Islamic Narratives and Accounts

In his book, Asín Palacios makes detailed comparisons between the Divine Comedy and a wide range of Islamic narratives and accounts. He traces points of convergence in the construction of the afterlife. These include the division of Hell into graded levels; the weighing of good and evil deeds; the bliss of Paradise; journeys across eschatological seas; stories of sleepers; periods of respite from punishment; and scenes in which angels and demons contend for possession of a deceased person's soul.²⁰

Palacios cites the following evidence in support of this influence:

- Hadith reports in which a person's deeds on the Day of Judgment are embodied in limbs that testify against that person.
- Hadith reports in which righteous deeds assume the form of a handsome man who brings glad tidings to the believer in the grave.²¹

Asín concludes this part with an important classification that underpins his argument. He divides the features he identifies as Islamic in origin into two main categories:

- The first category includes features that appear directly in Dante's poem. Examples are Hell and its descending levels, as well as punishments such as suspending the damned by their heels, immersing them in lakes, and having serpents consume their bodies.
- The second category includes Islamic features found in medieval Christian legends that predate Dante. Examples include the Vision of Saint Paul, the story of Tundale, and the Voyage of Saint Brendan, although these features do not appear directly in the Divine Comedy itself.²²

From this classification, Asín concluded that poetic conceptions of the afterlife circulating in Europe before Dante had entered European literature through contact with Islamic literature. They had not arisen within Christian European society.²³ In Palacios's view, Dante was thus connected to Islam in two ways:

- **A direct link:** represented by the features that appear in Dante's poem itself.
- **An indirect link:** through medieval Christian narratives and legends that had absorbed Islamic elements before reaching Dante's imagination.

This classification nevertheless requires critical examination. On the surface, it appears to strengthen Palacios's argument by increasing the amount of evidence and proposing several routes of transmission. Yet it creates another difficulty. It broadens the concept of similarity between Islamic

and Christian traditions until it encompasses almost every feature of the afterlife, including Hell, the scales, Paradise, the sleep of the righteous, and the struggle between angels and demons.

In fact, these concepts belong to eschatological ideas found in several religions and ancient civilizations. They are not exclusive to Islam and Christianity.

3. A Comparison between the Qur'anic A'raf and Dante's Limbo

One of Palacios's notable detailed comparisons concerns Limbo, the first circle Dante visits in Inferno. It is the dwelling place of unbaptized children and virtuous non-Christians, including several prominent Muslim poets, philosophers, and heroes. Palacios compares it with the Qur'anic concept of al-A'raf, a realm situated between Paradise and Hell.²⁴

Palacios also identifies a semantic similarity between the two terms. The Latin root of limbo means an edge or border. Al-a'raf derives from al-'urf, which denotes an elevated boundary between two realms. Both words therefore convey the meaning of a dividing limit or edge.²⁵

4. The Two Strongest Models of Mi'raj Imitation in Asín Palacios's Account

In the first chapter, under the seventh section on literary imitations of the narrative, Asín distinguishes two forms of Mi'raj imitation in Islamic literature. In his view, they correspond to two possible forms of Dante's relationship with Islamic heritage.

- The first is a religious and mystical imitation, represented by Ibn 'Arabī's symbolic ascent in al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya. Asín compares the stages of this ascent in detail with Dante's spiritual journey. In his reading, al-Burāq symbolizes divine love, Jerusalem symbolizes light and truth, and the Lote Tree of the Utmost Boundary symbolizes faith and virtue. He concludes that Dante, "like Muslim mystics in general and Ibn 'Arabī in particular," drew on the symbolism of the human ascent toward ethical and spiritual perfection.²⁶

- The second is a literary and critical, rather than religious, imitation. It is represented by Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī's Risālat al-Ghufrān (The Epistle of Forgiveness). Asín devotes a separate discussion to this work in the first chapter (pp. 68–81); he does not mention it only in passing.²⁷ He observes that Abū al-'Alā' pursued the dual purpose of theological and literary criticism. He made Ibn al-Qāriḥ, the protagonist of his narrative, encounter numerous historical and literary figures in Paradise and Hell, most of them poets and writers. The primary purpose of these scenes was literary criticism. Their secondary purpose was to criticize the narrow outlook of contemporary religious scholars.²⁸ Asín also notes that, although the epistle was not written in verse, it employed a form of "prose poetry."²⁹

