

Isrā' and Mi'rāj

Imam A. M. Khattab

Isrā' and Mi'rāj denotes an event in the life of the Prophet at a time when he needed encouragement in the face of what appeared to be insurmountable odds. He was stoned and driven out of Taif. His followers were kicked out of their country; some sought refuge in Abyssinia, the present day Ethiopia, and some went to other places. His wife, Khadija, had died, and his uncle, Abu Tālib, had died. It was at such a time that the event of Isrā' and Mi'rāj came to comfort the Prophet. There is no disagreement among Muslims that it occurred because there are references to it in the Qur'an. But how, and what is the nature of the event?

The reference to Isrā'¹ is in Chapter 17, Al- Isrā'. The verse is *clear-cut* and needs no interpretation. [Imam quotes verse. The translation is:]

“Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Inviolable House of Worship² to the Remote House of Worship³ – the environs of which We have

blessed – so that We might show him some of Our symbols. . .” [17:1].

Reference to the Mi'rāj is found in Sura 53, An-Najm, where the Qur'anic verses give the idea that the Mi'rāj⁴ had taken place, because the verses refer to how Muhammad met Gabriel at a particular place, on a particular night, and so on. The verses are a little bit vague and that is why the Muslim ulama⁵ are in disagreement regarding their interpretation. The main thing to remember is that, because there is no *clear-cut* Qur'anic verse with reference to Mi'rāj, like that of Isrā', there is no consensus on it. Mi'rāj is taken from the Arabic verb 'araja. 'Araja could be interpreted as *sa'ada* and in English it means “ascending”.

[Imam quotes Arabic verses. The translation is:] “Consider this unfolding of God's message, as it comes down from on high! This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded, and neither does he speak out of his own desire: that which he conveys to you is but a divine inspiration

¹ The land journey from Makkah to Jerusalem

² “*Masjid Al Haraam*” located in Mecca

³ “*Masjid Al Aqsa*” located in Jerusalem

⁴ The Ascension of Muhammad to the sky

⁵ Scholars

with which he is being inspired – something that a very mighty one [the Angel of Revelation, Gabriel] has imparted to him: an angel endowed with surpassing power, who in time manifested himself in his true shape and nature, appearing in the horizon's loftiest part and then drew near, and came close, until he was but two bow-lengths away, or even nearer. And thus did God reveal unto His servant whatever He deemed right to reveal. The servant's heart did not give the lie to what he saw: will you, then, contend with him as to what he saw? And indeed he saw him (the angel manifested in his true shape and nature) by the lote-tree of the farthest limit, near unto the garden of promise, with the lote-tree veiled in a veil of nameless splendor. . . . And withal, the eye did not waver, nor yet did it stray: truly did he see some of the most profound of his Sustainer's symbols" [53:1-17].

Those are the verses of the Qur'an. What we can get from this, in general, is that I recommend for our people not to delve into details; just say that the Prophet ascended from earth to Heaven.

What do the ulama of Islam say about that? Do they agree about the type of trip he had taken? There are three opinions. Some say he had seen it in his dream and the dreams of prophets are true. Another group of ulama say the journey was undertaken, but by his soul only, not by his body. A third group of ulama say he traveled body and soul. Who is correct? I don't know. I could choose any one of those opinions, and every one of you is free to choose any one of those opinions. That's Islam. These are the *Ayāt Mutashābihāt*⁶ which are subject to *ijtihad*.⁷ But if you go and say these words in Masjid Saad,⁸ they will declare you a *kafir*.⁹ But if you read all of the tafeers¹⁰ of the Qur'an, you will find all these three opinions. So, the important thing is that, as Muslims, we believe that the event of Isrā' and Mi'rāj occurred.

Some of the Orientalists and non-Muslims question the idea that Muhammad went to the sky, body and soul. They say it is very well known that oxygen, which is essential to the survival of human beings, is limited to certain layers above the earth, after which there is no oxygen. So how did Muhammad

go through this area where there is no oxygen? How did he breathe? That's a question which has been posed by Orientalists. Discovery of oxygen in the atmosphere is a scientific fact of later times, so no one argued about it in the olden times, because at that time the body of knowledge was limited and no one knew what oxygen is, and what hydrogen is, and all that. But, in fact, the miraculous part of the Qur'an is that it hints at the lack of oxygen in the upper atmosphere. [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The translation is:]

"And whomsoever God wills to guide, his bosom He opens wide with willingness towards self-surrender unto Him; and whomsoever He wills to let go astray, his bosom He causes to be tight and constricted, as if he were climbing unto the skies. . . ." [6:124].

