

# The Prophet's Night Journey and Ascent to Heaven

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## Preface

In this paper, the issue of the night journey (*Isrā'*) and the ascent to heaven (*Mi'rāj*) will be discussed from several aspects. First, the date of these occurrences will be considered, then, an interpretation of these events from the view of both the *Qur'an* and the *sirahs* is presented. As a third issue, the paper will deal with the question of whether the *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* were only spiritual or whether they happened to both the soul and the body of the Prophet. The interpretation of these events from the point of view of rationality and modern sciences is a fundamental issue. This paper also deals with that the subject of 'the Prophet and Miracles'.

## When the *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* Took Place

According to the vast majority of Muslim scholars of hadith, the *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* occurred a few years before the Migration (*Hijrah*) of the

Prophet to Medina in 622 CE. They put the time between fifteen months after the Mission and six months before the Migration.<sup>1</sup> The most acceptable saying is the one that affirms that the *Isrā'* and *Mi'raj* took place three years after the Mission and before the number of Muslims reached that of forty people. This tradition is related from Imam Ali.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Reality of the *Isrā'* and *Mi'raj***

**Dream or Wakefulness? In Soul or in Body?** In describing the reality of the *Isrā'* and *Mi'raj*, traditionists and biographers provide many details and yet come to two different conclusions. Those who speak of them as good dreams,<sup>3</sup> conclude that the *Isrā'* and *Mi'raj* were spiritual experiences. But those who agree that they were actual events,<sup>4</sup> adhere that they happened to the Prophet in both spiritual and physical form. This is because they believe that these incidents took place while the Prophet was in a state of complete wakefulness. Both groups invoke to their own evidence. Following their own heritage of traditions, they come to different results in their studies of *Isrā'* and *Mi'raj*.

### ***Spiritual Analysis***

The idea of the spiritual night journey and the ascent to heaven refers to some of the narratives related by Ibn Ishaq and some other Sunni biographers. He says,

On the night of al-Isrā', Muhammad was staying in the house of his cousin, Hind, daughter of Abu Talib, who was also called Umm Hāni. Hind related that "The Prophet of God spent the night in my quarters. He recited his night prayers and went to sleep. Just before dawn, the Prophet of God awoke us and we all prayed the dawn prayer together. When the prayer was through, he said, "O Umm Hāni, I prayed with you the night prayer in this place; then I went to Jerusalem and I prayed there, and as you see, I have just finished praying with you the dawn prayer."<sup>5</sup>

The following reasons have been provided to support the belief that the night journey and the ascent to heaven were spiritual rather than physical.

**1:** There are three reports that the Isrā' and Mi<sup>c</sup>rāj took place in the soul. They are as follows:

**a)** The above-mentioned report of Umm Hāni in which she related that the Prophet was sleeping in her quarters on that night until dawn.

**b)** <sup>c</sup>A'ishah reports: "The body of the Prophet of God -may God's peace and blessing be upon him- was never missed from his bed. Rather, God caused him to travel in soul alone."<sup>6</sup>

c) Mu<sup>c</sup>awiyah was asked about the Isrā' of the Prophet, and he answered that it was a true vision from God.<sup>7</sup>

2: That the Isrā' and Mi<sup>c</sup>rāj were in the soul and not in the body is indicated by the Qur'anic verse: "We granted the vision We have shown you only as a trial for the people."<sup>8</sup> It is claimed that there is no need to prove any miracles other than the *Qur'an* for Muhammad. That is to say, it is not necessary to assert that the Isrā' and Mi<sup>c</sup>rāj were in the body simply in order to claim them as two miraculous events, since the Qur'an recites: "Say, 'I am but a human like you unto whom a revelation is given that your God is one God.'<sup>9</sup>

3: Agreement with modern sciences is another reason for the view of those who believe in the spiritual Isrā' and Mi<sup>c</sup>rāj. Concerning this proof, this view has been paraphrased and translated by A. Wessels as follows:

This journey by night and ascent into heaven in the spirit are confirmed by science in our time. ... In our time science confirms ... the transmission of sounds through the ether by means of radio as well as the sending of pictures and written messages, all things which men once ... viewed as fantasy. Every day our science unveils a new hidden power of life.

