84314 - Are Al-Isra’ and Al-Mi`raj a Myth?

the question

One of the pretenders here in Libya has cast aspersions upon the story of the Isra’ and Mi`raj. He said in an article that was published by one of the newspapers that the story of the Mi`raj is pure myth, and it is not possible that this could have happened to any human being, and he quoted as evidence for that the verse in Surat Al-Isra’ in which Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):
“ `…or you ascend up into the sky, and even then we will put no faith in your ascension until you bring down for us a Book that we would read.’ Say (O Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)): `Glorified (and Exalted) be my Lord (Allah) above all that evil they (polytheists) associate with Him! Am I anything but a man, sent as a Messenger?’” [Al-Isra’ 17:93]

He said that the Quran rules out the possibility of the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) ascending to heaven, and stated that this is contrary to the text of the Quranic verse, and that the Mi`raj was merely a dream that he saw in his sleep, based on the verse (interpretation of the meaning):
“And We made not the vision which we showed you but a trial for mankind.” [Al-Isra’ 17:60]

Finally, I would like to tell you that this topic has caused me some confusion, but I believe that it was a miracle. I hope that you will respond and explain the matter in such a manner that there will be no contradiction between the verse which says that no human could ascend to heaven and the miracle of the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

Please note that I do believe that there is no contradiction in the Quran. Please advise us, may Allah reward you with good.

Summary of answer

• Al-Isra’ and Al-Mi`raj are among the great signs of Allah that point to the truth of His Messenger

Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) and to the greatness of his status before Allah.
• From the hadith of the Isra', it is known that Prophet Muhammad was taken on the night journey in a physical sense when he was awake, according to the correct opinion, from Al-Masjid Al-Haram to Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa, riding on Al-Buraq, in the company of Jibril (peace be upon him). He halted there and led the prophets in prayer, and he tied Al-Buraq to the ring of the door of the mosque.
• Then he was taken up from Bayt Al-Maqdis (Jerusalem) on that night to the first heaven, where Jibril asked for it to be opened and it was opened for them. There he saw Adam, the father of mankind; he greeted him with Salam and he welcomed him and returned his Salam, and acknowledged his Prophethood. Then he was taken up to the second heaven…

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Are Al-Isra' and Al-Mi`raj a Myth?

Undoubtedly the Isra' and Mi`raj are among the great signs of Allah that point to the truth of His Messenger Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and to the greatness of his status before Allah, may He be glorified and exalted. Furthermore they are among the proofs of the great might and power of Allah, and of His highness above all of His creation. Allah, may He be glorified, says (interpretation of the meaning):

"Glorified (and Exalted) be He (Allah) (above all that (evil) they associate with Him),Who took His slave (Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) for a journey by night from Al-Masjid-Al-Haram (at Makkah) to the farthest mosque (in Jerusalem), the neighbourhood whereof We have blessed, in order that We might show him (Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) of Our Ayat (proofs, evidences, lessons, signs, etc.). Verily, He is the All-Hearer, the All-Seer." [Al-Isra' 17:1]

It is narrated in Mutawatir reports from the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) that he was taken up to the heavens and that the gates of the heavens were opened for

him, until he passed beyond the seventh heaven, where his Lord, may He be glorified, spoke to him as He willed and enjoined upon him the five daily prayers . Allah, may He be glorified, initially enjoined them as fifty prayers, but our Prophet Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) kept asking Him to reduce it until He made it five, so they are five in terms of the obligation but fifty in terms of reward, because each good deed brings a tenfold reward. To Allah be praise and thanks for all His blessings.

But people differed concerning the Isra' and Mi`raj. Some of them said that it was a dream, but the correct view is that he was taken on the night journey (Isra') and taken up into the heavens (Mi`raj) when he was awake, because of an abundance of evidence that we will quote below.

At-Tahawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said in his famous book Al-`Aqidah:

"The Mi`raj is true. The Prophet was taken on a journey by night and was taken up to heaven himself when he was awake, then he was taken as high up as Allah willed, and Allah honoured him with whatever He willed, and revealed to him what He revealed. "The (Prophet's) heart lied not (in seeing) what he (Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) saw" [An-Najm 53:11] may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him in the Hereafter and in this world."

