

## Was al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj a bodily or spiritual journey?

The scholars of Islam – classic and modern – have long disputed the exact nature of the Prophet's journey to Jerusalem and the Heavens. Specifically, detailed discussions can be found highlighting whether al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj took place with soul only, or with body and soul.

Qādī Iyād analysed the debate in great detail in his book *al-Shifā bi ta'rīf huqūq al-Mustafā*<sup>1</sup>. From his work, it is clear there are three camps on this specific issue;

### Camp One.

**'Al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj was with soul only, and that the entire journey was a dream.'**

However, the advocates of this camp accept that the dreams of prophets are truthful and are part of revelation (*wahy*).

### Their evidence.

- Mu'āwiya (may Allāh be pleased with him) was asked about the night of al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj, and he replied that it was a 'beautiful dream (*al-ru'ya al-sāliha*).'<sup>2</sup>
- Muhammad ibn Ishāq too accepts this position. As evidence, he cites the verse from the Holy Qur'ān:

And We did not make the vision that we showed you except as a test for the people. (Isrā; 60).

The word in the verse used is *ru'ya*, which means 'dream' in Arabic. Therefore, it seems the Qur'ān asserts that the journey in its entirety was a dream.

- Āisha (may Allāh be pleased with her) reports:

I did not miss (*mā faqad'tu*) the body of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).<sup>3</sup>

This suggests the Prophet in body remained in Makka throughout the night.

- Moreover, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) himself said: 'Whilst I was sleeping...' When Anas (may Allāh be pleased with him) related the

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<sup>1</sup> pp. 106-124. *al-Shifā bi Ta'rīf Huqūq al-Mustafā*. Allama Qadi Abu al-Fadhal 'Ayadh ibn Musa (d. 544 A.H. /1149 C.E.). Dar Ibn Hazm Publications, Beirut, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> p. 144. *Sharh al-Aqa'id al-Nasfiyya*. Allama Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani. Qadimi Kutub Khana, Karachi, Pakistan, n.d. on publication.

<sup>3</sup> p. 144. *Sharh al-Aqa'id al-Nasfiyya*. Allama Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani. Qadimi Kutub Khana, Karachi, Pakistan, n.d. on publication.

story of the Night Journey, he began with the words ‘...whilst he was sleeping in the Sacred Mosque...’ These two reports implicitly suggest that all the occurrences of that night took place whilst he was asleep.<sup>4</sup> Also, a narration from Anas (may Allāh be pleased with me) concludes with the words: ‘Then I woke up in the Sacred Mosque [in Makka]’. Again, this implicitly implies the entire journey was a dream.

## **Camp Two**

**‘The Isrā (the Night Journey from Makka to Jerusalem) was performed with body and soul, whilst the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was awake. Thereafter, the journey to the skies (al-Mi’rāj) was performed with soul only.’**

### **Their evidence.**

Their proof is the verse from the Qur’ān in which Allāh Almighty proclaims:

Most pure is the One who took His blessed servant on the Night Journey from the Sacred Mosque to the Furthest Mosque (Isrā; 1).

This verse indicates that the astonishing and miraculous part of the journey was up to Furthest Mosque (Masjid Aqsā) only; there is no mention in the verse of the upward journey to the heavens.<sup>5</sup>

## **Camp Three (The Correct and Majority Opinion).**

**‘The Isrā and Mi’rāj occurred with body and soul, whilst the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was awake.’**

This – Qādī Iyād affirms – is the truthful position and the opinion of the majority of the classical scholars.<sup>6</sup> Allāma Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftazānī adds that ‘the one who denies its occurrence is an innovator (*mubtadi*).<sup>7</sup>

### **Our evidence.**

• Most Companions, Successors (*Tābi’īn*) and respected scholars express no doubt whatsoever in the fact that al-Isrā wa al-Mi’rāj occurred with body and soul. Their opinion itself is sufficient to dispel any doubts.

