



Revisiting Muhammad's al-'Isrā' Wal- Mi' rāj (Night Journey to Jerusalem and Ascension to Heaven)

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ABSTRACT

Muhammad's *Isra'* and *Mi'raj*, also known as the Night Journey and Ascension is believed to be a combination of both a physical and spiritual journey, with tradition suggesting that Muhammad's journey was spiritual. However, as time has passed, the details of the event have been elaborated upon, with references in the Quran suggesting a physical journey with the verse "glory be to him, who carried his servant by night... that we might show him some of our signs" (17:1) being cited. This article delves into the Islamic narrative of Muhammad's night journey and ascension by examining both primary and secondary sources. This article aims to explore the complexities of Muhammad's Night Journey and its theological implications.

KEYWORDS

Islam; Muhammad; *Isra'* and *Mi'raj*; theological implications

Muslims believe Muhammad's *Isra' Wal Mi'raj* (Night Journey and Ascension) is among the most popular divine miracles. The Muslim tradition narrates that the night journey and ascension occurred shortly after the incident of the "Satanic Verses" (Ibrahim 62–65). It seems to portray a combination of a physical and spiritual journey, and tradition holds the view that the night journey of Muhammad was spiritual. However, it has been elaborated over the centuries and Muslims celebrate Muhammad's night journey to heaven as his major miracle (Ibrahim 65). It is supposedly alluded to in the Quran in the verse, "Glory be to him, who carried his servant by night... that we might show him some of our signs" (Q. 17:1). Given this, the article considers Muhammad's night journey as an event that was only physical rather than spiritual because the description as narrated by the Muslim sources portrays Muhammad as the person asleep having a vision or a dream and being in an actual, physical location.

The article begins with a description of Muhammad's night journey. Then, it gives perspectives on the night journey, whether spiritual or

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physical, while looking at both primary and secondary sources. In the end, there will be a critical assessment of the Night Journey with careful consideration of Islamic sources and Christian sources, and the Islamic sources and perspectives will be used to do a critical theological evaluation of the Night Journey of Muhammad. This article intends to make known how Islam expounded their sources and perspectives to be polemical against Christianity and the Jews and elaborated on what, perhaps, was circulated by Muhammad, designed to place him somehow in the Holy Land since, according to Jewish tradition, “there could be no prophecy outside of Palestine” (Shoemaker 239).

The description of Muhammad’s night journey to Jerusalem and Ascension to heaven

Muhammad is a central figure in Islam and a name that most Muslims cherish because of what it represents. As a prophet in Islam, Muhammad is the most revered Muslim name. The portrayal of Muhammad in trusted Muslim sources requires critical assessment. Ibrahim (114) states that Muslims see Muhammad as the final legitimate prophet, and non-Muslims refute the claim based on Muhammad’s deeds and teachings. According to Ibrahim, Muslims perceive Muhammad from three different perspectives. First, Muhammad exists in the minds of Muslims as a legend. Second, Muhammad existed in the time of writing of Muslim sources as a traditional Muhammad, and third, he lived as a historical Muhammad (Ibrahim 34, 41). He suggests that the historical Muhammad does not connect with the traditional Muhammad in the Muslim sources because Muhammad appeared as an Arab warrior (Ibrahim) According to Ibrahim (96), Syriac sources provide information about Muhammad’s existence. All these are non-Christians, including early Chinese sources that portray Muhammad as a warlord, trader, Arab leader, etc. Most of the sources that provide information about Muhammad are Christian sources, sources of John of Damascus, and others. John speaks of Muhammad as an anti-Christ (John of Damascus 153). He states in his *Writings* about Muhammad as a false prophet:

From that time to the present, a false prophet named Mohammed has appeared in their midst. This man, after having chanced upon the Old and New Testaments and likewise, it seems, having conversed with an Arian monk, devised his own heresy. Then, having insinuated himself into the good graces of the people by a show of seeming piety, he gave out that a certain book had been sent down to him from heaven. He had set down some ridiculous compositions in this book of his and he gave it to them as an object of veneration (John of Damascus 153).

Christians and the Christian community in the Middle Ages encountered Muhammad and his followers and had a negative view of the claims of Muhammad's prophethood, considering his ideology a Christian heresy (Esposito 14; Montgomery 231; Quinn 17–54; Goddard 34–49). Ibrahim's convincing conclusion states that only the historical Muhammad existed against the legendary and traditional Muhammad portrayed by Muslims and their sources (Ibrahim 95–99).

