The Glorious Night
Journey & Miracle of Ascension

Al Isra wal Miraj

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The Glorious Night Journey and Miracle of Ascension, part of the series, “Islamic Times, Places and People”

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All praise is for the Lord of the Universe, the majestic creator, the sublime designer, the generous cherisher who implanted love and compassion in the hearts of man and women so that they could live together as husband and wife. Blessings be upon the finest of Allah’s creation, the mercy of the universe, the leader of the Prophets and the master of the believers, Muhammad ﷺ.

The faith of Islam is based on aqeeda (creed). Without his no deeds are acceptable. Therefore every muslim must know the creed of Islam According to Imam Nasafi (died 537 AH), there are some 63 articles of faith which make up the Islamic creed. One of these articles of faith is the miracle of ascension (Miraj). All of the books of creed speak about the ascension since it is definite aqeeda.

For example, “The Muslim Creed” By Suhaib Hassan published by Al-Quran Society, London says on page 10, “Miraj is true, Allah almighty took his prophet while he was awake on a splendid journey…”

Similarly Aqaid-e-Nasafi (by Imam Nasafi (died 537 AH) which is a standard aqeeda book in Hanafi schools world over says, “The Prophet’s ﷺ ascension was a bodily journey in a wakeful state to the heavens and then to the heights where Allah wished him to go.”

According to Imam Nawawi and Zaraqani, the Miraj took place on the 27th of Rajab some 17 months before the Hijrah in the year of sorrow.

Forty five companions have narrated ahadith about the Miraj. In the tafsir of Ibn Katheer, he has devoted 15 pages and compiled most of the authentic ahadith on this topic. Apart from Abu Darr Ghaffari, all the other narrators are Madani and from the Ansar. How did they learn about the Miraj ? It could be that the blessed Prophet ﷺ wanted to talk about it, which is most likely because it was one of the greatest and wonderful miracles. The other possibility is that the Ansari companions had heard it from Abu Darr. Then there were dozens of tabiun (successors) who narrated ahadith about the Miraj. The Prophet ﷺ, the companions and their successors all used to talk about the Ascension.

All the six books of Hadith contain chapters on Miraj. Imam Bukhari and Imam Muslim have separate chapters on Miraj and Isra respectively. If they hadn’t discussed it, we would have become ignorant about this aqeeda.
What is the Ascension?

Surah 17 of the majestic Quran, Al-Isra opens with an ayah which concisely describes the ascension:, where Allah  says:

Glorified be He who took His servant for a journey by night from the Masjid Al-Haram to the Masjid Al-Aqsa, the surroundings we have blessed, in order to show him some of Our signs. Indeed, He is the all-Hearing, the all-Seeing.

(Surah Al-Isra [17], Ayah 1)

This verse talks about the most remarkable miracles of Muhammad , the night journey (Isra). This journey had two phases: The horizontal from the Kaabah in Makkah, to the historic masjid in Jerusalem. The second was the vertical phase from Al-Aqsa to the divine throne. The purpose of this journey we are told was “to show him Our signs”. The hadith literature gives graphic details of this momentous journey. The verse begins with one of the Divine attributes, “Subhaan”, then Glorified. Let us look at the significance of this:

The diameter of the universe according to the astronomers is 3 billion light years, an incredible distance unimaginable, to the human intellect. The question is how could such a fantastic distance be covered in such a short period of night? We need not search any further, since the Glorious Quran tells us it was Subhaan who took His servant from the sacred mosque to the furthest mosque. The Divine name Subhaan ‘the one who is flawless without defect or weakness, the Glorified, The Quran claims the One took His servant on this miraculous journey is the one who is free from every kind of weakness.