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<sup>4</sup> p. 112. *al-Shifa bi Ta’rif Huquq al-Mustafa*. Allama Qadi Abu al-Fadhal ‘Ayadh ibn Musa (d. 544 A.H. /1149 C.E.). Dar Ibn Hazm Publications, Beirut, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> p. 113. Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> p. 113. Ibid. See also, p. 356. *al-Sharh al-Qawim fi Hill Alfaz al-Sirat al-Mustaqim* and p. 209. *Sahih Muslim bi Sharh al-Imam al-Nawawi*. Vol I; Part II. Dar al-Fikr; Beirut. n.d. on publication.

<sup>7</sup> p. 144. *Sharh al-Aqa’id al-Nasfiyya*. Allama Sa’d al-Din al-Taftazani. Qadimi Kutub Khana, Karachi, Pakistan, n.d. on publication.

Supporters of this truthful position include Ibn Abbās, Jābir, Hudhayfa, Umar, Ibn Mas'ūd, Abū Hurayra, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, Mālik ibn Sa'sata, Abū Habba al-Badarī, Dhahak, Qatāda, Ibn al-Musayyab, Ibn Shihāb, Ibn Zayd, al-Hasan, Ibrāhīm, Masrūq, Mujāhid, Ikrama, Ibn Jurayj, al-Tabarī, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (may Allāh be pleased with them all), as well as the majority of the Fuqahā (Jurists), Hadīth scholars, Kalām scholars and Qur'ān commentators.

- Qādī Iyād writes that we can only interpret the event differently when the possibility of the event is questionable. He continues to affirm that 'there is no impossible element in the Isrā whilst awake and with body.'<sup>8</sup> This is because the Being behind al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj was Allāh Almighty Himself; nothing is beyond His ability. In all of the Hadīth reports on the journey, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said 'when I was taken on the night journey'; nowhere do we find a report in which he said 'when I went on the night journey.' In other words, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) ascribed the occurrences to Allāh Almighty. It was He who made the journey possible. If people doubt the events on the basis of its physical impossibility, then they are in essence questioning what Allāh can and cannot do.

- Qādī Iyād adds that if the journey had occurred whilst the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was asleep, then;
  - (i) The verse in the Qur'ān<sup>9</sup> would certainly have mentioned that it occurred with just his soul.
  - (ii) The journey would not have been categorised as a sign (*āyah*) or a miracle (*mu'jiza*).
  - (iii) The infidels would not have considered the journey as far-fetched and would not have mocked the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).
  - (iv) Some weak-hearted Muslims would not have become apostates (non-believers) upon hearing the story the next day.<sup>10</sup>
  - (v) Abū Bakr (may Allāh be pleased with him) was given the title of *Siddīq* (most truthful/a verifier of the truth) by the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) just after al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj. This was because he believed the occurrences without hesitation. This too indicates that the journey must have been miraculous. Umm Hānī initially advised the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) not to tell anyone, in the fear that the people of Makka would not believe him.<sup>11</sup> She would only do that if the journey was actual and physical.
  - (vi) There would be no reason for the Makkans to ask which caravans he met on the way to Aqsa.<sup>12</sup>

- Professor Abd al-Halīm Mahmūd, who was the former Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar University, Cairo, writes that people often have the most far-fetched and astonishing

<sup>8</sup> p. 113. *al-Shifa bi Ta'rif Huquq al-Mustafa*. Allama Qadi Abu al-Fadhal 'Ayadh ibn Musa (d. 544 A.H. /1149 C.E.). Dar Ibn Hazm Publications, Beirut, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Surah Isra; verse 1.

<sup>10</sup> p. 113. Ibid. See also, *al-Isra wa al-Miraj*, Dr. 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud. Dar al-Ma'arif, Cairo, Egypt. 9<sup>th</sup> edition, n.d. on publication, and p. 144-145, *Sharh al-Aqa'id al-Nasfiyya*. Allama Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani. Qadimi Kutub Khana, Karachi, Pakistan, n.d. on publication.

