



The Me'raj

The miraculous Night Journey & Ascension, and a discussion of whether the Me'raj was bodily or just a spiritual experience.

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End of the Year of Sadness...

It was one of the hardest times in the life of the prophet (pbuh). He was rejected and outcast by the Quraysh, all who followed his message suffered terribly for it, and earlier that year he had lost both his beloved wife, and only protector, Abu Talib[1]. One still night, prophet (pbuh) laid himself to rest, after offering his prayers. Suddenly, he was awoken by the angel Gabriel , who informed the prophet (pbuh) that he would accompany him on a very special journey[2].

The Night Journey begins

The prophet (pbuh) mounted a wondrous creature named al-Buraq; a white animal with wings that was like cross between a mule and an ass, and 'his every stride was as far as his eye could see' . Upon this mount the prophet (pbuh) travelled from Meccah (either the house of Um Hani, or the Sacred Mosque itself according to various sources[3]) to Masjid al-Aqsa, at Jerusalem.

During the journey, the prophet (pbuh) heard a voice from his right, which he ignored, then another from his left, which he also ignored, then saw a woman before him with all the ornaments of the world upon her, wishing to speak to him. The prophet Muhammad (pbuh) passed her without paying any attention, at which he heard a frightful noise. They arrived after a very short time; the prophet (pbuh) visited different parts of the mosque and various places associated with the prophets (pbut) en route, including mount Sinai, where the Most High spoke to the prophet Moses (pbuh), and Bethlehem, the birth place of the prophet Jesus (pbuh).

At the Holy Mosque in Jerusalem, they were met by a group of prophets among which were Abraham, Moses and Jesus (pbut), who gathered behind Muhammad (pbuh) in prayer when Gabriel called the adhaan [4]. After this, the treasurer of the mosque brought vessels containing wine and milk (and some say also of water) before the prophet Muhammad (pbuh), from which he chose the milk and was informed by Gabriel, '***thou hast been guided unto the path primordial, and hast guided thereunto thy people, O Muhammad***' [5].

The prophet (pbuh) found out from Gabriel that the voices he had heard on his left and right were Jewish and Christian women trying to seduce him, and had he responded his sect would have become Christians or Jews. The beautiful woman before him was the world, and had he responded to her, he would have preferred this life to the next. And lastly, the frightening sound was the noise made by a rock striking the bottom of Hell, after being thrown from its verge 70 years earlier. It is narrated that the prophet (pbuh) never laughed after hearing this [6].

From there, the prophet (pbuh) followed in the footsteps of Enoch, Elijah, of Jesus and Mary, and undertook the second more amazing part of his journey; the ascension to the skies.

The Ascension

From the rock at the centre of the temple site the prophet (pbuh) ascended, mounted upon al-Buraq and led by the angel Gabriel. The prophet (pbuh) ascended 'beyond the domain of earthly space and time', passing through the seven heavens in turn and conversing with the souls of previous prophets and the angels of the heavens (pbut) [7]. He met the angel Ismail, lord of the meteors that drive every demon from approach of the heavens, and his army of seventy thousand angelic commanders, each with a division of seventy thousand angels, all of which laughed for joy at meeting the beloved last prophet (pbuh). He met the fearful angel who never smiled; the guardian over Hell, who opened a door to hell that blazed with such fire the prophet (pbuh) feared that he might be consumed. He met the prophet Adam (pbuh), the father of all men, and the angel of death, Azraeel, whose work is more severe than any other angel.

The prophet (pbuh) saw groups of people who had sinned in life, and were reaping the results through torture in Hell [8]. He met the prophets Jesus and John, Joseph, who 'had been endowed with no less than half of all existing beauty' [9], Idrees (Enoch), Aaron, Moses and Abraham (pbut) [10]. The prophet (pbuh) prayed at Bayt-ul-Ma'moor, the farthest mosque as mentioned in the Quran, then saw the palaces reserved for himself, his family and his pure women. The prophet Muhammad (pbuh) '***observed the stars and the system of the world... saw the centres of blessing and torture (paradise and hell)...and consequently became fully aware of the secrets of creation, the extent of the universe and the signs of the Omnipotent Allah***' [11].