The Lord of the universe, Who can create from nothing by the mere command of ‘kun’ (Be) and ‘fa-yakun’ (it becomes), by using the divine epithet “Subhaan”, the clouds of doubt vanish in the air! Hence the denial of the Miraj is not the denial of the miraculous journey, but the power of Allah 
The Dome of The Rock

This is the oldest Muslim building which has survived basically intact in its original form. It was built by the Caliph Abd al-Malik and completed in 691 CE. The building encloses a huge rock located at its center, from which, according to tradition, the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven at the end of his Night Journey. In the Jewish tradition this is the Foundation Stone, the symbolic foundation upon which the world was created, and the place of the Binding of Isaac. The Caliph Omar is said to have cleared the waste which had accumulated on the rock during the Byzantine period. The structure is octagonal and the dome is borne by a double system of pillars and columns. The walls, ceiling, arches, and vaults are decorated with floral images. The dome, on the inside, is covered with colored and gilded stucco. Abd al-Malik marked the end of the construction with a dedicatory inscription (still visible) which reads: "This dome was built by the servant of God Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan, emir of the faithful, in the year seventy-two" (Hejira 72 in the Muslim calendar is 691/692 CE). Under the Abassid ruler, Caliph al-Mamun (r. 813-833), repairs were carried out, and the caliph also seized the occasion to replace the tiles bearing al-Malik's name with others bearing his own name as the building's founder.
The term the "farthest mosque" is considered in Islamic tradition as the general name for the precinct of al-Haram al-Sharif ("The Noble Sacred Enclosure") in Jerusalem, as well as the specific name for the congregational mosque located at its southern edge.

The contemporary congregational mosque of al-Aqsa is a result of different stages of construction and renovations. It is usually agreed upon that Abd al-Malik, the Umayyad Caliph who was the patron of the Dome of the Rock, started the construction of al-Aqsa Mosque at the end of the 7th century. A major building phase took place during the time of the Caliphate of his son, Abd al-Malik (709-715 AD). The building suffered from several major earthquakes and was renovated and reconstructed during the Abbasid period by Caliph al-Mahdi (775-785) and possibly by Caliph al-Mansur (743-75). A further reconstruction was executed during the Fatimid period, in the 11th century. During the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem the mosque was considered as Templum Salomonis (the royal palace of Solomon) and it served as the palace of the Kings of Jerusalem and later as the dwelling place of the Knights Templars. At the same time the Dome of the Rock was regarded as the Templum Domini (The Temple of the Lord). Moreover, several major restorations are known to have taken place during the 14th and 20th century.

The mosque consists today of a seven bay hypostyle hall with several additional small halls to the west and east of the southern section of the building. Unlike most hypostyle-style mosques the building does not have a clearly delineated courtyard unless one considers the whole Haram as its court. It is capped with a silver dome, made of lead sheets, which together with the golden dome of the Dome of the Rock, formulate the icon of the Haram in Jerusalem.
Narratives of the Ascension from Hadith Literature

Detailed narratives of the ascension are found in the books of ahadith. Imam Bukhari in his Jami us-Sahih, in the “Book of Tawhid” has a chapter devoted to Miraj, whilst Imam Muslim’s Jami us-Sahih has a chapter called “Isra” in the “Book of the beginning of the revelation”

The two original narrators that heard it directly from the Prophet ﷺ appear to be Abu Darr and Malik ibn Sa’sa Ansari, whilst others such as Anas bin Malik, Abu Huraira, Abdullah ibn Abbas, Jabir ibn Abdullah, Abdullah ibn Masud and many more report it from these two original narrators.

According to Ibn Kathir, forty-five sahaaba have narrated this incident. Anas ibn Malik in Sahih Muslim begins his Hadith by saying “Abu Darr used to tell us…” suggesting that the miracle was mentioned many times and Abu Darr seems to be the source of the Madani Sahaaba narration.

Here we shall narrate the event according to the Jami us-Sahih of Imam Muslim. The Messenger ﷺ says:

“One night I was asleap, in the Harim near the Kaabah when I was woken by Jibril. He informed me of the Diving will and took me to the well of Zam Zam, where upon he opened by chest and poured wisdom and faith into it. Then he sealed it. I was then presented with a beautiful Buraq. This is an animal larger than a mule but smaller than a horse. I mounted it.”