<sup>11</sup> *Tafsir al-Qurtubi*, X; 137.

<sup>12</sup> *Tafsir al-Qurtubi*, X; 137.

dreams, travelling to far-off places and meeting people that they have never met before. Seldom do people consider such dreams miraculous, or deny the possibility of such visions occurring. The reaction of the infidels of Makka, as well as the Muslims, clearly suggest that the events of al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj could not have been a dream. Otherwise, the reaction would have certainly been less controversial.<sup>13</sup>

- The verse from Sūrah al-Isrā mentions the verb *asrā*. In Arabic, this verb (meaning to travel by night) is not used to mean a journey performed whilst asleep. Rather, it is used to denote an actual, physical journey.<sup>14</sup>
- The word *abd* (servant) that features in the verse (Sūrah al-Isrā; 1) is only used to describe a person with body and soul. It cannot be used in the Arabic language to denote a person with soul only.<sup>15</sup>
- Those who deny that al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj took place with body and soul on the sole basis that it is scientifically impossible have simply misunderstood what a *mu'jiza* (miracle) is. As Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan rightly points out, a miracle is not considered as such until it breaks the law of nature.<sup>16</sup> The parting of the sea by Mūsā (peace be upon him) – with the permission of Allāh – was miraculous *precisely* because it contravened the laws of nature. In short, if a Muslim acknowledges Allāh Almighty as 'capable of all things', then denying al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj on the basis of its physical impossibility should be completely avoided.

## **The answers to the evidence put forward by the first camp.**

**-In response to the verse 'And We did not make the vision that we showed you except as a test for the people.'**

- Ziā al-Ummah Pīr Muhammad Karam Shāh al-Azharī writes that many Qur'ānic commentators do not believe that this particular verse actually refers to the night of al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj.<sup>17</sup> It could in fact be referring to the dream the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) had prior to the Conquest of Makka. Even if we do assume that this verse *is* referring to the Night Journey, then there is still ample evidence to clearly indicate that it was not a dream, but a real occurrence;
- Imam al-Bukhārī records a Hadīth from Ibn Abbās (may Allāh be pleased with him) who said in the commentary of the verse 'And We did not make the vision that we showed you except as a test for the people' that 'this was a vision of sight [i.e. not a

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<sup>13</sup> p. 41-42. *al-Isra wa al-Miraj*, Dr. 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud. Dar al-Ma'arif, Cairo, Egypt. 9<sup>th</sup> edition, n.d. on publication.

<sup>14</sup> p. 115. *al-Shifa bi Ta'rif Huquq al-Mustafa*. Allama Qadi Abu al-Fadhal 'Ayadh ibn Musa (d. 544 A.H. /1149 C.E.). Dar Ibn Hazm Publications, Beirut, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Imam al-Qurtubi writes in his *Tafsir* that if there was a higher title for the Prophet than *Abd*, it would certainly have been mentioned here in this special verse (10: 135).

<sup>16</sup> p. 631, *Zia al-Quran*. Pir Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari. Zia al-Quran Publications, Lahore, 1402 A.H.

<sup>17</sup> p. 626. *Ibid*.

dream] that was shown to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) on the night of the Ascension.’<sup>18</sup>

- The verse ‘except as a test for the people’ (*illa fitna li al-Nās*) too supports the view that the journey occurred whilst the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was awake. Qādī Iyād writes a dream (whilst asleep) is not ‘a test for the people’, since no one denies the occurrences of a dream.<sup>19</sup>

### **In response to the opinion of Āisha and Mu’āwiya (may Allāh be pleased with them)**

- As for the opinion of Āisha (may Allāh be pleased with her), she was not married to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) at the time. In fact, she may not have been born at the time of the Night Journey, (as there are minor disputes as to which year al-Isrā wa al-Mi’rāj took place). Hence, she did not witness this night, she was very young at the time and must have heard the event from someone else. For this reason, preference is given to the other Companions, of which most assert al-Isrā wa al-Mi’rāj took place with body and soul. Also, Āisha never slept with the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) until Madina, and al-Isrā wa al-Mi’rāj happened when the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was in Makka Sharif.<sup>20</sup>