On the night journey of Muhammad, the views of Christians and the Christian community in the Middle Ages about his claims as portrayed by the Islamic tradition make the narrative illegitimate. Gabriel Reynolds (28) raises questions on the reliability of the traditional biography of Muhammad's night journey as narrated by Ibn Ishaq. The question critiques the only historical source, Islamic sources, such as Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishaq's biography of Muhammad. Reynolds rightly argues, "No pagan, Jewish, or Christian authors who lived at the same time as Muhammad mention them (or him) at all" (Reynolds 28). This means that the history of Muhammad's night journey to Jerusalem and ascension to heaven does not have any confirmation from non-Islamic sources and that questions the reliability of the Islamic traditional narrative from Ibn Ishaq as seen in the section that describes Muhammad's night journey from primary Muslim sources.

According to Islamic tradition, it was after the incident of the Satanic Verses that Muhammad and his followers encountered resistance from the Quraysh tribe in Mecca, which caused Muhammad to send his followers to Abyssinia (Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishāq 1999:146). The satanic verses are very controversial because Muslims deny the incident. According to Muslim sources, Muhammad received a satanic revelation mistakenly, and the revelation included praises to the pagan deities of Me, which contradicts Muhammad's message of strict monotheism (Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishāq 1999:165–167). When the followers returned to Mecca, according to the account of Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishāq, there was oppression and persecution that led to hopelessness. At the time of hopelessness, Muhammad claimed he experienced an incredible night journey (Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishāq 167–89; Peters 64–67, 168–69). The story of Muhammad's night journey and ascension is primarily rooted in the *Hadith* and *Sira* (Muhammad's biography).

Primary sources

Muhammad's night journey has a Quranic grounding of the ascent called *Mi'raj* of Muhammad, which seems tenuous in two ways. In the first place, the *Encyclopedia of the Quran* asserts that the ascent is not described, and the term *Mi'raj* is not used in the Quran. Secondly, the Quran stresses that Muhammad made no miracle other than the divinely claimed miracle

of the Quran itself (McAuliffe 176). The Quran does not describe in detail the claimed night journey by Muhammad. The usual Quranic reference to the night journey is in chapter 17, known as “Night Journey” (*al-Isra’*) or “Children of Israel” (*Bani Israil*), verse 1. However, there are other verses that also indirectly mention the Night Journey, which is Chapter 53, “The Star” (*al-Najm*), verses 1–18, and Chapter 81 (*al-Takwir*), verses 15– 4. The verse says, “Exalted is he who took his servant by night from *al-Masjid al-Haram* to *al-Masjid al-Aqsa*, whose surroundings we have blessed, to show him of our signs. Indeed, he is the hearing, the seeing” (Q. 17:1). The general story of the night journey and ascension involves many events whose details are not mentioned in the Quran, but can be found in the Hadith (Mohd Nor 59). This verse is explained in the *Hadith*. The first *Hadith* of al-Bukhari states,

That the Prophet talked to them about the night of his Ascension to the Heavens. He said, “(Then Gabriel took me) and ascended up till he reached the second heaven where he asked for the gate to be opened, but it was asked, ‘Who is it?’ Gabriel replied, ‘I am Gabriel.’ It was asked, ‘Who is accompanying you?’ He replied, ‘Muhammad.’ It was asked, ‘Has he been called?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ When we reached over the second heaven, I saw Yahya (i.e. John) and Jesus who were cousins. Gabriel said, ‘These are John (Yahya) and Jesus, so greet them.’ I greeted them and they returned the greeting saying, ‘Welcome, O Pious Brother and Pious Prophet!’” (al-Bukhari, vol. 4, book 55, hadith 640).

The second *Hadith* of al-Bukhari states,

The Prophet said, “I met Moses on the night of my Ascension to heaven.” The Prophet then described him saying, as I think, “He was a tall person with lank hair as if he belonged to the people of the tribe of Shanu’s.” The Prophet further said, “I met Jesus.” The Prophet described him saying, “He was one of moderate height and was red-faced as if he had just come out of a bathroom. I saw Abraham whom I resembled more than any of his children did.” The Prophet further said, “(That night) I was given two cups; one full of milk and the other full of wine. I was asked to take either of them which I liked, and I took the milk and drank it. On that it was said to me, ‘You have taken the right path (religion). If you had taken the wine, your (Muslim) nation would have gone astray’” (al-Bukhari, vol. 4, book 55, Hadith 646).