If a spirit attained to the power and the ability to which the soul of Muhammad attained, and God

caused him to travel by night from the holy mosque (*al-Harām*) to the most distant mosque (*al-Aqsā*), around which He spread blessing, in order to show him His signs,<sup>10</sup> then that is something which science confirms. And these meanings ... give expression in the purest way to the spiritual unity and the unity of existence in the soul of Muhammad. One can in some sense understand it, if one tries to rise in his soul above the temporal fantasies of life and tries to come to the essence of the highest reality.<sup>11</sup>

Those who believe that the night journey and the ascent to heaven were spiritual and say that it was only the Prophet's soul that experienced these two incidents establish this doctrine based mostly on the aforementioned reports on the authority of 'A'ishah and Mu'awiyah.<sup>12</sup> Refuting this view, we confirm that the authentic view is what the Shi'ā and a great number of Muslims accept i.e. the view that the *Isrā'* and the *Mi'rāj* were in both body and spiritual. The following explanation seems enough to prove this view.

1. Lady 'A'ishah, with whom this narrative ends, never reported directly from the Prophet since she was not yet his wife nor was she of an age to record such a story. Moreover, because of debatable hadiths, it is not clear whether she was born before or after the *Isrā'*.<sup>13</sup>

2. Besides the *hadiths*, we appeal to the Qur'anic verses such as:

Glory be to Him who had His servant travel by night from the Hallowed Mosque (Masjid al-Haram) to the Further Mosque (Masjid al-Aqsa) the surrounding of which We have blessed, so We might show him some of Our signs.<sup>14</sup>

This verse specifically depicts the Isrā'.<sup>15</sup> The case of the Mi'raj is not mentioned directly or clearly in the Qur'an except in the verses of surat al-Najm:

... Someone possessing such ability that he soared up and stood, poised at the highest [point on the] horizon. Then he approached and came right down (to) and stood two bow-lengths off or even closer. He (God) inspired whatever He inspired in His servant. His vitals did not deny whatever he saw.<sup>16</sup>

These verses can work as proof-texts for the Mi'raj on the condition that the underlined pronouns refer to the Prophet and not to the angel Gabriel. These Qur'anic verses plus the great number of *hadiths* leave no room to doubt that the Mi'raj occurred in body and soul.<sup>17</sup>

The word 'servant' (*'abd*) in these two Qur'anic passages contains both the soul and body together. So if Isrā' and Mi'raj happened in the Prophet's sleep, the text should read 'His servant's soul' instead of

'His servant' (*bi-rubi ʿabdihī* and *ila rubī ʿabdihī* instead of *bi-ʿabdihī* and *ila ʿabdihī*). Furthermore, these verses were revealed to indicate God's favour (*imtinan*) toward His Prophet. They imply praise to God and explain His wonderful power. But if these two events were mere dreams, they do not prove God's power, for anyone may see such dreams, which may be regarded as merely a figment of the imagination or a hallucination. Consequently, these two events would be meaningless if they are not introduced as signs of God's might and His glory.<sup>18</sup>

3. The miraculous aspect of the two incidents is the most important point of the stories; therefore, they cannot be mere dreams because the act of dreaming does not imply any miraculous element.<sup>19</sup>

4. It is related that at the time of these happenings, Abu Talib and the Hashimites were under the impression that Muhammad was missing and searched for him. If the Prophet was sleeping, it would be meaningless to say that his uncle was looking for him.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, those biographers who deny the *Isrāʾ* and *Mīʿrāj* to have occurred in both body and soul could be doing so because they are incapable of comprehending such events occurring in a physical form, or because they do not take into consideration the honour of the Prophet, or because they cannot convince people to accept such stories.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Goals of the Isrā' and Mi<sup>c</sup>rāj**

The following points help us to understand the goals and philosophies of such miracles.

1. Indeed, the Isrā' and Mi<sup>c</sup>rāj are two great ageless miracles that common people are incapable of fully understanding, let alone duplicating. Perhaps the wondrous nature of these events is now brighter than before. After man discovered some of the secrets of the universe and its wonderful aspects, he realized how difficult it is to pierce the heavens. The veracity of such inimitable incidents depends on the believers' affirmation of Muhammad's prophecy by their acceptance and belief in his sayings and his eternal miracle, the *Qur'an*. This approval causes the believers to be certain that everything which has come from the Prophet (with authentic evidence) is true. Thus, when the Prophet reports such extraordinary incidents, it makes it easier for the believers to accept that they took place in reality. With this condition, the Isrā' and Mi<sup>c</sup>rāj stay miracles forever, from generation to generation throughout the history of humankind.<sup>22</sup>

2. As the *Qur'an* indicates, one of God's aims in the Isrā' was to show the Prophet the signs of God's glory in order to establish more the power of faith in his heart. This does not contradict the argument that the Prophet was perfect and infallible from the beginning, for divine perfection and infallibility exist at several levels. Thus, for the Prophet

there were still ways to be more perfect; even though he was the most perfect of all the prophets.