There is further evidence offered by Allāma Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftazānī. He writes that Āisha’s said the body of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) did not part from her on the night of Ascension. This could possibly mean that the body of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) did not part from his soul on this night. In other words, she meant that the body and soul remained together throughout the journey, thus supporting the view that the journey was not a dream.<sup>21</sup>

- As for the opinion of Mu’āwiya (may Allāh be pleased with him), he was not a Muslim at the time.<sup>22</sup>

### **In response to the narrations of Anas (may Allāh be pleased with him).**

- In response to the Hadīth recorded by Anas in which the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was reported to have said (at the end of the journey) ‘Then I woke up in the Sacred Mosque’, which seemingly suggests that the events of the night was a dream, the scholars write that this does still not explicitly suggest that the entire journey was a dream. Rather, it indicates that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was asleep or almost asleep when the angel

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<sup>18</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book of Merits, Chapter; the Mi’raj, Hadīth no. 3599; *Zia al-Quran*, 2: 668. Pir Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari. Zia al-Quran Publications, Lahore, 1402 A.H.

<sup>19</sup> p. 115. *al-Shifa bi Ta’rif Huquq al-Mustafa*. Allama Qadi Abu al-Fadhal ‘Ayadh ibn Musa (d. 544 A.H. /1149 C.E.). Dar Ibn Hazm Publications, Beirut, 2002.

<sup>20</sup> p.117. Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> p. 144, *Sharh al-Aqa’id al-Nasfiyya*. Allama Sa’d al-Din al-Taftazani. Qadimi Kutub Khana, Karachi, Pakistan, n.d. on publication.

<sup>22</sup> p. 627, *Zia al-Quran*. Pir Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari. Zia al-Quran Publications, Lahore, 1402 A.H., *Tafsir al-Qurtubi*, X; 137.

approached him in the Sacred Mosque in Makka. It cannot be deduced from this that the entire events of the night was a dream.<sup>23</sup>

Imam al-Qurtubī adds that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) had many *Mi'rājs*.<sup>24</sup> There is nothing wrong with suggesting that some of them may have been via the means of a dream.<sup>25</sup> As for the *Mi'rāj* mentioned in Sūrah al-Isrā, then there is no doubt that this was a physical journey, with body and soul.

### **In response to camp two.**

Certainly, Sūrah al-Isrā does only mention the night journey from Makka to Jerusalem. But that does not mean the rest of the journey (to the heavens) was with soul only. This is because Sūrah al-Najm *does* mention the *Mi'rāj*. Moreover, this chapter, like Sūrah al-Isrā, does mention the word *abd* when referring to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). And *abd* can only be used to describe both body *and* soul.

### **Conclusion.**

To conclude, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj was merely a spiritual journey. The Companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) were clearly in the best position to know the exact nature of the journey, and the majority express no doubt in the fact it was a bodily occurrence.

Even without the evidence from the Qur'ān and *ahādīth*, the reaction from the people of Makka after al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj is sufficient to support the fact that the journey was with body and soul. If it was merely a spiritual journey, why did some Muslims become apostates? If it was just a dream, why did the infidels challenge the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) to describe Jerusalem?

Once we wholly acknowledge Allāh Almighty as the force behind al-Isrā wa al-Mi'rāj, then a true Muslim does not question the event at all. Nothing is beyond His capabilities.

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<sup>23</sup> p. 210. *Sahih Muslim bi Sharh al-Imam al-Nawawi*. Vol II; Part I. Dar al-Fikr; Beirut. n.d. on publication.

<sup>24</sup> Imam al-Nawawi was of the opinion that it happened twice, once awake and once when he was asleep (*al-Mawahib al-Laduniyya*, II: 340)

<sup>25</sup> *Tafsir al-Qurtubi*, X; 137-8.