

THE ORDER OF THE SKIES AND THE DISTANCES BETWEEN THEM

While the ancient philosophers never saw the sky itself, they did see the stars and were able to note their movements by observing that the stars seemed to move together from east to west and back again during the night and day. It appeared that these formed a fixed canopy with the stars studded in it since they were unable to observe the individual movements and orbits of the various stars.

Apart from this, they observed seven planets that completed their orbits in various times; some within a year, others within a month. These orbits varied in direction and curvature. These planets were referred to as the seven Sayyaaraat and the sun and moon were included in these. The scholars of astronomy and philosophers observed these planets in their observatories and noted that the various orbits are not on the same plane, but are arranged one upon the other. They noted in wonder that these planets travelled in fixed orbits that are neither straight nor circular and that they never strayed from their orbits and operated with the same precision that governs the alternation of night and day.

According to other philosophers, it is the orbits of these planets that are called Falak (plural-Aflaak), meaning that each Falak is not a concrete object, but rather an imaginary path of movement. There is yet another group of philosophers who held the opinion that the Aflaak are concrete objects. They maintained that each planet had its own orbit and that there were at least two other Aflaak in each of the seven Aflaak, which travelled in orbits related to the Aflaak they were attached to. These were sometimes referred to as Tadweer or Mutammim. The orbit in which the moon was, therefore had two layers, one occupied by Venus and the other by Mercury. In their count there were therefore 25 Aflaak within the seven primary Aflaak. There was then the 8th Falak above these, called the Thawaabit which contained the stars that were fixed to it. They maintained further that all these Aflaak were transparent and that because of this transparency, it appears that the Thawaabit is the first of them all.

In addition to all of this, they also stated that above the 8th Falak was the Falakul Aflaak (the Falak of all the Aflaak), which lay at the very end of the universe. They say that it is really this Falak which revolved and the others move from east to west in a day because they are part of it. This group of philosophers state that there also exists beneath these 25 Aflaak 13 spheres, all piled upon each other like the layers of an onion. At the centre of these is the ground, as we know it. Above it is the sphere of water, which has been depleted in parts by the ground and above this is the sphere of air and then the sphere of fire.

Together with this concept of the universe, the ancient philosophers also believed in up to ten intellectual entities that went with these orbits and planets, which may be seen as forms of gods. They regarded these intellectual entities and the celestial bodies to be in existence forever and also believed that they were impenetrable. Therefore, according to them, no one is capable of travelling to and from them, not even a Nabi or any animal like the Buraaq. They therefore regard the Mi'raaj to be an impossibility.

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