

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate

Chapter 2: AL-ISRA (The Night Journey: 1)

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلًا مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ الْأَقْصَى الَّذِي بَارَكْنَا حَوْلَهُ لِنُرِيَهُ مِنْ آيَاتِنَا إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ

“Exalted is He who took His servant [Muhammad] by night from al-Masjid al-Haram (Sacred Mosque) to al-Masjid al-Aqsa (Farthest Mosque), whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing.”(17:1)

Overview:

This chapter takes its name from the word ‘asra’ in the first verse where Rasulullah’s miraculous night journey from Masjid al-Haram in Makkah to Masjid al-Aqsa in Quds (Jerusalem) is related. The surah is also named as Banu Israil (Children of Israel) as it mentions their stories. It was revealed in Makkah at the time of al-mi’raj (the ascension) which happened in the twenty-seventh night of the month of Rajab, eighteen months before al-hijrah (the emigration). This blessed journey was a solace given to Rasulullah who was grieved by the deaths of his wife Khadija and his uncle Abu Talib in the year of sorrow, by the attacks he suffered in the city of Taif, and by the three-year siege imposed by Makkan polytheists. His ascent was a divine gift for his worship and endurance (walayah), and his descent was because of his appointment as a messenger of Allah (nubuwwah).

The first part of the celestial journey of Allah’s messenger from Makkah to Jerusalem is known as ‘al-isra’ (the night walk), and the second part from there to heavens and beyond is titled ‘al-mi’raj’ (the ascension, the elevator). Qur’an refers to the night journey in the verse (17:1) above, and the ascension is explained briefly in chapter al-Najm, the Star:

“While he was in the higher [part of the] horizon; then he approached and descended; and was at a distance of two bow lengths or nearer; and he revealed to His servant what he revealed; the heart did not lie [about] what it saw. So will you dispute with him over what he saw? And he certainly saw him in another descent; at the Lote Tree of the Utmost Boundary; near it is the garden of refuge. When there covered the Lote Tree that which covered [it]; the sight [of the Prophet] did not swerve, nor did it transgress [its limit]. He certainly saw of the greatest signs of his Lord.” (53:7-18)

Rasulullah is believed to have traveled both spiritually and physically as indicated in the wording of (17:1) which starts with praises for the infinite glory of Allah, and makes an explicit reference to his whole being by using the word ‘abdihi’ (His servant), and to his hearing and vision in particular. He traveled in the company of Gabriel as he rode an angelic creature named al-Buraq, and took an elevator called al-Mi’raj to heavens. Even though there are different views on the nature of this blessed journey, especially the ascension, most scholars hold the view that it actually took place both spiritually and physically when Rasulullah was fully awake, and that his blessed luminous body accompanied him in this journey.

Another wisdom behind the praising the glory of Allah and emphasizing the status of Rasulullah as His servant is that there should be no confusion in his status similar to what happened in the case of previous prophets. In its simplicity and purity, Islam insists that no similarity could ever exist between Allah and any of His creatures no matter how great they might be.

There are reports in authentic traditions that the Makkan polytheists scoffed at him on hearing the incident, and even some of the Muslims became skeptical. However, he answered all their questions about the description of Masjid al-Aqsa accurately proving the truth of the night journey, and silencing the disbelievers. At some point when he did not remember certain details, the masjid is made appear for him, and he watched it as he answered their questions.

There are numerous authentic traditions giving details of isra and mi'raj. A brief summary is as follows: One night, when Rasulullah was asleep in Hatim at Ka'ba, Gabriel came down, opened his breast apart, washed his heart with water of Zamzam and filled it with faith and wisdom, and placed it back in his chest. Then Rasulullah mounted Buraq and rode to Masjid al-Aqsa accompanied by Gabriel. There he met all previous prophets and led them in a prayer in congregation indicating his position as their rightful heir. He then took al-mi'raj and visited all seven heavens: he saw Adam in the first heaven, Jesus and John in the second, Joseph in the third, Enoch in the fourth, Aaron in the fifth, Moses in the sixth, and Abraham in the seventh heaven. He observed invisible dimensions of existence in detail including Paradise and Hell.