According to Islamic tradition, the event began one night as Muhammad slept around the *Kaaba* at Mecca. He was awakened by the angel Gabriel, who conducted him onto a winged animal called a *Buraq*, a horse-like creature with wings. Ibn Ishaq describes *Buraq* as “a white animal, half mule, half donkey, with wings on its sides” (Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishāq 182). According to tradition, Muhammad mounted the animal and was taken on a journey from Mecca to Jerusalem. On the way, it is said that they encountered several good and several wicked powers and visited Hebron and Bethlehem. At Jerusalem, they meet Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, of whom a description is given (Bukhari, vol. 4, book 55, hadith

640 and 646). The *salat* is performed, and Muhammad, acting as imam, takes precedence over all the other prophets assembled there (Gibb and Bearman VII, 98). In Reuven Firestone's and Vinay Khetia's reports, al-Tabari, the earliest Islamic historian and exegete, narrates the story of Muhammad's night journey and ascent.

Popular Islamic tradition has greatly elaborated and expanded the story of Muhammad's "night journey" and ascent to heaven... In many versions, Muhammad is first of all carried from Mecca to Jerusalem and then from Jerusalem taken up to the seventh heaven. It is claimed that these are fuller descriptions of what is briefly referred to in the Qur'an (17:1): "Glorified be he who carried his servant by night from the Inviolable Mosque to the Furthest Mosque, whose neighborhood we have blessed, that we might show him our signs" (Firestone 336–44; Khetia 29–62).

Al-Tabari's account of Muhammad's night journey and ascension portrays Muhammad as the superior prophet of Islam to others. The argument suggests that Muhammad's superiority resulted from his ascend from the first heaven to the seventh, where he met Allah without the angel, Gabriel (Al-Tabari 78–79). Al-Bukhari's narration insinuates that Muhammad served as an intermediary between Allah and the other prophets because the narrative states that he bounced back and forth nine times between the fifth heaven and the seventh, negotiating with Moses and Allah on the number of times Muslims should pray daily (Bukhari, vol. 9, book 93, hadith 608).

Secondary sources

The secondary sources primarily expanded on descriptions of the critical Quranic text (Q. 17:1) and the Islamic tradition. Mordecai Nisan asserts that "One of the enigmatic yet famous quranic verses relates to Muhammad's night journey (*Isra*) from the holy Mosque, presumably the *masjid al-haram* in Mecca, to the furthest Mosque called the *masjid al-aksa*" (Nisan 275). The night journey and ascension of Muhammad are, for the entirety of Muslims, a uniformly positive moment captured in both primary and secondary sources about Muhammad's life and perhaps the zenith of his prophetic work (Ali 64).

Islamic tradition states that Muhammad's night journey and ascension occurred immediately after the Satanic Verses incident when there was severe resistance to the Quraysh (Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishaq 182). According to Ibn Ishaq 241, Muhammad had sent his followers to Abyssinia. When some Muslims heard the rumor that Mecca had converted to Islam and began returning from Abyssinia, it is said that Muhammad's followers encountered opposition and were driven away from Mecca by their own people. Supposedly, those who decided to stay were rejected, so they could not conduct business. The Islamic tradition states that some of the

followers of Muhammad returned hopeful, but their hopes were ruined because of their painful experiences. The traditionalists acknowledge that during this hopeless and sad period, Muhammed claimed to experience the night Journey and ascension to heaven (Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishāq 167–68; Peters 64–67, 168–69).

