

Prophet Muhammad (p)'s Night Journey and Ascension to Heaven

*By Muhammad Asad, a Jewish convert to Islam.
Commentary on the Night of Ascension*

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In Chapter 17 verse number one – the Night of Ascension is mentioned. Below is the translation for your easier reference.

Surah 17 (*Al-Isra*), aya't 1 reads:

"Limitless in His glory He who transported His servant by night from the Inviolable House of worship [at Mecca] to the Remote House of Worship [at Jerusalem] -- the environs of which We had blessed -- so that We might show him some of Our symbols: for, verily, He alone is all-hearing, all-seeing"

Mohammed Asad has given the following commentary in his translation of the Quran, "The Message of the Quran by Muhammad Asad

"The Inviolable House of Worship" referred in Chapter (Surah) 17th verse one is present day Kaaba, located in Mecca where Muslims go for pilgrimage, at least once in their life time. This was the first Temple build to the worship of One God by Abraham and Ismael. This journey to Mecca happened when Hagar and Ismael were driven out of their house because of Sarah. Abraham left them to the care of God and placed them on a caravan headed south of Jerusalem. They ended up in Kaaba where finally Abraham on his visit to see Hagar and Ismael got the revelation to build the House of Worship to One God – in Mecca. This is called Kaaba.

"The Remote [lit., "farthest"] House of Worship", is the ancient Temple of Solomon -- or, rather, its site -- which symbolizes here the long line of Hebrew prophets who preceded the advent of Muhammad and are alluded to by the phrase "the environs of which We had blessed". The juxtaposition of these two sacred temples is meant to show that the Qur'an does not inaugurate a "new" religion but represents a continuation and ultimate development of the same divine message which was preached by the prophets of the old.

Mohammad Asad then adds more commentary on this in an appendix, which follows:

Appendix, "The Night Journey

THE PROPHET'S "Night Journey" from Mecca to Jerusalem and his subsequent "Ascension" to Heaven are in two stages, one mystic experience.

According to various well-documented Traditions - extensively quoted and discussed the Prophet accompanied by the Angel Gabriel, found him transported by night to the site of destroyed Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem. The site had nothing left of the Temple of Solomon.

Here Prophet led a congregation for long deceased prophets in prayer; some of them he afterwards encountered again in Heaven. The Ascension, in particular, is important from the viewpoint of Muslim theology inasmuch as it was in the course of this experience that the five daily prayers were explicitly instituted, by God's ordinance, as an integral part of the Islamic Faith.

Since the Prophet himself did not leave any clear-cut explanation of this experience, Muslim thinkers - including the Prophet's Companions - have always widely differed as to its true nature.

The great majority of the Companions believed that both the Night Journey and the Ascension were *physical* occurrences - in other words, that the Prophet was borne bodily to Jerusalem and then to Heaven - while a minority were convinced that the experience was purely spiritual. Among the latter we find, in particular, the name of Ayesha, the Prophet's widow and most intimate companion of his later years, who declared emphatically that "he was transported only in his spirit, while his body did not leave its place."

As against this, there are theologians who maintain that the Night Journey and the Ascension were physical experiences. That Prophet Mohammed was transported body and soul. Differences in opinion exist even today.

The most convincing argument in favor of a *spiritual* interpretation of both the Night Journey and the Ascension is forthcoming from the highly allegorical descriptions found in the authentic Traditions relating to this double experience: descriptions, that is, which are so obviously symbolic that they preclude any possibility of interpreting them literally, in "physical" terms. Thus, for instance, the Apostle of God speaks of his encountering at Jerusalem, and subsequently in Heaven, a number of the earlier prophets, all of whom had undoubtedly passed away a long time before. According to one Tradition (quoted by *Ibn Kathir* on the authority of *Anas*), *he visited Moses in his grave*, and found him praying.

In another Tradition, the Prophet "passed by people who were sowing and harvesting; and every time they completed their harvest, [the grain] grew up again. Gabriel said, "These are the righteous people in God's cause who spread God's message of love, compassion and forgiveness. Their work is always growing and blessed.

Then they passed by people who had lead a tyrannical life and caused a lot of wars, killing and unjustified suffering. They were all in a state of suffering.

In the best-known Tradition on the Ascension (quoted by *Bukhari*), the Prophet is believed to have said that while I lay on the ground next to the Kaaba there came unto me an angel, and cut open my breast and took out my heart, washed it in the heavenly waters of faith and then it was restored to its place. This is prelude to the Ascension - and is part of the Night Journey to Jerusalem - as purely spiritual experiences.

The early Muslim theologians, lacked adequate psychological knowledge and so did his early followers. They could think of only two alternatives. Physical transportation or a dream.