The End of All Knowledge

From there he ascended to the '***end of knowledge of every knower***' [12], the Lote Tree of the Uppermost Boundary, whose every leaf shaded a great sect [13]. Gabriel appeared to the prophet in all his splendour [14], but stayed behind as the prophet (pbuh) approached within two bows-lengths or nearer the summit of truth [15]. The prophet (pbuh) led all of the angels in prayer as he had led all of the prophets in prayer at the Holy Mosque [16], and received the command of fifty prayers a day for his people, which were finally reduced to five

at his supplication, suggested by Moses (pbuh) [17]. Some narrations state that the prophet (pbuh) also learnt the form of the ritual ablution and prayer during his ascension [18].

Return Journey

On his journey back to Meccah from Jerusalem following the descent, the prophet (pbuh) saw a party of Quraysh searching for their lost camel. He drank some water from a container of theirs, and covered it. Later on he passed abu Sufyan's caravan, and noticed one of their camels had broken its leg. When the prophet (pbuh) told the Meccans of his journey, he described masjid al-Aqsa perfectly as witnessed to by Abu Bakr who had travelled to it before [19], and informed the listeners that the party with the camel who had broken its leg would arrive in Mecca at about sunrise [20]. The Quraysh had initially taken to mocking the prophet (pbuh) over his claims to have undertaken such a journey in a single night, but upon hearing this became excited and rushed to find the caravan. Abu Sufyan eventually appeared, and verified the words of the prophet (pbuh) [21].

Bodily or Spiritual?

'Both shi'ah and sunni traditions declare that the ascension was bodily, and not merely in the spirit; in the state of wakefulness, not of sleep' [22].

The first verse of chapter 17 of the Quran states, '***Glory be to Him Who made His servant go by night from Masjid ul-Haram to Masjid ul-Aqsa, whose surroundings we have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs. He alone hears and observes all'***. The use of the word 'servant' (in Arabic, abd) here applies to the worldly, elemental form as well as the spirit; it refers to human *body and soul together* [23]. The prophet's (pbuh) own narration of the events bears witness to this fact:

- firstly, he physically mounted al-Buraq, an action which indicates his human form
- when he dismounted in Jerusalem, the prophet (pbuh) interacted with his surroundings as normal, conversing with the keeper of the mosque and drinking the milk that was offered to him.

If we accept these acts as having taken place, it is apparent that they cannot have been performed by a spirit or soul with no earthly form. Neither can it be argued that these events were images in the mind of the prophet (pbuh) as people are inclined to see themselves in dreams; the prophet (pbuh) ***drank the milk at Jerusalem and the water belonging to the party in the desert – he had a direct physical interaction with several people who existed in the waking world as we know it.***

Not Dream-like

Further, the account was lucid, coherent and continuous; all traits that are rarely seen in dreams, and the Prophet (saw) had no extrahuman abilities such the power to fly, run very fast, lift heavy objects with ease etc. which people often see themselves with in dreams. The Prophet (saw) was exactly the same during this experience as he was every other day of his life, and had to be

physically **guided** through the ascension by Gibraeel [24]-- he had no influence over where he went next or what he saw, as would be the case if the experience was a figment of his imagination.

If the prophet (pbuh) was dreaming, or had been granted freedom from his own body, or had some kind of heavenly form, it stands to reason that he should have been able to travel freely through the heavens as the angels do and ascend as he wished, without having to be actively taken there through others.

Scientific impossibility?

There are some individuals who state that the me'raj could not have happened as it is a scientific impossibility. Yet the Quran contains the story of Solomon (pbuh) and the throne of the Queen of Sheba, which was brought to his palace ***'in the twinkling of an eye'***, by means that are not comprehensible to man [25]. ***Science itself is only theory which is based on the collective observations of men, developed in an attempt to explain natural phenomena. As such, it is inherently limited by the experience of the observer.***

The ***ultimate and elusive aim*** of science is absolute truth; the body of scientific knowledge is continuously developing and changing, and will not represent that truth in its entirety until man perfects his knowledge of the universe. Until recently, scientists believed it was impossible to travel between two distant points faster than light could travel between them, until the theory of higher-dimensional 'wormholes' was developed, which may form a short link between two very distant points. The traveller simply takes a shorter route to his destination that is beyond our current experience, which means he completes the journey in less time without travelling faster than light speed.