Traditionalists' portrayal of Muhammad's context suggests that his hopelessness and sadness were related to the problems and challenges around the satanic verses and possible rejection by the Meccans, opposing his message of strict monotheism (Ibrahim 62). The portrayal of this traditional account is a legitimacy issue. Could it be that Muhammad wanted those who rejected his message and persecuted him, according to tradition, to believe that he was a legitimate messenger of Allah? Of course, according to the Muslim sources, one could argue that Muhammad's account of his night journey and ascension legitimizes his claims that he is a messenger or prophet of Allah with a message of strict monotheism for the people of Mecca. Ibrahim (63–65) reveals that the Muslim primary source suggests that "People were unconvinced of Muhammad's prophethood, which we see in various verses. They compared him to Moses: "Why has he not been given the like of Moses?" (Q 28:48). They said, "Why has no sign been sent down upon him from his Lord?" (Q 6:37)." The people questioning the legitimacy of Muhammad's prophethood, especially the Meccans, wonder why a prophet could not perform miracles like other prophets. The quest for legitimacy triggered the necessity for Muhammad's night journey to Jerusalem because of the significance of Palestine in prophecy (Shoemaker 239). To explore further, the next subtitle focuses on the perspectives on Muhammad's night journey and ascension to heaven.

Perspectives on Muhammad's night journey Jerusalem and Ascension to heaven

Concerning the *Isra'* and especially the *Mi'raj*, Buckley (570–71) states that there are a considerable number of disparities between the traditions that form part of the Sunni collections of the Hadith and the Shia collections. These disparities naturally give rise to doctrinal disagreements. An example is the omission of Abu Bakr's sources that believe in Muhammad's miraculous journey, which earned his honorific *al-Siddiq* ("The Trusting"). He argues that Shia Muslims have an antagonistic view of the first caliph, Abu Bakr, because he denied Ali's right to succeed Muhammad as the leader of the earliest Muslim community. Another example is the omission of sources that split open Muhammad's breast and its cleansing. The cleansing is Muhammad's initiatory purification before his journey, but according to the *Imamiyya*, all the prophets were holy or sacred and infallible even before becoming prophets. Therefore, according to Shia,

Muhammad did not require purification, and the scene is considered mythical (Buckley 570–71).

It is noteworthy to begin the perspectives with the disparities concerning the *Isra* and *Miraj*, a clear indication that there are conflicting views on whether the night journey of Muhammad was physical or spiritual. An example of a phrase that appears as a conundrum to scholars is al-Bukhari's statement, referring to Muhammad's night journey and ascension: "On that, Gabriel said, "Descend in Allah's name." the prophet then woke while he was in the sacred Mosques at Mecca" (Al-Bukhari, vol. 9, book 93, hadith 142). The rendition of the phrase sounds like a myth because it suggests a dream or vision-like encounter rather than a physical or spiritual journey. However, the account sounds like a physical journey because of an account that suggests meeting with physical people in a geographical space. Tariq Ramadan states a contrary view to that of al-Bukhari. Ramadan claims,

Muhammad was taken back to Jerusalem by the Angel Gabriel and al-Buraq and from there to Mecca. On the way back, he came upon some caravans that were also traveling to Mecca. It was still night when they reached the Kaba enclosure. The angel and al-Buraq left, and Muhammad proceeded to the home of Um Hani, one of his most trusted Companions. He gave her an account of what had happened to him, and she advised him not to tell anybody about it, which Muhammad refused to do. Later on, the Quran was to report this experience in two different passages (Ramadan).

Robert N. Walsh's assertion on Muhammad's night journey also acknowledged that the nature of Muhammad's *Isra' Wal Mi'raj*, whether a dream, vision, or literal transportation of his body to heaven, has been contentious for centuries. The extraordinary impact of Muhammad's *Isra' Wal Mi'raj* suggests the contention around his journey does not matter. For fourteen hundred years, Muslims have practiced prayers five times a day, whilst the great mystics of Islam, the Sufis, apply Muhammad's *Isra' Wal Mi'raj* as a recommendation to their own spiritual experiences (Walsh 104).

Physical journey

The debate on the night journey of Muhammad for centuries is based upon the question of whether the journey was physical or spiritual. The traditionalists maintain a literal interpretation, arguing supporting a physical journey rather than a spiritual one. Ibrahim (62) alludes to Muhammad Husayn Haykal (144ff), arguing that "while the vast majority of cultural and religious Muslims believe the story narrates an actual physical event, many progressive Muslims argue that it was merely a dream given to encourage Muhammad."