No one understood this verse in the olden times. Today we know that a lack of oxygen, not only at high altitudes but even at sea level, causes a feeling of *constriction and tightness* in the chest.¹¹ But we did not understand the meaning of that verse except after the present body of knowledge came into being. So contemporary Orientalists question how Muhammad ascended to the sky where there is no oxygen. The answer of those who say he went to the sky, body and soul, is that God, who created the sky and who created the oxygen and who created everything of that sort, is able to let His Prophet ascend to this area without any need for oxygen. That's how they put it to prove their point that Muhammad ascended body and soul.

When the Prophet informed his people the next day that he traveled to Jerusalem and to the sky and came back the same night, even some Muslims rejected Islam. And Muhammad was advised by one of his wives not to tell the people because they would not believe him. But, because he had confidence in himself, he told the people about it. The Qurayshites told him to give them some proof that he really had traveled, because it took *them* one month going and one month coming from Mecca to Jerusalem, with their caravans. So there is another hadith, which says he told the Qurayshites that on the way he had come across such-and-such caravan, with such-and-such tribe, at such-and-such place, and it consisted of so many camels, etc., and they found it all to be true. But, what is the lesson that we can truly learn from this? Normally, as Muslims, when we talk about AbuBakr, we call him AbuBakr Siddiq. Why? The word *siddiq* in Arabic, translated into English, means "the one who believes". Why

⁶ Not clear-cut; brooking more than one interpretation

⁷ A sincere effort to make an educated, enlightened and informed opinion explaining an issue related to Islam

⁸ Located on Secor Street, Toledo, Ohio

⁹ Unbeliever. By "these words" Imam means: "Who is correct? I don't know. I could choose any one of those opinions, and every one of you is free to choose any one of those opinions. That's Islam."

¹⁰ Qur'anic exegeses

¹¹ These are the classic symptoms of a person suffering a heart attack and are due to lack of oxygen

was that title given to AbuBakr? It is mentioned in Islamic history that when the Prophet told the people about his experience of Isrā' and Mi'rāj even some Muslims disbelieved him, some rejected Islam, and some people went to AbuBakr and said to him: "Do you believe your friend? Do you know what he said today?"

He replied: "No."

They said: "Mohammad is saying that in one night he went from Mecca to Jerusalem and ascended to the sky and came back the same night. Do you believe that?" AbuBakr is recorded in history as saying:

"If Mohammad said it, it must be true."

The next question is how Muhammad traveled there? How was he transported? There is a hadith – and you know my attitude in this respect – I am not very well-versed in hadith; I don't know too much about that science so I cannot confirm which one is true and which is not true. I depend mostly upon the Qur'an because there is no argument in it. The hadith which is narrated says, "Jibreel brought *Al-Boraq* to me on that night to take me on that trip." And let me assume that the Prophet said that. Good. But what is *Al-Boraq*? All we can understand is that *Al-Boraq* is a means of transportation but we don't know what its definition is. The Prophet did not describe it.

If you go to the churches nowadays, you will find a statue of Jesus on the cross, and the statue is white in color, blonde, with nice looking blue eyes, as if he was born in California! He is not supposed to be that way; he is supposed to be like my color, because he was born in the same area where I was born – in the Middle East. But generation after generation of the Christians see him depicted that way, so that image is ingrained in their heads and they believe that Jesus looked like that. The same thing for Mary – her statue is all over, and it is ingrained in their heads that she looked like that. But that is how the people imagine, and then depict religion, and it is passed down, incorrectly, to the next generation. The Muslims did the same. They took the word *Al-Boraq* from the hadith and they began to imagine what it represented and what it looked like and ended up making a picture of *Al-Boraq*. This is one of the myths around the night of Isrā' and Mi'rāj.