Likewise, it is not a point of concern that while in a waking, physical ascension the prophet (pbuh) saw the dwellers of Paradise and Hell even though the Day of Judgement has not yet come; he ascended beyond the confines of this world, including the constraints of time. Time is not absolute, as Einstein showed, the concepts of 'before' and 'after' are wholly dependent on the situation of the observer of the events. What it indicates is merely that the prophet (pbuh) observed these acts from a perspective different to that experienced by ordinary people on earth. Similarly, the fact that the prophet (pbuh) saw Abu Sufyan's party, although they couldn't see him, indicates not that he had no form, but that he had ascended beyond the confines of the conventional three-dimensional space human experience is centred within. ***It is meaningless to call the me'raj impossible as the concept of 'scientifically impossible' alters periodically as science progresses;*** we must instead accept the wisdom of the Almighty and acknowledge our ignorance in the matter.

Conclusion

The prophet (pbuh) had risked his life, his wealth, his family - everything he had - just to do as Allah had commanded him to. The All-Knowing and Most Merciful knew the hardships His servant had undergone for His sake, and at the prophet's (pbuh) most vulnerable time He showed him, not through visions and dreams but through physical experience, the truth of the universe,

its inhabitants, their punishment and reward. *'He made him ascend so that he might become aware of the expanse of the universe and see and hear wonderful things, the like of which had not been seen and heard by the eyes and ears before'* [26]. It was a physical reality, and not merely the spiritual ascension that had been undertaken by many before [27], **including the prophet (pbuh) himself** on other occasions [28]. And there was clear proof to any who may have doubted its occurrence, with the party in the desert and the verses in the Quran. ***The Quraysh, who consistently denied Muhammad (pbuh), accepted the reality of the me'raj as is evident from their great agitation over it*** [29].

Although we cannot understand the means, there is no grounds to deny the reality; the entire point of a miracle is to be something beyond human capability to cause or understand. If we could explain and reproduce the same event, it wouldn't be much of a miracle at all.

References:

[1] M. Lings, 'Muhammad, his life based on the earliest sources', Millat Book Centre (India), p.96

[2] J. Subhani, 'The Message', ch. 22: 'Me'raj – the heavenly ascension, the Me'raj according to the Quran, Hadith and History'

[3] as [1] above, p.101

[4] M. B. al-Majlisi [tr. J. L. Merrick] (1997), 'The life and religion of Muhammad, Hiyat al Qulub', Ansariyan Publications, Iran, p.192

[5] as [3] above

[6] as [4] above p.193

[7] as [2] above

[8] as [4] above, pp.194-5

[9] as [1] above, p.102

[10] as [4] above, pp.195-6

[11] Majma'ul Bayan, Surah Bani Isra'il 17:1, taken from [2] above

[12] as [1] above, p.102

[13] as [4] above p.197

[14] as [12] above

[15] as [13] above

[16] as [4] above p.198

[17] as [1] above p.103

[18] as 4 above, pp.200-202

[19] as 17 above

[20] as 4 above p.205

[21] as [2] above

[22] as [4] above p.190

[23] J. Subhani, *'The Message'*, ch. 22: *'Me'raj – the heavenly ascension, does me'raj have a Quranic origin?'*

[24] as [23] above

[25] Holy Quran, 27:38-40

[26] J. Subhani, *'The Message'*, ch. 22: *'Me'raj – the heavenly ascension, the object of me'raj'*

[27] J. Subhani, *'The Message'*, ch. 22: *'Me'raj – the heavenly ascension, was me'raj of the prophet physical?'*

[28] as [4] above pp.190-207

[29] as [27] above