The idea of specific places mentioned in the Islamic text within certain geographical locations depicts a reality in a physical realm. The mention of Mecca and Jerusalem in the event of the night journey contradicts the spiritual perspective of the journey. Some of the first European scholars to study the night journey and ascension narratives found stories that ignored Jerusalem in favor of an ascension to heaven directly from Mecca (Mohd Nor 61). Some orientalist deny the reality of the night journey because of the date with special consideration to the layers of antiquities in Jerusalem before the claimed night journey. Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor (62) alludes to the argument of Sam Shamoun (n.d.), who states that some of the historical realities considered to be problematic are the first Jerusalem Temple that was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian armies in 587 BC and then, the destruction of the second Temple in A.D. 70 by the Roman soldiers. All these occurred more than five centuries before the alleged night journey to Jerusalem occurred. History claims that the temple that eventually became *Masjid al-Aqsa* did not exist until A.D. 691 when *Amir Abdul-Malik* built it. This historical revelation indicates that it is highly questionable to date the text in Quran 17:1 to the time of Muhammad. Quran 17:1 states, "Glory be to the one who took his servant Muhammad by night from the Sacred Mosque to the farthest Mosque whose surroundings We have blessed, so that We may show him some of our signs. Indeed, he alone is the all-hearing, all-seeing."

There is the notion that the passage was probably written around the time of the erection of the *Masjid al-Aqsa*, which substantiated the fact that *Masjid al-Aqsa* could probably contain no early references to the supposed night journey. This discrepancy becomes a strange omission from the time of the claim that *Masjid al-Aqsa* was established to commemorate the alleged event. Eleven centuries later, Abdul Hamid II made inscriptions that mentioned the night journey (Shamoun, n.d. in Mohd Nor 62). Stephen Burge did a review of Buckley's work on the *Night Journey and Ascension in Islam*, and he asserts that

The contemporary political importance of Muhammad undertaking a physical journey to Jerusalem since it imbues the Dome of the Rock with spiritual power. Buckley presents different responses, from the Hadith that provide proofs of the *Isra*, such as Muhammad's vision of the caravan returning to Mecca, to al-Ṭabari's systematic analysis in which he states that for the Meccans to believe in Muhammad's prophethood, the *Miraj* and *Isra* needed to be real events, to al-Raza's philosophical and scientific responses. In modern reflections on the physicality of the *Miraj* scholars have made comparisons with planes and satellites, but often scholars have urged people to accept that a supernatural event such as the *Miraj* and the *Isra* on the basis of faith, since they cannot really be proved true (Burge 129).

Spiritual journey

Muslims understand the spiritual journey as an event that happens in the spiritual realm without any physical experience. It supposedly happened when Muhammad was taken to Jerusalem and ascended to heaven, from the first heaven to the seventh heaven, through the help of an angel and *Buraq*, and Muhammad met with some prophets and led them in prayer. This seems contradictory, and Gabriel Said Reynolds (28–29) explains how Islamic Sources often include conflicting versions of the same account. He refers to Ibn Ishaq's description of Muhammad's physical night journey to Jerusalem. Still, he refers to a tradition in which Aisha insists that the journey was only in spirit. Reynolds (28–29) brings further a tradition found in Bukhari's resources that skips Jerusalem entirely. The idea of the spiritual journey has faced significant criticism, probably due to the unrealistic construction of the event's story. One inevitable consequence could be that non-Muslim, Christian, or secular Western scholars probably never acknowledged the divine nature of the night journey of Muhammad. Ibrahim states that "Many modernist and progressive Muslims view the story as a dream or vision, not an actual event. They refer to Muhammad's biography itself, which portrays the event as part of a long dream" (Ibrahim 64). Dues to the contradictory narratives in the Islamic tradition, Ibrahim rightly concludes, and I agree that "These reports suggest that the journey was a dream, a vision, or a mere soul activity, not a physical experience" (Ibrahim 64). The undoubted truth about the night journey highlights the issues of faith as inherent in the study of events such as miracles, magic, the supernatural, and the *Isra'* and *Mi'raj*. However, this cannot hinder constructive theological scholarship (Burge 131).