We were born to find the picture of *Al-Boraq* hanging on the walls. I am sure some of you have seen it because even now it is found in some places. This picture depicts *Boraq* as having the body of a horse, the head of a man and wings like a bird. Those Muslims visualized or imagined it to be a horse of some kind because the horse was the fastest means of transportation at that time and it could run very fast

between Mecca and Jerusalem. That same means of transportation which then transported Muhammad from the earth to the sky must have wings, because it needed to fly, too. What flies? The birds. Therefore, *Boraq* must be like a bird. So they put wings on the horse. Imagine, a horse with wings? With wings it could now fly up into the sky, and with the head of a human being it could think so it knew where it was going. That's how the ancient Muslims pictured it. What kind of creature is that – a horse with a human head and two wings? If I am to visualize it today I would say, no, it must be something else, because I would analyze it in the context of our present body of knowledge. I would have to understand it in a completely different way. It could be something like that Columbia spacecraft which goes into orbit around the earth. The main idea is that we interpret it, nowadays, according to what we know, and maybe the people who will come after us will find a means of transportation which is faster than what we have nowadays, so we are going to be wrong and they will be right. And that is the challenge of Islam. There is a framework; you can change your interpretation inside that framework, but don't go beyond that framework. And that is why we always say Islam is applicable in every time and in every place.

The term *Al-Boraq* can be analyzed linguistically. The word *Al-Boraq* is a noun. The verb is *abraqa* (to move at the speed of light). *Abraqa* also means to send a telegram. If I want to send a cable to my brother in Egypt I say "*abraqa Abdelmoneim ila akhee*" (Abdelmoneim cabled his brother). Someone taps on a machine here and it types on the other side of the world. It is indicative of speed also. *Abraqa* or *baraqa* is taken from the word *barq* which is the lightning associated with thunder. So *boraq* is a noun from either *abraqa* or *baraqa*. Assuming that he traveled body and soul, it means that Muhammad, *'alayhi-s-salato wa-s-salaam*, was transported in seconds like the lightning in the sky. How? I don't know. Nobody knows. It means that *Al-Boraq* is a very, very fast means of transportation like the lightning.

Speaking of the means of transportation, we find that the Qur'an refers to it in a special verse and mentions the horse foremost. [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The translation is:]

"And it is He who creates horses and mules and asses for you to ride, as well as for their beauty: and He will yet create things of which today you have no knowledge" [16:8]. See the language of the Qur'an – it is like clay – you can shape it in every time and in every place because it says "God will yet create, as means of transportation, things of which today you

have no knowledge.” This verse was revealed in the sixth century after Jesus. This, then, will be applicable to the cars, the train, the plane, and to the spaceship in our day, and will be applicable to something else which may be invented in the future. It is put in a very pliable language – that is the language of the Qur'an. You can adapt it to suit every time and every place.

There is no doubt that the prayer was imposed upon the Prophet on that night. There is a hadith that is quoted and that hadith, by the way, is mentioned in Bukhari.¹² And before I talk about it, I would like to tell you something, so no one will pick up the telephone and call California and say, Imam Khattab does not believe in hadith. When I come across a hadith which does not make sense to me, I neither deny it, nor use it.

According to that hadith, when the Prophet went up into the heavens, God imposed upon him to pray 50 times a day. So, the Prophet accepted, and while he was coming back, according to that story, he met the Prophet Moses in the fourth heaven, and Moses asked him:

“What did your God impose upon you and your followers?” He replied: “Fifty prayers every day.”

Moses said to him: “That is too much. Your people cannot afford that. My advice to you, Muhammad, is to go back to God and ask Him to discount it a little bit.” So, Muhammad went back to the seventh heaven, and asked God, and God discounted them, so they became 40. On his way back to earth [Imam laughs] – and note that the gas in Al-Boraq is not finished; it is going back and forth, but the fuel is there – on his way back to earth, he met Moses again, and he asked him: “How much?”

Mohammad replied: “Forty now.” God reduced them – discounted them 20%.

Moses said: “Still too much. Go back.” So he went back. Another 25% – thirty. He came back. Moses said to him: “How much now?”

He replied: “Thirty.”

Moses said: “No. Go back.” So he went back. Twenty. Came back. And so it continued back and forth until the number was reduced to 5. Even then, Moses said it was too much. But the Prophet replied: “Moses, I am ashamed to go back to God and ask Him to reduce it more than this. Already it is reduced from 50 to five. It is too much.” That is the hadith.