Ibn Abi'l-`Izz Al-Hanafi said in Sharh At-Tahawiyyah (may Allah have mercy on him):

"The people differed concerning the Isra'.

- It was said that the Isra' involved his soul only and his body was never absent. This was narrated by Ibn Ishaq from `Aishah and Mu`awiyah (may Allah be pleased with them), and a similar report was narrated from Al-Hasan Al-Basri.

But it should be noted that there is a difference between saying that the Isra' was a dream and saying that it involved his soul but not his body. There is a great difference between the two ideas.

`Aishah and Mu`awiyah (may Allah be pleased with them) did not say that it was a dream; rather they said that his soul was taken by night but his body was not absent.

The difference between the two is that what a sleeper sees in his dream may be representations of things that are known in real life. So in a dream it may be as if a person sees himself being taken up to heaven and being taken to Makkah, but his soul did not ascend or go there; rather the angel of dreams caused him to see a representation of something.

They [`Aishah and Mu`awiyah (may Allah be pleased with them)] did not mean that the Isra' was a dream; what they meant was that the soul itself was taken on the night journey, so it left the body and then returned to it, and they regarded this as something unique to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), because no one else could have the experience of their very soul ascending completely to heaven except after death.

- It was also suggested that the Isra' occurred twice: once when he was awake and once in a dream …
- Similarly, some of them said that it happened twice: once before the revelation began and once after that.
- Others said that it happened three times: once before the revelation began and twice after that.

Every time there was some ambiguity they suggested that this was a separate occurrence, so as to reconcile between the reports. This was done by those who were weak in knowledge of Hadith.

In contrast, the view of the leading scholars of Hadith is that the Isra' occurred once, in Makkah, after the Prophet's mission began and one year before his Hijrah (migration to Madinah); it was also suggested that it occurred one year and two months before that, as stated by Ibn `Abd Al-Barr.

From the Hadith of the Isra', it is known that he was taken on the night journey in a physical sense when he was awake, according to the correct opinion, from Al-Masjid Al-Haram to Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa, riding on Al-Buraq, in the company of Jibril (peace be upon him). He halted there and led the prophets in prayer, and he tied Al-Buraq to the ring of the door of the mosque. It was also said that he halted in Bethlehem and prayed there, but there is no sound report to that effect at all.

Then he was taken up from Bayt Al-Maqdis (Jerusalem) on that night to the first heaven, where Jibril asked for it to be opened and it was opened for them. There he saw Adam, the father of mankind; he greeted him with Salam and he welcomed him and returned his Salam, and acknowledged his Prophethood. Then he was taken up to the second heaven…"

And he (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

"One of the proofs that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was taken on the night journey (Isra') physically when he was awake is the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

"Glorified (and Exalted) be He (Allah) (above all that (evil) they associate with Him), Who took His slave (Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) for a journey by night from Al-Masjid-Al-Haram (at Makkah) to the farthest mosque (in Jerusalem)." [Al-Isra' 17:1]

The word "slave" implies both body and soul, just as the word "person" implies both body and soul. This is the regular meaning when the word is used in the usual sense, and this is the correct view. So the Isra' involved both body and soul, and that is not contrary to reason. If we accept that it is far-fetched to think that a person could ascend to heaven, then we should accept that it is far-fetched to think that the angels could descend, and that would lead to denying Prophethood, which constitutes kufr (disbelief)." (Sharh At-Tahawiyyah, 1/245)

Ibn Kathir (may Allah have mercy on him) said in his Tafsir (3/33):

"Then the people differed as to whether the Isra' involved both body and soul, or only his soul. There are two views; the majority of scholars are of the view that he was taken on the night journey both in body and soul, when he was awake, and not in a dream, although they do not reject the idea that the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) may have seen a dream before that, then seen those things after that when he was awake, because he (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) never saw a dream but it came true like the breaking of dawn. The evidence for that is the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Glorified (and Exalted) be He (Allah) (above all that (evil) they associate with Him),Who took His slave (Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) for a journey by night from Al-Masjid-Al-Haram (at Makkah) to the farthest mosque (in Jerusalem), the neighbourhood whereof We have blessed.” [Al-Isra’ 17:1]