Critical assessment of the night journey

The nature of Muhammed's journey has attracted critical assessment by scholars seeking to ascertain the claim's legitimacy. It is essential to know whether Muhammad's experience was a dream, a spiritual vision, or a literal journey to heaven. For fourteen hundred years, devout Muslims have prayed five times a day, while the great mystics of Islam, especially Sufis, use the language of ascension to describe their own spiritual experiences. It is pertinent to critically assess the night journey using Islamic and Christian sources. It is observed that despite those who seem inclined to acknowledge the Night Journey, some Orientalists doubt that the event even took place. It is appropriate to constructively criticize the genuineness of the claim by questioning the story of the night journey. Tariq Ramadan, in "The Night Journey: Prophet Muhammad's Meeting with Allah," asserts,

Muhammad was taken back to Jerusalem by the Angel Gabriel and *al-Buraq*, and from there to Mecca. On the way back, he came upon some caravans that were also traveling to Mecca. It was still night when they reached the Kaaba enclosure. The angel and *al-Buraq* left, and Muhammad proceeded to the home of Um Hani, one of his most trusted Companions. He gave her an account of what had happened to him, and she advised him not to tell anybody about it, which Muhammad refused to do. Later on, the Quran was to report this experience in two different passages. One is in the surah whose title, *Al-Isra'* (The Nocturnal Voyage), directly refers to the event (Ramadan).

It seems like the event was merely a constructed story because it begins with sleep near the Kaaba, a usual practice of Muhammad for sacred reasons, followed by the claim of supernatural experience that only Muhammad claimed he experienced. The Islamic tradition reveals that Muhammad's wife, Aisha, states, "The apostle's body remained where it was, but God removed his spirit by night" (Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishaq 183; Haykal 144ff). Aisha's account appears contradictory to the traditionalists, who are literalists in the view of Muhammad's night journey and ascension.

In the claim, there are the specific names expounded by those who were not eyewitnesses of the event and had little or no knowledge of the locations in Quran 17:1. Sam Shamoun (n.d.), one of the orientalist who tries to argue against the physical aspect of the Night Journey, says that it is confusing to relate the verse 17:1 to the Mosque or Temple because the text did not mention anything of its kind. It seems that the date of the claimed night journey does not tally with the referred events in Jerusalem because the problem with this is that Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian armies destroyed the first Jerusalem Temple in 587 BC. Furthermore, Roman soldiers leveled the Second Temple in A.D. 70, more than five centuries before this alleged night journey to Jerusalem took place. The temple that eventually became *Masjid al-Aqsa* did not exist until A.D. 691, when Amir Abd-ul-Malik built it (Shamoun n.d. in Mohd Nor 61–62). Considering the Muslim sources, it seems that the claims of Muhammad's night journey to Jerusalem and ascension to heaven was a physical event with a religious undertone to make sense of the Quran, to make Islam appealing to non-Muslims, to legitimize Muhammad's prophethood, to claim Jerusalem for Islam, and polemical purposes toward Christians and Jews.

It was observed from an early date that Muslim scholars, theologians, and particularly mystics who viewed the *Mi'raj* (an allegory for their own spiritual "ascension" to the divine) have exercised themselves in providing evermore colorful depictions of the *Isra'* and the *Mi'raj* of the *Buraq*. Thus, the simple descriptions cited above rapidly became overstated because it was done by combining elements from earlier traditions and adding notions

drawn from such as Islamic eschatology, the Quran, Christianity, Judaism, and pure invention (Buckley 574).

Christian sources depict how Islamic tradition expounded the text in Quran 17:1 to validate the historical account of Muhammad's night journey and ascension for polemic purposes. The exaggeration is apologetic because it is intended to defend Muhammad's prophetic claim and present him as a superior prophet and leader to the Old Testament biblical prophets mentioned in Islamic tradition and written histories. The presupposition that Muhammad led all the prophets in prayer in the heavenly realm is a polemic against Jews and Christians, insinuating Muhammad has emerged as a superior leader. Buckley's critical theological approach uses Islamic sources to address difficult and/or complex Islamic claims. Buckley's reference to Al-Tabari's outlines shows four points that he considers to confirm the physical nature of the *Isra/Miraj*.¹ He thinks that "the traditions narrated by the Prophet reveal that God took him on a night journey on the *buraq*, and if this journey had taken place only in spirit or was a dream, the *buraq* would not be needed since riding animals carry only physical bodies" (Buckley 583). The idea of using material things in immaterial situations seems to convey an unrealistic and confusing message. The illegitimacy of the story can be traced through the fact that Islamic tradition or historians would have ascertained that a Buraq was seen, even though Muhammad was supposedly invisible. It can be deduced that it became paramount for the prophet to be "raised to heaven to receive the teachings that were to become the foundation of Islamic worship and ritual, *al-aqidah and al-ibadat*, which require that believers should accept their form as well as their substance" (Ramadan).