How can we analyze that hadith and that story? How can we read into it? Let us use logic. First, why is Moses the

one who advised Prophet Muhammad? That's my question. Why Moses? Why not the grandfather of the prophets – Prophet Ibrahim?¹³ Why not Prophet Noah? Why not Jesus? That same hadith tells us, also, that Muhammad met *all* the prophets in the different heavens, so why specifically did Moses advise Muhammad? When the Jews occupied Palestine, they said to the Muslims: behave yourselves; our Prophet and we were the ones who reduced all your prayers, otherwise you would all be in hell. My interpretation is that this is an insertion by the Jews. I could be wrong, but, at least, it makes me think. Secondly, was the Prophet Muhammad following the Kissinger-style shuttle diplomacy going back and forth to God? Why all this negotiation? *Is it not understood that when God makes a decree and imposes obligations upon a prophet and his nation that there is no room for negotiation, period?* This is my question regarding that hadith. *That is nonsense.* I don't care if it is in Bukhari or other than Bukhari, because I have a brain and I have to utilize it.

There is nothing in the Qur'an to tell us about the details of the prayer that was made obligatory that night. All that is mentioned in the Qur'an is *aqeemus-salah* which means “Establish prayer!” It is a command. It did not tell us to pray *Fajr* at that time and *Zuhr* at that time, or that this is four rak'ats, this is two rak'ats and so on. But this came to us through what we called the sunnah or the actions of the Prophet. The Muslims had seen the Prophet praying that way and it was transmitted from one generation to the other, because the Prophet said to the people, “Pray as you have seen me pray.” The closest the Qur'an has come to shedding light on the subject of prayer is in the verse in Chapter 2, Al Baqarah, which indicates that the prayers are more than one: “Guard your prayers especially the middle one.” It means that the number of prayers is an odd number. That is the nearest thing we know about prayers as mentioned in the Qur'an. But, because the Prophet prayed five times a day, this is what we are following.

When we pray, we recite certain words, and perform certain actions; for example, we read Al-Fatihah¹⁴ when we are standing up, we bow, we prostrate, and when we sit down we recite *Attashahhud*. This is not something haphazard; every word and action has its meaning. The recitation of *Attashahhud* in every prayer commemorates the event of Isrā' and Mi'rāj when the Prophet ascended and presented himself before God – although I don't know how this sounds because God is not

¹² Considered to be the most authentic book of hadith

¹³ Abraham

¹⁴ The opening chapter of the Qur'an

limited to any place.

Now, when you enter the presence of someone, you normally greet him/her and say *Assalam-u Alaykum* (Peace be upon you). So, when the Prophet entered that specific area, about which we don't know anything, he said: *Attahiyat-tu lillah, wasalawato, wathtayyabat* which means "Greetings to thee, O Allah, and prayers and all good things." So Allah answered his greeting and said to him: *Assalam-u Alayka ayyuhan nabiyu wa rahma-tul-lahy wa barakatu-hu* which means "Peace be upon you, O Prophet, the mercy and the blessing of God be upon you." The Prophet, as always, was not concerned with himself only, and he wanted his followers, also, to be included in the blessings that God invoked upon him, so he said: *Assalam-u alayna wa 'ala 'ibadillah-his saliheen* which means "Peace be upon us, and upon the righteous people of God." Of course, in our visualization and our comprehension as human beings, where there is an important person, there are lots of guards and spectators around him, and Muhammad is in the presence of

the King of kings, and the surrounding area is full of angels watching that exchange of conversation and greetings between the slave and his Creator, and they exclaim: *Ashhadu Allah ilaha illallah wa ashhadu- unna Muhammad-an 'abdu-hu wa rasool-lu hu* which means: "We witness that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is His slave and His Prophet." This is what we call the *Shahada*.

The *Attashahhud* and the *Shahada* are what we recite in our prayers while we are sitting down. It recounts what had taken place during the night of Isrā' and Mi'rāj in the course of which the formal prayer (*salah*) was imposed upon the Prophet. So, in fact, if you recite up to the end of *Shahada*, and you say *Assalam-u Alaykum wa Rahamatullah*, your prayer is correct and complete. The remainder of the prayers that we say, after the end of the *Shahada*, i.e. *As-Salah al-Ibrahimiyyah*, etc. is *du'a*¹⁵ but, it is optional; if you say it, it is okay, and if you don't say it, it is okay, also.

¹⁵ Supplications. *Du'a* and *salah* are two distinct entities but, for lack of a word in English, they are both translated as "prayer". *Salah* is obligatory prayer, a ritual following a distinct pattern – *du'a* is individual supplication.