Since it appeared to them -- and rightly so -- that these wonderful occurrences would greatly lose in significance if they were relegated to the domain of mere dream, they instinctively adopted an interpretation in physical terms and passionately defended it against all contrary views.

Modern psychical research, though still in its infancy, has demonstrably proved that not every spiritual experience (that is, an experience in which none of the known organs of man's body has a part) must necessarily be a mere subjective manifestation of the "mind" -- whatever this term may connote -- but that it may, in special circumstances, be no less real or "factual" in the objective sense of this word than anything that man can experience by means of his physiological organism. We know as yet very little about the quality of such exceptional psychic activities, and so it is well-nigh impossible to reach definite conclusions as to their nature. Nevertheless, certain observations of modern psychologists have confirmed the possibility - claimed from time immemorial by mystics of all persuasions - of a temporary "independence" of man's spirit from his living body. In the event of such a temporary independence, the spirit or soul appears to be able freely to traverse time and space, to embrace within its insight occurrences and phenomena belonging to otherwise widely separated categories of reality, and to condense them within symbolical perceptions of great intensity, clarity and comprehensiveness. But when it comes to communicating such "visionary" experiences (as we are constrained to call them for lack of a better term) to people who have never experienced anything of the kind, the person concerned - in this case, the Prophet - is obliged to resort to figurative expressions: and this would account for the allegorical style of all the Traditions relating to the mystic vision of the Night Journey and the Ascension.

At this point I should like to draw the reader's attention to the discussion of "spiritual Ascension" by one of the truly great Islamic thinkers who said the Night Journey was performed by his soul, while his body did not leave its place.

"Those who have reported to us the Ascension of the Apostle of God can be divided into two groups -- one group maintaining that the Ascension was in spirit *and* in body, and the other group maintaining that it was performed by his spirit, while his body did not leave its place. They merely mean that it was his soul itself which actually went on the Night Journey and ascended to Heaven, and that the soul witnessed things which it [otherwise] witnesses after death when the separation of body and soul takes place.

It is obvious that this kind of spiritual experience of soul separating from the body and traveling is not for anyone to understand -- just like one God-guided and God inspired person is quiet different from those who do not believe in God.

However, it is impossible that we ordinary human beings will ever be in a position to fully comprehend spiritual experiences of this kind. Our minds can only operate with elements provided by our consciousness of time and space; and everything that extends beyond this particular set of conceptions will always defy our attempts at a clear-cut definition.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the Prophet's Night Journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, immediately preceding his Ascension, was apparently meant to show that *Islam is not a new doctrine but a continuation of the same divine message which was preached by the earlier*

prophets, who had Jerusalem as their spiritual home.

It is also a well-known Tradition that on the occasion of his Night Journey the Prophet led a prayer at the site of destroyed Temple of Solomon, in which all other prophets joined him, expresses in a figurative manner the doctrine that **Islam**, as preached by the Prophet Muhammad, is the fulfillment and perfection of mankind's religious development, and that Prophet Mohammad was the seal of God's message-bearers.

Definition and commentary is by Iftekhhar Hai

Islam : It is important here to define Islam. The Quran is very clear in explaining the definition of the word Islam. What does it mean and what does it stand for. The uniqueness of this word is - that it is not named after any person (in this case our Prophet). It means total surrender or submission to Allah (God). Islam was the religion even before our Prophet Mohammed was born (pbuh) as is evidenced in The Quran in reference to 42:13,

"The same religion (Islam or submission) has He established for you that which He enjoined on Noah. That which We have send as inspiration to you (Mohammed pbuh) and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: That you should stay steadfast in religion (submission to our Lord -Islam) and make no divisions therein. (this means work for the unity of humankind) As for those who worship other than God they are on (hard) wrong way to call from. God chooses and guides those whom He wills towards Him.

Commentary: *According to this if a Christian, a Jew or any believer in One Supreme Being says "we surrender or submit to God." They are falling within the definition of the word Islam. The art of surrender or submission is called Islam. This art of submission/surrender was shown to all the Prophets and their people as evidenced in The Quran 10:47, 14:4 & 16:36. Islam is very inclusive and broad in its definition. Muslims believe in Allah and take Mohammed (pbuh) as their messenger, just as Christians and Jews believe in the same God and take Jesus and Moses as their respective messengers. However Muslims believe in all the prophets from Jewish and Christian scriptures. One must refrain from judging other believers and their depth of surrendering or submission. God is THE ONLY JUDGE.*

Surah 3:85, "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, never will it be accepted of him." Here the definition of Islam must be taken in its greater context of surrendering and submission as explained above.

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