It traveled at phenomenal speed. The Messenger ﷺ was soon at the second precinct of Masjid al-Aqsa. There all of the prophets of the past ages were assembled and waiting for him. He lead them in congregational prayer.

This noble assembly marked the end of the horizontal part of the journey. From here, accompanied by Jibril ﷺ, the Messenger ﷺ traveled on the Buraq ascending the heavens.

In the first heaven, He ﷺ met Adam ﷺ, who greeted Him ﷺ with love and affection in the words, “Welcome O righteous Son!”

The ascension continued to the second heavens where He ﷺ met Isa ﷺ and Yayha ﷺ, then on to the third heaven where He ﷺ was met by Yusuf ﷺ, on the fourth by Idris ﷺ, on the fifth by Harun ﷺ, and on the sixth by Musa ﷺ and on the seventh He ﷺ was greeted by Ibrahim ﷺ.

The journey continued beyond the heavens until He ﷺ reached the Baiy al Mamur – The Kaabah of the Angels, from where He ascended to the Lote tree of the uttermost boundary.

This is the focal point of the Divine mercy. Jibril ﷺ then reached the point where he was not allowed to travel any further. It was at this point that he parted from Muhammad ﷺ.

The Prophet ﷺ continued alone, but where to ? That is beyond the point of human grasp. The Glorious Quran alludes to it, in Surah An-Najm [53] Ayah 8:

Then he drew near, very near, like two bows lengths or even closer.

(Surah An-Najm [53], Ayah 8)

Narratives of the Ascension from Hadith Literature
What happened there is also in the realm of a mystery. We are just told that He revealed to His servant what he revealed, in Ayah 10 of Surah An-Najm:

And He revealed to His servant what He revealed
(Surah An-Najm [53], Ayah 10)
Was the Ascension a dream or a physical journey?

The numerous hadith reported in Bukhari, Muslim and other books do not indicate this journey was a dream. Qadi Iyaad al Malaki, in his commentary on Sahih Muslim says:

“The majority of the pious predecessors and later jurists, scholars of Hadith and men of learning believe the Miraj to be bodily. Four reasons are given by the scholars for this conclusion:

Firstly, the word ‘Abd’ in the ayah of the Miraj refers categorically to mind and soul together.

Secondly, all the hadith about the Miraj actually talk about the Prophet ﷺ mounting the Buraq, eating, drinking, meeting past prophets, leading them in the prayer. All these are physical actions. No where is it mentioned that this was a dream.

Thirdly, if it was a mere dream, which the beloved Messenger ﷺ narrated to the people of Makkah, why did they deny it? Surely don’t people see many weird and wonderful dreams?

Fourthly, how could it have been a test of people’s faith it was a mere dream?

This is why the great Hanafi scholar, Imam Nasafi mentioned in his classical work “Aqaid an Nasafi”. “In the Miraj, he was taken to Masjid al-Aqsa and then to Sidrat-ul-Muntaha, and wherever Allah wished.”

All this took place in a state of wakefulness and with the body. However it took place in the realm of the Barzakh, which is the state between the physical and spiritual. Hence spiritual laws govern the body and the spiritual elements appeared in the bodily form. In fact all the ‘strange’ events of Miraj were expressed in this state of Barzakh.

Shah Wali Allah’s comments on the intercession: (Sirat un –Nabi, page 451, in Hujja Tullahil Balaagah) Shah Wali Allah goes on to interpret many of the scenes of the Miraj in light of the above.

