

Islamic Jerusalem: The Land of the Night Journey and Ascension

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Introduction

One of the major events happened to Prophet Muhammad (d. 632 CE / 13 AH) during his lifetime was the Night Journey and Ascension. He travelled to Islamic Jerusalem during the night from *al-Masjid al-Harām* in Makkah, and ascended from there to the highest Heavens. From this incredible experience, one can argue that perhaps Islamic Jerusalem is the only land which serves as a medium of the relation between earth and Heaven. One could also argue that the Night Journey shows the significance of Islamic Jerusalem as the hub of a relationship between humankind and The Creator. In this matter, Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi (1998: 53; 2005: 44) clearly states that Islamic Jerusalem “was the centre point for the Prophet’s earthly journey known as the Night Journey and the heavenly journey known as the Ascension.” Indeed, Islamic Jerusalem was the place where the Night Journey ended and the Ascension began. Accordingly, this miraculous event is one of the reasons why Islamic Jerusalem is highly significant and special to the Muslims.

Although the main reference to the event is mentioned in only a few verses in the Qur’ān (for example Qur’ān, 53: 11 – 15, and Qur’ān, 17: 1 & 60), one could argue that the event has

affected people from the early Muslims period until modern times. Along with those who can accept this event without any doubts, there are also those who do have doubts on the occurrence of the Night Journey. Such has been the situation from the Prophet's lifetime until now. For instance, there is considerable discussion as to the actual area where the Prophet began his journey to Heaven is. In addition, there is debate concerning the meaning of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā*, namely whether *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* in this verse refers to the place from which Muhammad is said to have ascended to Heaven or whether it is a reference to Islamicjerusalem in general.

In this article, the researcher attempts to examine closely the event of the Night Journey from various aspects. The researcher also endeavours to examine several points and questions with regard to the event in terms of its symbolical link between Islamicjerusalem and Makkah; when the event took place; why the Ascension took place from Islamicjerusalem; the disputes over the Night Journey and the response to the dispute; and several other relevant issues.

The Night Journey and Ascension in the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth

The Night Journey took place following the harsh challenges and oppression faced by Prophet Muhammad in Makkah, after his *da'wah* was made public. According to scholars such as Ibn Hishām (d. 217 AH / 832 CE) (1955, 1: 396) and Mubārakfūrī (1418AH: 111 – 112), after having faced harshness and passing the 'Year of Sorrow', Prophet Muhammad was taken to fulfil the *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* (Night

Journey and Ascension). Accordingly, Prophet Muhammad was miraculously transported from *al-Masjid al-Harām* in Makkah to Islamicjerusalem and then to Heaven. In the Qur'anic reference to this account, this chapter begins: "Glory to Whom who did take His worshipper, Muhammad, for a journey by night from *al-Masjid al-Harām* at Makkah to *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* at Islamicjerusalem, which We have surrounded with *barakah*, in order that We might show him some of Our Signs: surely He is the Hearing, the Seeing." (Qur'ān,17: 1).

It should be noted that the event of *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* is recorded in the Qur'ān and *Hadīth*. Examining the event, it appears that the event consisted of two phases. Phase one covers his earthly return journey from Makkah to Islamicjerusalem, known as *al-Isrā'*, and phase two covers his heavenly journey from Islamicjerusalem to the Heavens, known as *al-Mi'rāj*. The Qur'anic references to this event are quite brief. Ali (1997, 1B: 824) argues that, "obviously the Qur'anic references to this event, though very precise and positive, are nonetheless very brief." Although there are only a few Qur'anic verses related to this event, a number of *Ahādīth* have supported and thus explained it in some detail.

Details of this event are available in the numerous reports that exist on the subject. These emanate from the *sahābah* (companions) who report directly from Prophet Muhammad. The exegetes have quoted many narrations in discussing this event, as may be found in their books (Ibn Kathīr, 1994, 3: 5 – 10; Al-Tabarī, 1999, 8: 3 – 16; Al-Qurtubī, 1998, 5: 185 – 190; Al-Zuhaylī, 2003, 8: 5 – 10). The number of narrations from

sahābah is no less than twenty and, according to Ali (1997, 1B: 824), the narrations are mostly independent of one another.