This distinction is important because Asín assigns Risālat al-Ghufrān a different status from al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya. He treats the former as evidence that the idea of a literary ascent circulated widely in Islamic culture. He does not consider it a direct source for explaining Dante's conception of the afterlife. He regards the latter as closer to such a source. This distinction weakens Bint al-Shāṭi's charge that Asín neglected the literary and critical aspects of Risālat al-Ghufrān. It also supports the criticism that Asín did not apply the same standards to every comparison. His level of precision varied according to the text under consideration.

5. The Hypothesis of Historical Channels of Transmission

Palacios moves from textual similarity to the construction of a historical context. He traces the actual bridges and channels that may have carried these ideas and forms of knowledge to Dante. He surveys the routes of interaction and contact between Islamic and Christian civilizations during the Middle Ages and groups them under several main headings:

- **The geographical reach of the early Islamic conquests:** these conquests marked European history through their extension into North Africa, al-Andalus, southern France, Italy, Sicily, and the Balearic Islands.³⁰
- **Active trade from the eighth to the eleventh centuries:** it extended across the Caspian Sea and the Volga River to the Baltic Sea, England, and Iceland. The many Arab treasures and coins discovered in these regions attest to this activity.³¹
- **Religious and military contact:** this took the form of Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land and then the Crusades. Through these encounters, Frankish knights absorbed many Eastern customs and practices.³²

Despite the number of these channels, Palacios gives greatest weight to two principal settings: Sicily and al-Andalus. At the court of King Roger II in Palermo,³³ and even more strongly at the court of Emperor Frederick II, cultural interaction between Muslims and Christians reached its height. The imperial court came to resemble an Islamic court. The emperor himself could speak and read Arabic. He surrounded himself with leading Muslim scholars who served as his teachers, advisers, and courtiers.³⁴

After surveying these historical channels, Palacios explicitly identifies one author who repeatedly emerged as the most plausible model and as a key to what remained obscure in Dante: Ibn ‘Arabī. He argues that al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya was probably the source from which Dante derived the general idea of his poem and perhaps the designs on which he constructed *Inferno* and *Paradiso*.³⁵

6. The Discovery of the Latin Book of the Mi‘rāj

Miguel Asín Palacios died in 1944 without obtaining the documentary evidence he sought. He found no text proving that the Mi‘rāj narrative had actually entered Dante’s cultural environment. Such evidence emerged shortly after his death. In 1944, the Italian scholar Ugo Monneret de Villard (1881–1954) discovered two manuscripts in libraries in Oxford and Paris. They contained Latin and Old French translations entitled the Book of Muhammad’s Ladder (*Liber Scale Machometi*).³⁶

The Italian Orientalist Enrico Cerulli (1898–1988) and the Spanish Orientalist José Muñoz Sendino (1881–1958) studied the text independently. Each published a separate edition in 1949.³⁷ Documentary studies established that an Arabic account of the Mi‘rāj, whose Arabic original remains lost, was translated into Castilian by order of King Alfonso X the Wise. His Jewish physician Abraham al-Faqīh produced the translation between approximately 1264 and 1266. Bonaventura da Siena (Segna di Bonaventura), an official and scribe at Alfonso’s court, then translated the Castilian version into Latin and French.³⁸

This discovery has an important historical implication. An actual channel of transmission existed in Toledo at the court of Alfonso X between approximately 1264 and 1277. It therefore predated Dante’s work on the *Divine Comedy* by only one generation and belonged to an Iberian environment with close and direct ties to Western European culture.

Several scholars, notably Giorgio Levi Della Vida (1886–1967) and Francesco Gabrieli (1904–1996), regarded this discovery as the missing link that Asín Palacios had sought throughout his life but never found.³⁹ Cerulli himself, however, adopted a more cautious position than Asín's supporters expected. He did not claim that Dante had actually read this particular text. Instead, he argued that any narrative elements that entered the Comedy were absorbed into a structure formed primarily by classical, biblical, and authentically Christian elements.⁴⁰ Bruno Nardi, Manfredo Porena, Olschki, Silverstein, and other scholars likewise rejected the discovery as conclusive evidence that Dante had used the text directly.