Tasbih [the phrase “Subhan Allah (Glory be to Allah or Glorified be Allah)] is used in the case of matters of great significance. If it had been a dream, there would have been nothing great about it and it would not have been regarded as being of such great significance; the disbelievers of Quraysh would not have hastened to disbelieve him and a number of those who had previously become Muslim would not have apostatised.

Moreover, the word “slave” refers to both soul and body together, and Allah, may He be exalted, said “Who took His slave (Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) for a journey by night”, and He, may He be exalted, also said (interpretation of the meaning): “And We made not the vision which we showed you but a trial for mankind, and likewise the accursed tree.” [Al-Isra’ 17:60]

Ibn `Abbas said: This was something that the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) saw with his own eyes on the night in which he was taken on the night journey (Isra’), and the accursed tree is the tree of Az-Zaqqum. (Narrated by Al-Bukhari (2885)

Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “The sight (of Prophet Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) turned not aside (right or left), nor it transgressed beyond (the) limit (ordained for it)” [An-Najm 53:17]; sight is one of the physical faculties, not part of the soul.

Moreover, he was carried on Al-Buraq, which was a shining white animal; this can only refer to the body, not the soul, because to move the soul there is no need for a mount to carry it. And Allah knows best.”

Shaykh Hafiz Al-Hakami said in Ma`arij Al-Qabul (3/1067):

“If the Isra’ and Mi`raj had to do with the soul in a dream, Quraysh would not have rejected it and they would not have said, It takes us a month by camel to reach Jerusalem and a month to come back, but Muhammad claims that he was taken there last night and was back here with us this morning…! And they ridiculed him (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

If that had been a dream, they would not have found it so far-fetched and there would have been no meaning in their rejecting it, because a person may see in his dream things that are farther away than Jerusalem, and no one will disbelieve his dream or find it far-fetched. But the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) told them about a night journey that was real and had happened when he was awake, not in a dream, so they rejected it and ridiculed him, as they found it far-fetched and outrageous, and also out of stubbornness, because they had little knowledge of the might and power of Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, and they did not realise that Allah does whatever He wills. Hence when they told Abu Bakr As-Siddiq about it, he said: If he said it, then it is true. They said: Do you really believe him? He said: Yes, and I believe him in something even more extraordinary than that, that news from heaven comes to him in the morning or in the afternoon – or words to that effect.”

Al-Hafiz Abul-Khattab `Umar ibn Dihyah said in his book At-Tanwir fi Mawlid as-Siraj Al-Munir:

“There are Mutawatir reports about the Hadith of the Isra’ narrated from `Umar ibn Al-Khattab, `Ali, Ibn Mas`ud, Abu Dharr, Malik ibn Sa`sa`ah, Abu Hurayrah, Abu Sa`id, Ibn `Abbas, Shaddad ibn Aws, Ubayy ibn Ka`b, `Abd ar-Rahman ibn Qart, Abu Habbah Al-Ansari, Abu Layla Al-Ansari, `Abdullah ibn `Amr, Jabir, Hudhayfah, Buraydah, Abu Ayyub, Abu Umamah, Samurah ibn Jundub, Abu’l-Hamra’, Suhayb Ar-Rumi, Umm Hani’, and `Aishah and Asma’ the daughters of Abu Bakr As-Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with them all). Some of them reported it at length and others reported it more briefly.