The various narrations include accounts from Umm Hānī', Abdullah Ibn 'Abbās, Abdullah Ibn Mas'ūd, Anas Ibn Mālik,¹ Abū Hurayrah, Abū Dharr, Jābir Ibn Abdullah, Mālik Ibn Sa'sa'ah, Ḥudhayfah Ibn al-Yaman, Ubay Ibn Ka'b, and Abū Ayyūb al-Ansārī (Ali, 1997, 1B: 824; Al-Qazqī, 2003: 89 – 112; Ibn Hishām, 1955, 1: 396 – 397). This list of *sahābah*, who narrated the *Hadīth* of *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj*, continues as al-Suyūfī (n.d., 1: 252) pointed out, and includes Barīdah, Samrah Ibn Jundb, Sahl Ibn Sa'd, Shaddad Ibn Aws, 'Alī Ibn Abī Tālib, 'Umar Ibn al-Khattāb, 'Aishah, Asmā' Bint Abū Bakr and Umm Salamah.

Narrators among Companions	Location of Hadīth
Abdullah Ibn 'Abbās	<i>Sahīh Bukhārī, Hadīth</i> no. 3239, 3396, 3888, 6613; <i>Sahīh Muslim, Hadīth</i> no. 165, 176;
Anas Ibn Mālik	<i>Sahīh Bukhārī, Hadīth</i> no. 3370, 4964, 5610, 5717, 6581; <i>Sahīh Muslim, Hadīth</i> no. 165.
Abū Hurayrah	<i>Sahīh Bukhārī, Hadīth</i> no. 5576.
Abū Dharr	<i>Sahīh Bukhārī, Hadīth</i> no. 349, 1636, 3342.
Jābir Ibn Abdullah	<i>Sahīh Bukhārī, Hadīth</i> no. 3886, 4710.

¹ *Musnad Ahmad, Ḥadīth* no. 12443, 12444.

Mālik Ibn Sa' sa' ah	<i>Sahīh Bukhārī, Hadīth</i> no. 3207, 3393, 3430, 3887.
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Fig. 1 : Location of several narrations of the *Aḥādūth* about *Isrā'* and *Mi'raj* in *Sahīh al-Bukhārī* and *Sahīh Muslim*
Sources: Al-Bukhārī, 1981; Muslim, 1994; Ibn Hajar, 1997.

The above table shows several narrations with regard to the event of the Night Journey, narrated by several early Muslim scholars among the companions of Prophet Muhammad. These *Aḥādūth* cover a wide range of issues such as how Prophet Muhammad was taken from *al-Masjid al-Harām*, how the people did not believe in the story, and so on. Undoubtedly, these narrations confirm that the event is not just an ordinary story of Prophet Muhammad. The fact that it was narrated in several versions could be a strong point to face people with who do not believe in this event.

Different Opinions on the Date of the Night Journey

It is the opinion of some historians, which apparently become popular, that the Prophet Muhammad went on this remarkable journey on the 27th night of Rajab (the seventh month in the *Hijrī* Calendar). In fact, its exact date is still debatable and no common agreement has been reached. However, al-Mubārakfūrī (1418AH: 112) argues that the majority of scholars are in favour of a date between 12 to 16 months prior to *Hijrah* (the migration to Madīnah).

In a close examination of the date, the researcher found that Ibn Hajar mentioned some opinions of scholars which seem

to be in favour of a date between 12 to 18 months before *Hijrah*; however, one claims that the event occurred 5 years before *Hijrah*. For example, Ibn Hajar states that Ibn Sa‘d and al-Nawāwī were of the opinion that it happened a year before *Hijrah*. Ibn Hazm agrees with this, and he argues that this is also the opinion and consensus of other scholars (*al-Ijmā’*). In addition, Ibn Hazm argues that the event happened in the month of Rajab during the 12 years of *al-al-bi’tah / al-nubuwwah* (prophethood). Those who disagree include Ibn al-Jawzī who claims it was 18 months before *Hijrah*, Abū Rubay‘ Ibn Salīm who claims it to be 16 months before *Hijrah*, and Ibrāhīm al-Harbī who claims it was 11 months before *Hijrah* in Rabī‘ al-Akhīr.² The difference of opinion regarding the date of the Night Journey is indeed complex, and presents a challenge to come out with a solid answer. We shall see in the figure below (Fig. 2) the differences of opinion among scholars.