It is essential to note Hirschberg's suggestion on Muhammad's night journey. Shoemaker alludes to his correct argument that suggests that the story of Muhammad's Night Journey to Jerusalem is a primitive tradition but understood as a story that perhaps was circulated by Muhammad himself not eyewitnesses, designed to place Muhammad somehow in the Holy Land, since, according to Jewish tradition, "there could be no prophecy outside of Palestine (Shoemaker 103–110). Hence, the narrative of the night journey, as Ibrahim rightly attests, intends to "establish legitimacy for Jerusalem as a Muslim land and Muhammad as a divinely supported prophet" (Ibrahim 69). This probably was intended to convince the Jews and non-Muslims that he was a true prophet. Muslim scholars have, from the beginning, pondered the question of whether the night journey was purely spiritual or whether it was also physical. Most Islamic scholars think that the night journey was both physical and spiritual. However, this question is not essential in light of the teachings that can be drawn from this claimed extraordinary experience undergone by Muhammad. According to Ramadan, the traditional account seems to have first and

foremost recognized the centrality of Jerusalem at that time because Muhammad prayed to face the holy city (the first *qibla*, or direction of prayer). During the night journey, it was at the site of the temple that he led the prayer with all the prophets (Ramadan). Jerusalem thus appears at the heart of the Prophet's experience and teaching as a dual symbol of both centrality (with the direction of prayer) and universality (with the prayer of all the prophets) (Ramadan). Later, in Medina, the *qibla* (direction of prayer) was changed from Jerusalem to the Kaaba in Mecca to differentiate Islam from Judaism, a polemic approach against Judaism, but this by no means entailed a diminution of Jerusalem's status. In the above-mentioned verse, the references to the "most sacred mosque" (the Kaaba, in Mecca) and the "farthest mosque" (*al-Aqsa*, in Jerusalem) establish a spiritual and sacred link between the two cities (Ramadan).

Dan Gibson opposes the claims of the Islamic tradition and Muslim sources that indicate that the "Al-Aqsa Mosque referred to by Muhammad in Qur'an 17:1 was the Mosque in Jiranaḥ, a village just outside of Masjid-al-Ḥarām. The famous Mosque known today by the same name in Jerusalem was built ninety years after Islam began and cannot be the al-Aqsa mosque referred to by these historians" (Gibson 240). He argues, "When the old Mosque was torn down, the foundation stones of the earlier Mosque underneath revealed that the original building faced north toward both Petra and Jerusalem, which were in almost the same direction. This is true of every Mosque in Medina" (Gibson 17). As an archeologist, Gibson has done extensive research work with evidence displayed in maps, charts, and photographs. His archeological work reveals artifacts, suggesting that the Islamic tradition constructed an account to make sense of the Quran and to legitimize Muhammad's prophethood.

Conclusion

The narrative of Muhammad's night journey to Jerusalem and ascension to heaven, as posited in the Muslim sources and Islamic tradition, appears conflicting because of its physical and spiritual nature. The portrayal of Muhammad as spiritually superior to other prophets sounds polemical to Jews and Christians, who would not accept Muhammad's claims and those of Muslim sources. The only legitimate way to claim prophethood is to construct and present a convincing narrative with evidence of supernatural phenomena such as the spiritual journey to heaven. Hence, as many critical scholars infer, it is appropriate to note that Muhammad's claim of the Night Journey appears physical, blending constructed stories for polemic purposes. From the beginning, the traditional Islamic portrayal of Muhammad's struggles seemed to make sense of their sources and gain acceptance by constructing and deconstructing stories to appeal to his

audience for his own aggrandizement. It is evident that the impact of the Night Journey, even if it is unclear and confused or contradictory, affects and influences so many people in the world who believe in the religion of Islam and zealously pursue the course of Islam. The claimed event of the night journey defines worship and prayer in Islam around the world today.

Note

1. Muslims claim that Al-Ṭabarī (839–923) is the greatest early Islamic historian and exegete with a reputable knowledge of memorization of the Qurʾān at the age of seven (Al-Tabari 1989:10–134).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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