Gabriel then took him to higher spheres where he heard the scraping of the pen that inscribes destinies. They reached the Lote Tree of the Farthest Boundary, 'Sidrat al-Muntaha' that marked the boundary for all spheres of creation. Nobody except Rasulullah had access beyond this point including the archangel Gabriel who said "if I take a step further, I will burn up and incinerate". Rasulullah was shown four holy rivers and the celestial masjid, Bait al-Ma'mur, which is visited by seventy thousands of angels every day. He was offered three vessels containing wine, milk, and honey. He preferred the milk which meant his religion is most consistent with human nature and his ummah would be on the straight path. Moreover, he traveled into the garden of refuge, Jannat al-Ma'wa, which is the paradise of the martyrs and the God-fearing.

In the final stage of his journey, leaving Gabriel behind at Sidrah, he mounted another creature named Rafruf and moved forward to appear before Allah. He is believed to have been admitted to the presence of his Lord, saw Him with his blessed eyes in a manner independent of time and space considerations, and spoke with Him. He reached to a stage where he became as close as two bows length or even closer to his Lord. This is referred to as 'qab qawsayn' in the passage from the chapter Star quoted above. It was there that besides other important instructions and many glad tidings, five daily prayers were prescribed as a vehicle of personal mi'raj for each Muslim. Rasulullah went back to the Lote Tree by Rafruf, and saw Gabriel there as he first saw him in his true form at the cave of Hira. They returned back as quickly as in the blink of an eye.

Among many luminous fruits of mi'raj, the gift of five daily prayers (salah) is considered to be the main one. The messenger of Allah opened the way to divine presence with his mi'raj and left the door ajar for his ummah (community) to follow his footsteps. That the salah was first prescribed during his majestic ascension at universal scale indicates its fundamental role as a vehicle of minor ascension for every Muslim at personal scale.

Let's follow a devout believer to better understand this point: We see him taking ablution (wudu') and getting ready for his spiritual journey at night. He then mounts the prayer rug for his Buraq and reaches from his room of Masjid al-Haram to Masjid al-Aqsa of sincerity. He drinks a cup of milk mixed with tears, and sets sail to the heavens of his spirit over the wings of verses from the Qur'an. Moving one floor up in each unit of prayer until he reaches his own Sidrat al-Muntaha, he changes his vehicle and mounts the Rafrat of ihsan. (Ihsan is the title of worshipping Allah as if you see Him, or at least having full consciousness that He watches over you.) He flies to the furthest points of his soul which is the same distance as the furthest points of the heavens. He appears in the presence of Allah, and with the mysterious formulas of at-tahiyah (a supplication recited in prayer while sitting), he feels as if he talks to Allah and sees Him beyond description and imagination (from teachings of Gulen).

Badiuzzaman points out that the miracles worked in the hands of prophets have indications to scientific developments and wonders of technology. There may be such indications in the incident of mi'raj as well. The opening up his noble heart prior to the night journey may be an indication that one day medicine will develop so much that open heart surgery will be possible. This has already become a relatively routine medical practice today. Similarly, the prospects of constructing an elevator extending up to heavens taking spaceships to outer space for space explorations should also be studied.

It is reported from 'Aisha, the mother of faithful, that Rasulallah used to recite the chapters of al-Isra and al-Zumar often before he went to sleep. In addition, it is strongly recommended to recite, every night, the last two verses of surah al-Baqarah which are believed to be revealed during the mi'raj. Abu Dharr reported that Rasulallah said "I was given the final verses of al-Baqarah from a treasure trove beneath the supreme throne; no prophets before me was given them." In another authentic tradition Ibn Mas'ud narrated Rasulallah saying that "whoever recited the last two verses of al-Baqarah at night, they will be sufficient for him."

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May Allah help us complete our ascension in the footsteps of Rasulallah, and favor us with certainty of faith and sincerity of worship. May peace and blessings of Allah be upon His messenger, his pure family and companions, and his noble brothers in the office of messengership.