3. Also, Allah wished to prepare His servant for the strong challenges he would encounter and enable him to deal with the difficulties and troubles that people would make for his Divine Mission. The Prophet himself said that none of God's prophets was as mistreated as he was. In such circumstances, events like the Isrā' and Mi'rāj opened his heart and his mind toward the universe in its totality. They gave him a clearer vision and a deeper awareness in his dealing with prophetic issues and helped him in solving problems related to the leadership of the Umma.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Possibility of the Isrā' and Mi'rāj**

Discussing the possibility of the Isrā' and Mi'rāj, S. J. Murtada gives an interpretation of these two happenings based on the Qur'anic verses and modern science. Referring to these two sources, he suggests two ways to resolve the issue of the possibility of both a bodily and a spiritual Isrā' and Mi'rāj and to make this issue easy to understand. First, he starts with the story of the prophet Sulayman and his companions in the *Qur'an*. Sulayman invited Belqeys, the Queen of Saba' to his divine religion. The Queen, accepting Sulayman's invitation, decided to visit him in his court. This story is made use of by the author as a proof-text to confirm the possibility of

both a spiritual and bodily night journey and ascent to heaven. The whole story goes like this:

He (the prophet Sulayman) said, ‘O [members of the] elite! Which of you will bring me her throne before they come to me in submission?’ An afreet from among the jinn said, ‘I will bring it to you before you rise from your place. Indeed I have the power for it and am trustworthy.’ The one who had knowledge of the Book said, ‘I will bring it to you in the twinkling of an eye.’ So when he saw it set near him, he said, ‘This is by the grace of my Lord, to test me if I will give thanks or be ungrateful... (27:38-40)

This companion of Sulayman brought the Queen’s throne from Saba’ in less than the wink of an eye and showed that it was possible, in reality, to perform such an extraordinary action by the permission of Allah.<sup>24</sup>

The second part of Murtada’s argument is based on science and technology. He says that the confirmation of the Isrā’ and Mi‘rāj is easier than in the past, especially after man invented an instrument by which he is able to exceed speeds of thirteen KMs per second. As well, man has discovered that the speed of light is around 300,000 KMs per second. Moreover, some scholars believe that the unseen waves of the force of gravity (*jādhība*) pass through the universe

timelessly. Thus, if a very great distance can be traversed by a limited being like human being in a very limited time, then it is not impossible for the Unlimited Creator of human being to make His servant travel by night from the *Ká'ba* to *Masjid al-Aqsá*, then to the heavenly world (*malakut al-samá'*), and then finally to his point of departure.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Prophet and Miracles**

In fact, what helped Islam to progress and achieve victory was the Prophet's greatest miracle, i.e. the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam which truly astonished the Arabs. It was a miracle not only due to its comprehensive rules and messages, its foretelling or reporting of unseen news and events, etc., but also due to its role as evidence and complete proof of the Prophet's prophecy. The Qur'an astonished the Arabs to the extent that they had no choice except either to deny it (in spite of the fact that their hearts felt certain about it) or to believe in it.<sup>26</sup>

The inimitability of the *Qur'an* refers to the fact that God challenged the adversaries of Islam to bring anything like this divine book.<sup>27</sup> When they could not do that, He challenged them to bring ten chapters the same as those of the *Qur'an*,<sup>28</sup> but again they were incapable of doing so. Then, He asked them to bring at least one chapter,<sup>29</sup> even a very short one. If the polytheists had been able to compose even a very short chapter like the shortest one of the *Qur'an*,

this new religion, Islam, would have vanished. Two of the greatest aspects of the wondrous nature of this Book, i.e. its eloquence and its fluency (*balāghah* and *fasābah*) are well-emphasized by Arab scholars.<sup>30</sup>

The *Qur'an* is the eternal and most important miracle of the Prophet of Islam. Nevertheless, other miraculous aspects of the life of the Prophet, in addition to those of the Isrā' and Mi'rāj, have been approved by Muslim biographers.<sup>31</sup> For instance, they speak of the episode of the cave Thawr, which occurred just before the Prophet's Migration to Madina. The story goes like this: When the Prophet was hiding in the cave of Thawr, God protected him from his enemies who were seeking for him by inspiring a spider to weave its cobweb over the door of the cave and a wild pigeon to build its nest and lay its eggs at the entrance of the cave. Thus, the enemies thought that Muhammad had never entered into the cave.<sup>32</sup>