Moreover, Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr argues that the date was one year and two months before *Hijrah*, Ibn Fāris’s opinion is that it was one year and three months before *Hijrah*, while the opinion of al-Suddī is one year and five months before *Hijrah* – which is in the month of Shawwal³ (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 254 – 255). Ibn Qutaybah stated, as reported by Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, that it was eighteen months before *Hijrah*. Ibn Sa‘d, taking from Ibn Abī Sabrah, claims that it was in Ramadān eighteen months before

² The opinion of Ibrāhīm al-Harbī was supported and clarified by Ibn al-Munīr in “*Sharh al-Sīrah li Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr*” (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 254 – 255).

³ Al-Tabarī and al-Bayhaqī agree with Al-Suddī.

Hijrah. Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr reports that it was in Rajab, and al-Nawāwī agrees with this.

Scholar	Opinion
Ibn Sa‘d	A year before <i>Hijrah</i>
Al-Nawāwī	A year before <i>Hijrah</i>
Ibn al-Jawzī	18 months before <i>Hijrah</i>
Abū Rubay‘ Ibn Salīm	16 months before <i>Hijrah</i>
Ibn Hazm	Rajab, 12 years of prophethood (<i>al-bi‘thah</i>)
Ibrāhīm al-Harbī	11 months before <i>Hijrah</i> in Rabī‘ al-Akhīr
Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr	A year and two months before <i>Hijrah</i>
Ibn Fāris	A year and 3 months before <i>Hijrah</i>
Al-Suddī	A year and 5 months before <i>Hijrah</i>
Ibn Qutaybah	18 months before <i>Hijrah</i>
Ibn Sa‘d from Ibn Abī Sabrah	Ramadān, 18 months before <i>Hijrah</i>
‘Iyād reports from al-Zuhrī	5 years before <i>Hijrah</i>

Fig. 2 : Varying opinions of scholars on the date of *Isrā’* and *Mi‘rāj*.

Source: Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 254 – 255.

In contrast with those who are in favour with the date between twelve months and eighteen months before *Hijrah*, Ibn al-Athīr gave his opinion that it was three years before *Hijrah*. Additionally, ‘Iyād reports from al-Zuhrī, later followed by al-Qurtubī and al-Nawāwī, that the event occurred five years before *Hijrah* (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 254 – 255; Al-Qurtubī, 1998, 5(2): 192).

Though there is no single agreement on the date of the Night Journey, it is interesting to note that, all agree that the Night Journey in fact took place before *Hijrah*. Some suggest that it took place in the early years of *al-bi‘thah*, while the majority suggest dates ranging from between twelve months (one year) to eighteen months before *Hijrah* (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 254 – 255; Al-Qurtubī, 1998, 10: 210; Al-Nawāwī, 1996, 2: 209 – 210).

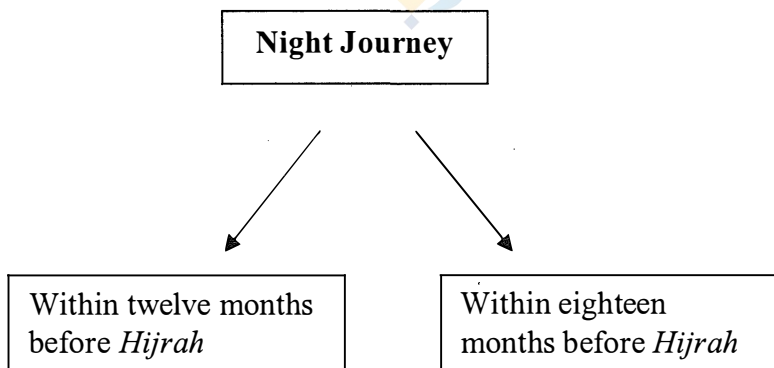


Fig. 3 : Two major opinions on the date of the Night Journey

With regard to the date of the Night Journey, the researcher agrees with Ali (1997: 827) who suggests that the context of Chapter al-Isrā’ and the internal evidence of the

reports on this subject clearly indicate it took place rather late in the Makkah period, which is before *Hijrah*. He argues that the command to pray five times daily was definitely received during the *Mi'rāj*. Since this obligation was not performed during the life-time of Khadijah, who died late in the tenth year of *al-bi'thah*, the command to perform this obligation, and therefore the *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj*, undoubtedly must have taken place after her death.