Even though the reports of some of them do not meet the conditions of soundness, there is consensus among the Muslims on the Hadith of the Isra’, but the heretics turned away from it, seeking to put out the Light of Allah (i.e. the religion of Islam, this Quran, and Prophet Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) with their mouths. But Allah will complete His Light

even though the disbelievers hate (it) (cf. As-Saff 61:8)” (Tafsir Ibn Kathir (3/63)

The dangers of taking verses out of context

The way in which this writer discussed the issue and reached his conclusions is astounding, because he referred to one of the many demands that the disbelievers had made, and he gave the impression that the Quranic response – “Say (O Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)): `Glorified (and Exalted) be my Lord (Allah) above all that evil they (polytheists) associate with Him! Am I anything but a man, sent as a Messenger?’” [Al-Isra’ 17:93] – is referring to that particular demand, namely ascending up into the sky, and indicating that it is not possible for the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) to do that. But in fact this Quranic response was referring to a number of demands that the polytheists made out of stubbornness and going to extremes in rejection and denial. There follow these demands as described in the Quran (interpretation of the meaning):

“And they say: `We shall not believe in you (O Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)), until you cause a spring to gush forth from the earth for us;

`Or you have a garden of date-palms and grapes, and cause rivers to gush forth in their midst abundantly;

`Or you cause the heaven to fall upon us in pieces, as you have pretended, or you bring Allah and the angels before (us) face to face;

`Or you have a house of adornable materials (like silver and pure gold, etc.), or you ascend up into the sky, and even then we will put no faith in your ascension until you bring down for us a Book that we would read.’ Say (O Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)): `Glorified (and Exalted) be my Lord (Allah) above all that evil they (polytheists) associate with Him! Am I anything but a man, sent as a Messenger?.” [Al-Isra’ 17:90-93]

Think about these demands that deserve no response except the Quranic response: “Say (O Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)): `Glorified (and Exalted) be my Lord

(Allah) above all that evil they (polytheists) associate with Him! Am I anything but a man, sent as a Messenger?'"

Is it possible for one who is a human being to cause a spring to gush forth from the earth, and rivers, or to cause the heaven to fall down, or to bring Allah and the angels, or to ascend up into the sky and bring from it a Book addressed to every disbeliever?!

As it says in the commentary that was narrated from Mujahid and others. And this is in accordance with the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

"Nay, everyone of them desires that he should be given pages spread out (coming from Allah with a writing that Islam is the right religion, and Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) has come with the truth from Allah the Lord of the heavens and earth, etc.)" [Al-Muddaththir 74:52]

Undoubtedly these are not characteristics of human beings, nor are they within their capabilities. The statement of the Quran that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) is not able to do that refers to all of these demands together, and not just some of them, because among them are some demands that are ordinarily possible. It is proven that water sprang from between the fingers of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), as is narrated in Sahih Al-Bukhari (3576) and elsewhere, so how about causing springs to gush forth from the earth (i.e., that is not impossible for him either). It is also not impossible that he could have had a garden of date palms… and other demands that they made. But the disbelievers had no real interest in these things; rather their main aim was to go to extremes in stubbornness and obstinacy with the Messenger (peace and blesisngs be upon him) for the sake of persisting in their transgression.

At-Tahir ibn `Ashur (may Allah have mercy on him) said: Because their demands were based on stubbornness, Allah instructed him to respond to them in a manner that would highlight astonishment at their words by saying "`Glorified (and Exalted) be my Lord", as this phrase is used to express astonishment, then follow that with a question by way of rebuke and emphasizing that he was no more than a human with a message from his Lord, i.e., I am not a lord who is in control,

such that I could create what is demanded of me, so how could I bring Allah and the angels, and how could I create on earth what was not created in it?” (At-Tahrir Wa’t-Tanwir (15/210-211)

Avoid the arguments of the doubters

Protect yourself against anything that may make you doubt, and be more eager to take care of your religious commitment than to acquire wealth, and do not give the devils among men and jinn any way to undermine the certainty in your heart or to shake your faith. So long as you have not acquired sufficient Islamic knowledge to protect yourself from the specious arguments of the doubters, then flee from such people and avoid sitting with them or meeting with them; do not listen to their fancy words, for you do not know whether doubt will take root in your heart when you leave them, and if you expose yourself to confusion, will you be able to save yourself from it or will you fall prey to it? We ask Allah to guide us and all His slaves who affirm His Oneness.

And Allah knows best.