The splitting of the moon (*shaqq al-qamar*) is another miracle which biographers and commentators ascribe to the Prophet. The date determined for this miracle is the eighth year of the Mission when the Prophet and his companions were under the pressure of the boycott. Some commentators on the *Qur'an*, shed light on the interpretation of the verse of the splitting of the moon:

The Hour has drawn near and the moon is split. If they see a sign, they turn away, and say, 'An incessant magic!' (54:1&2)

These verses announce that even if the Prophet would have split the moon, the polytheists would not believe in his message. These verses alone do not prove that the splitting of the moon occurred in reality or that the polytheists said that it was witchcraft. However, this interpretation would be reasonable if there were no sound and authenticated hadiths according to which the splitting of the moon happened in reality.<sup>33</sup>

### **Summarizing Comments**

We consider that the Isrā' and Mi'raj were two miracles of the Prophet and, therefore, these two events should be understood to have taken place in both body and soul, as it is accepted by the Imamites and a large number of other groups of Muslims. However, in order for us to understand how the Prophet's mental state was affected during his extraordinary night journey and ascent to heaven, we should have discussed the psychology of the Prophet both before and after these two events in order to compare the two conditions. This would have enabled the reader to come to a clearer conclusion.

As there is neither any single tradition nor any Muslim scholar who refutes the miraculous aspect of the *Qur'an*, this issue has been never a subject of dispute. It is confirmed that the main criteria for evaluating stories are the *Qur'an*, authentic hadiths and reason. One may realize that there is no contradiction between reason and the miraculous aspects of the events such as the Isrā' and Mi'raj. With

respect to the story of the splitting of the moon, we do not refute it because of authentic hadiths. Similarly, regarding the story of the cave, we focus on what is related and confirmed through authentic hadiths and biographies.

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<sup>1</sup> Murtada, *Al-Sabih*, v. 1, p. 269 ; Majlisi, *Bihar*, v. 18, p. 319 ; Ibn Kathir, *Bidaya*, v. 3, p. 108

<sup>2</sup> Murtada, *Al-Sabih*, v. 1, pp. 271, 274.

<sup>3</sup> The majority of Sunnis.

<sup>4</sup> Most of Shi'is.

<sup>5</sup> Haykal, *The Life*, p. 139-140 ; Ibn Hisham, *al-Sirat*, v. 2, pp. 52-53.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.140 ; Ibn Ishaq, *The Life*, p. 183

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> The *Qur'an*, 17 : 60 ; Haykal, *Hayat*, p.189.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 : 110 ; Cf. Haykal, *The Life*, p. 144.

<sup>10</sup> The *Qur'an*, 17: 1.

<sup>11</sup> Wessels, *Biography*, p. 67 ; Haykal, *Hayat*, p. 195.

<sup>12</sup> Murtada, *Al-Sabih*, v. 1, pp. 275 & 277.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 275-276.

<sup>14</sup> The *Qur'an*, 17 : 1. I have underlined the words in the passage.

<sup>15</sup> Murtada, *Al-Sabih*, v. 1, p. 277.

<sup>16</sup> The *Qur'an*, 53 : 6-12. I have underlined the words in the passage.

<sup>17</sup> Murtada, *Al-Sabih*, v. 1, p. 277.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 1, p. 276. From Tabataba'i, *al-Mizan*, v. 13, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 286-287.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287. For details see p. 288.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 1, pp. 285-286.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 1, p. 171.

<sup>27</sup> "Say, 'Should all humans and jinn rally to bring the like of this Qur'an, they will not bring the like of it, even if they assisted one another.'" (17:88)

<sup>28</sup> "Do they say, 'He has fabricated it?' Say, 'Then bring ten surahs like it, fabricated, and invoke whomever you can, besides God, should you be truthful.' But if they do not respond to you, know that it has been sent down by God's knowledge, and that there is no god except Him. Will you, then, submit [to God]?" (11:13 & 14)

<sup>29</sup> This Qur'an could not have been fabricated by anyone besides God; rather it is a confirmation of what was [revealed] before it, and an elaboration of the Book, there is no doubt in it, from the Lord of all the worlds. Do they say, 'He has fabricated it?' Say, 'Then bring a surah like it, and invoke whomever you can, besides God, should you be truthful.' (10:37 & 38)

<sup>30</sup> For more information, see: Murtada, *al-Sabih*, v. 1, pp. 198-216.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 1, pp. 286-287.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 2, p. 250. Murtada does not employ the word miracle in the case of the above-mentioned story.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 2, p. 120.