For example, the Hadith mentioned two cups were presented to the Prophet ﷺ. Once was a cup of milk and the other was a cup of wine. He ﷺ chose the cup of milk, and there upon the angel said: “You selected the natural state. If you had chosen the cup of wine, your entire nation would have been lead astray.” In this world for Barzakh, milk represented the natural state, and misguidance was in the form of wine.
The Purpose of the Ascension

The Quran explains the reason for taking Muhammad ﷺ on this miraculous journey as “to show him our signs.” The Messenger ﷺ visited heaven and hell, met the prophets and the angels and above all his Majestic Lord, ﺎﻟmighty.

According to Imam Nawawi and Zarqaani, this took place on 27th Rajab, 17 months before Hijrah. This was the year which biographers call “the year of sorrow” when his beloved wife and caring uncle die. The Messenger ﷺ was very sad that he lost two great supporters and comforters. The ascension was a “Divine treat” for him. Some of the other purposes of the journey are as follows:

- Declaration of the universality of Islam
  - By leading the prophets
  - By praying in Masjid al-Aqsa

- Warning the Kuffar of the imminent punishment

- The twelve commandments:
  - Not to commit shirk
  - Kindness to parents
  - Respect others rights
  - Avoid spend thriftiness
  - Do not kill your children
  - Do not commit adultery
  - Do not kill
  - Be kind to orphans
  - Fulfill your promise
  - Be fair in your dealings
  - Do not be suspicious of others
  - Do not be arrogant

- Prelude to Hijrah

- The obligatory five prayers
Schematic Representation of the Ascension

The Divine Throne of

The Lote Tree of the Extreme Limit
(Sidratul Muntaha)

Heaven via Raafaf
("flying carpet")

Hell

End of Jibril's journey

Vertical Journey

Narrate Ibn Abbas: (regarding the Verse) "And We granted the vision (Ascension to the heavens "Mira") which We showed you (O Muhammad as an actual eye witness) but as a trial for mankind." (17:60). Allah's Apostle actually saw with his own eyes the vision (all the things which were shown to him) on the night of his Night Journey to Jerusalem and then to the heavens. The cursed tree which is mentioned in the Qur'an is the tree of Az-Zaqqum.

Sahih al-Bukhari Hadith 8, Volume 610

Narrate Abu Huraira: On the night Allah's Apostle was taken on a night journey (Mira) two cups, one containing wine and the other milk, were presented to him at Jerusalem. He looked at it and took the cup of milk. Gabriel said, "Praise be to Allah Who guided you to Al-Fitra (the right path); if you had taken (the cup of) wine, your nation would have gone astray.

Sahih al-Bukhari Hadith 7, Volume 482

Horizontal Journey
via
the Buraq

Masjid al-Aqsa

Masjid al-Haram

27th Rajab محرم
When the Prophet journeyed to the Divine Throne, special arrangements were made to welcome the Arabian guest.

Like springtime everywhere, songs of greetings sung by the Angels in the skies like nightingales.

In the heavens and the earth were festive celebrations, the dazzling lights smiling and the fragrant perfumes spreading.

His radiant face created a moonlight near the Throne; The night was lit and the mirrors reflected the brightness.

The dressed up Kaabah welcomed the bridegroom with pride; The black stone like a beautiful mole on her pretty face.

The prayer niche lowered her head in delight; The black curtain gracefully moved, saturated with divine light.

The clouds moved and the hearts did a peacock dance; To honor Him, the Kaabah gazed in a lyrical trance.

The waterspout on the roof of the Kaabah, the golden Meezaab gently moved towards the ear from her foreheard; The raindrops gathered like pearls on Hateem’s bed.

The hills smiled and the elegant tops stood out in the space; The shoots of green grass rhythmically moved with grace.

What an exciting moment the angels, pure and wise, gathered around and dressed him as the bridegroom of paradise.

The light from His shining face so generously distributed; The moon and the Sun begged most eagerly this bright charity.

Gabriel could go no further with the divine guest; The prophets stirrup slipped from his hands though he tried to hold it.

He whole reflected on the Prophets speed suddenly found his mind aflame; All the trees in the woods of intellect started burning with shame.