One of the leading Arab critics of Asín Palacios's thesis was 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān (Bint al-Shāṭi'). In her study of *Risālat al-Ghufrān*, she argued that Palacios ignored the strong spiritual element that dominates Dante's Paradise but is absent, in her view, from al-Ma'arrī's. She held that Dante's Paradise embodies the Christian idea of Heaven, whereas the paradise of *Risālat al-Ghufrān* is filled with physical pleasures and satirical literary dialogue.⁴¹ According to the translator, Bint al-Shāṭi' went further and attributed Palacios's thesis to a nationalist ideological motive. She alleged that he sought either to gratify the pride of some Spanish Muslims or to claim for Spain a share of the literary glory attributed to Dante.⁴²

The translator Jalal Mazhar replied that Asín Palacios never claimed *Risālat al-Ghufrān* was the main foundation or sole source of the Divine Comedy. Palacios examined it alongside dozens of other Islamic works and identified only certain partial features in each. Mazhar also noted that Dante's Paradise contains extensive treatment of the spirituality of Heaven drawn from Mi'rāj narratives, Prophetic hadith, and Sufi writings in particular.⁴³

This reply is methodologically valid regarding the place of *Risālat al-Ghufrān* among Asín's sources. Al-Ma'arrī's work is only one of dozens of Islamic texts on which Palacios relies.⁴⁴ It is not the foundation of his central argument. As noted above, that argument identifies Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, rather than al-Ma'arrī, as the most likely principal source of the Comedy. Bint al-Shāṭi's objection therefore addresses one aspect of Asín's thesis, not its core. Her exclusive focus on *Risālat al-Ghufrān* concerns a secondary element and does not challenge the thesis's central claim.

A fair assessment of Palacios's thesis must first acknowledge the importance of the evidence he presented:

1. His comprehensive documentation of the three groups of Isrā' and Mi'rāj narratives, together with exegetical interpretations and Sufi insights. This body of material remained a basic and authoritative reference for later comparative studies of Mi'rāj literature.
2. Medieval Europe, especially Sicily and Iberia, was not isolated from the Islamic world. It was deeply involved in cultural interaction with it. This historical fact is independent of whether the specific thesis concerning Dante is correct.
3. Archival documents establish an actual channel through which the Mi'rāj narrative was transmitted: the Book of Muhammad's Ladder in Toledo, one generation before Dante. This fact was discovered after Palacios's death and lent support to the general direction of his hypothesis.

Conclusion

Miguel Asín Palacios's thesis may ultimately be described as a strong example of scholarly hypothesis-building through documentation and close textual comparison. It advances a historical possibility supported by evidence. For this reason, the hypothesis remains active in comparative research today.

The study has reached the following conclusions:

- Miguel Asín Palacios's thesis on the influence of Islamic *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* literature on Dante Alighieri provides a significant model for rigorous scholarly dialogue between European Arabism and Islamic heritage.
- The Prophet Muhammad's divinely ordained *Mi'rāj* journey has exerted a profound influence on human thought, philosophy, and world literature.
- Islamic civilization and Arab culture were central sources of intellectual and humanistic illumination during the Middle Ages. Extensive channels of contact and intellectual exchange operated through al-Andalus and Sicily.
- The close correspondences between Dante's depiction of the other world and Islamic heritage are extensive. His Hell resembles the descending levels of the Fire, his Purgatory resembles the concept of al-A'rāf, and his Paradise is filled with rivers and light. The poem also shows clear influence from Ibn 'Arabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* and Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī's *Risālat al-Ghufrān*. Taken together, these parallels are too clear to be treated as mere coincidence.
- Palacios's thesis employed a clear method, but it emphasized textual similarities more than proof of direct historical contact. Later discoveries, including the Book of Muhammad's Ladder in 1949, strengthened this line of argument. The controversy nevertheless remains unresolved.

Endnotes

¹Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro) (70–19 BCE) was one of ancient Rome's greatest poets and a leading figure in classical Latin literature. He is best known for the *Aeneid*, the Romans' national epic. The poem recounts the legend of Rome's foundation and secured his lasting place in world literary history. He consequently became one of the most influential poets in the Western literary tradition.

²Fouad al-Marghi, *Introduction to European Literatures*, 2nd ed. (Syria: Aleppo University Publications, 1980), p. 98.

³Issa al-Na'ouri, *Studies in Italian Literature* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1981), p. 23.

⁴Aziza Fawwal Babi, *Encyclopedia of Notable Figures: Arabs, Muslims, and International Figures* (Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya), vol. 2, p. 158.

⁵Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. Hasan Uthman, 3rd ed. (Dār al-Ma'ārif), p. 64.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁸The Divine Comedy: Inferno, p. 82.

⁹“Who Was Durante degli Alighieri?—Dante Alighieri,” www.arageek.com, accessed January 29, 2020; adapted.

¹⁰It was translated in 2002 and published in a second edition by Dār al-Ma‘ārif. It was also translated in January 2005.

¹¹He was born in Zaragoza, the capital of Aragon, and studied in its schools. He entered the Faculty of Arts at its university while also studying at the diocesan seminary, an institute for training clergy. He graduated from the seminary in 1890 and was appointed a priest at the Church of San Cayetano in Zaragoza.

¹²The thesis was republished in Madrid in 1942. Its latest edition appeared in 1984 as a bilingual publication marking the centenary of Palacios’s birth. It has also been reprinted repeatedly in Madrid and Granada and translated into several languages.

¹³Abd al-Rahman Badawi, *Encyclopedia of Orientalists*, p. 123.

¹⁴Yahya Murad, *Orientalists’ Fabrications against Islam and Responses to Them* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya), p. 576.

¹⁵Asín Palacios, *Islam’s Influence on the Divine Comedy*, translated edition (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1980), author’s introduction, p. 12.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁸Qur’an, al-Isrā’ 17:1.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, table of contents, pp. 7–8; for details of the first group, see p. 20 ff.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 7.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 225. Asín cites these hadith reports from al-Suyūṭī’s *Sharḥ al-Ṣudūr* and Ibn al-Layth al-Saraqṣṭī’s *Qurrat al-‘Uyūn*.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 226–227.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 228.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 92–94.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 94.

²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 58–60.

²⁷Asín devotes a separate discussion to Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī’s *Risālat al-Ghufrān* in the first chapter (pp. 68–81).

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 81.

³⁰Ibid., p. 231.

³¹Ibid., p. 231.

³²Ibid., p. 232.

³³The court of King Roger II in Palermo, Sicily, was one of the greatest cultural and intellectual centers of the Middle Ages. It brought together Latin, Byzantine, and Islamic cultures.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 232–233.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 263–264.

³⁶Oriente Moderno, XXIX, no. 7–9, July–September 1949, Rome, pp. 137–138.

³⁷Enrico Cerulli, *Il “Libro della Scala” e la questione delle fonti arabo-spagnole della Divina Commedia* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1949); José Muñoz Sendino, *La Escala de Mahoma* (Madrid, 1949).

³⁸Mauro Agosto, *Dal Kitāb al-Mi‘rāğ all’Inferno dantesco*, Europa Latina.

See a summary of this chain in that work and in several articles on Cerulli’s 1949 discovery.

³⁹Vincente Cantarino, “Dante and Islam: History and Analysis of the Controversy” (1965), pp. 39–42.

The discovery was described as “the missing link” between Dante and Islam.

⁴⁰Dante and Islam, ed. Ziolkowski (2015), summarizing Cerulli’s position.

Cerulli was cautious about treating the discovery as evidence that Dante directly used the text.

⁴¹Islam’s Influence on the Divine Comedy, introduction by the translator Jalal Mazhar, pp. 16–17.

⁴²Ibid., p. 15.

⁴³Ibid., pp. 17–18.

⁴⁴See the book’s bibliography, p. 265, where Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī’s *Risālat al-Ghufrān* and Ibn al-Qāriḥ appear in a long list of sources.