Near the Divine Throne the Angels sang welcoming back the auspicious feet to grace as before.

On hearing this, the devotee exclaimed, “Where is my master? How lucky that my eyes will again kiss the soles of Allah’s Messenger?”

Allah’s Throne knelt down, the Angels fell into a prostration; It rubbed his eyes on his feet; The showed their utmost veneration.

Such bright lights shone that all the candles flickered; The lamp felt ashamed when the “Sun” itself appeared.

In this atmosphere the Messenger of Mercy came respectfully to say: “Those ways are open for you today, which were closed for Moses one day.”

“Move forward, O Muhammad! Come nearer, O Ahmad, My beloved.” What a lovely call it was and what a joyful atmosphere it created!

“O Allah, all praise be to You; You are undoubtedly Samad, Moses yearned here you became anxious to see.”

Allah gently encouraged him though the pace humbly slow; Grandeur checked him but grace inspired him steadily to go, overawed by Divine splendour, but inspired by the grace.
He advanced hesitantly with respect and humility; Allah led him on this endless journey with an exceptional agility.

At last a barge emerged from the ocean of his personality, as he drew nearer and near to Allah. The sun revealed the news that Allah Almighty’s beloved Messenger was soon expected to come back after meeting his creator.

The crown of Allah’s light was on his head amidst a blissful prayer; The Angels stood on both sides of his way to present a salute of honour.

Had we been there, we would have sought for some charity; How could that happen, when we were destined to live this life of poverty?

He hardly sat on the saddle that the journey of salvation ended at a glance; The salvation itself congratulated him and the sins engaged themselves in a dance.

The dust of luminous path rose up like the clouds of light; The space overflowed with rain and the whole way was exceptionally bright.

O Moon! You should have picked up dust from the Prophet’s feet, you would have got rid of your spots by rubbing it on them for a day.

The hoof-prints of the Buraq filled the entire way with flowers; In no time all over the place there were fragrant orchards and bowers.

The mystery of Aqsa prayer unfolded the secrets of first and last; The prophets of past and present prayed behind them.

As he advanced, his resplendent face shone with splendour, the sky light up and the stars became dimmer and dimmer.

The ocean of Unity surged forward and washed sands of diversity; Forget the dunes of the sky, just two bubbles were “Allah’s Arsh & the Kursi.”

His sun-like merciful face eclipsed the shining stars, the moonlight and starlight looked like shadows in his sunshine.

Who could see this ocean’s shore? It was all speed and surprise; He leapt like sight and became hidden from his own eyes.

To differentiate between the circumference and the centre was difficult; The arches bowed and the circles felt giddy as a result.

Millions of veils disappeared revealing endless oceans of luminosity, It was a strange Union of Lights, which symbolized diversity in unity.

He is the first and the last; He lives in the absence and the presence; His own hidden light went to see his own visible existence.

Here Allah gave His beloved Messenger a gift of formal and ritual prayers, He also honoured him with garlands of darood and salaam’s regal flowers.

The tongue was anxious to speak and the ear was eagerly to go very near; mysteriously and silently he said what he wanted to say and heard what he wanted to hear.

Then the distinguished guest was taken to paradise; The starts of paradise felt honoured to see the glory of their Arabian moon.

The Arabian moon was accorded a glorious welcome joyfully; All the heavenly flowers became daffodils and the chandeliers shone more brightly.

The spirit of ecstasy edged him on but the sense of humility checked him modestly; A real conflict of emotions “To advance or just to stay there reverently.”

Allah’s omnipotence be praised I His truthful moon shone at millions of stations on his way; Even then he returned home by dawn before starlight faded away.
Take pity on Raza, O our intercessor an Allah’s Messenger of mercy! Grant him a small share from the gifts distributed during the Miraj journey.

My mission is to praise the Prophet; My aim is to achieve his pleasure; The poetic rhymes and refrains have no value; Mustaf’s love is my true pleasure.