This refutes the claim of those who believe it happened three years and five years before *Hijrah*. In addition, it is generally agreed that the *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* took place after Prophet Muhammad was passing the 'Year of Sorrow', caused by the death of his beloved wife Khadijah (d. 619 CE / 4 BH) and his uncle Abū Tālib (619 CE / 4 BH) (Mubārakfūrī, 1418AH: 112). This emphasises the fact that the event must have taken place in the late Makkah period.

Taking into consideration the 'Year of Sorrow', it seems that the date of the Night Journey could be between eleven and twelve years of *al-bi'thah*. Additionally, one could argue that this remarkable event happened to Prophet Muhammad in the middle age of his prophethood. Taking this into consideration, it means that the event happened in the year 11½ of his prophethood, because the total of his prophethood was approximately twenty-three years. It is indeed interesting to note

that this could be in line with Chapter al-Isrā' which the Chapter is placed nearly in the middle of the Qur'ān.⁴

This argument also leads one to accept the opinion that the Night Journey happened eighteen months (1 ½ years) before *Hijrah*. This would mean that the opinions of Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Qutaybah concerning the date of the Night Journey would be the most reliable. Meanwhile, the opinion of Ibn Sa'd may be rejected because if the event happened in Ramadān, it would become less than eighteen months before *Hijrah*. Hence, eighteen months before *Hijrah* means that the event took place on the month of Rajab. The researcher will attempt to analyse the date of the Night Journey in the following discussion.

Analysis of the date of the Night Journey

In order to know the date of the Night Journey, the researcher considers that it is essential in the first instance to identify the important dates in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Hence, the researcher has analysed those dates which are significant to the Prophet. This may be summarised as follows:

No.	Important Historical Date	Event
1	21 Ramadān 1 of <i>al-bi'thah</i> = 10 August 610 CE	The Prophet received his first revelation - <i>al-bi'thah</i>
2	27 Safar 14 ⁵ of <i>al-bi'thah</i> – prophethood (1 AH) = 9	Migration: The Prophet left his house with Abū

⁴ This argument was raised by Abdallah Ma'rouf Omar, PhD student in Islamic Jerusalem Studies, during his presentation on 26 October 2004 at Al-Maktoum Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, UK.

	September 622 CE	Bakr.
3	8 Rabī' al-Awwal 14 of <i>al-bi'thah</i> (1 AH) = 19	The Prophet arrived at Qubā', near Madīnah.
	September 622 CE	
4	13 Rabī' al-Awwal 14 of <i>al-bi'thah</i> (1 AH) = 23	The Prophet arrived at Madīnah.
	September 622 CE (Friday) ⁶	

Fig. 33 : Several important historical dates during the life of the Prophet

Source: Mubārakfūrī, 1418 AH; Ali, 1997; Al-Albānī, 1421 AH; Sabhah, 1991; and www.islamicfinder.org.

From these dates, the researcher will attempt to investigate the most likely date of the Night Journey, taking into consideration the opinions of several scholars and the hypothesis that the event took place eighteen months (1 ½ years) before *Hijrah*, or in the year 11 ½ of prophethood. The calculation will use both calendars, *Hijrī* and Gregorian, in order to obtain an answer from different perspectives.

⁵ The year 14 of *al-bi'thah* (prophethood) is taken if we consider that the year begins with Muharram. If one considers the year begins with the starts of *al-bi'thah*, the month of Safar here is year 13 of *al-bi'thah*. However, the researcher prefers the year beginning with Muharram instead of *al-bi'thah*.

⁶ Mubārakfūrī prefers the date 12 Rabī' al-Awwal / 23 September 622 CE to be on Friday. However, according to the date conversion at www.islamicfinder.org the researcher found that Friday fell on 13 Rabī' al-Awwal.

Hijrī Based Calculation

i. From the Date of *al-bi'thah*

Beginning of *al-bi'thah* = 21 Ramadān 1 of *al-bi'thah* / 16 August 610 CE

Night Journey = 11 ½ years after *al-bi'thah* (12 of *al-bi'thah*) / 621 CE

If calculated from the date of his *al-bi'thah*, by adding 11 ½ years to this date, the Night Journey should be on 21 Rabī' al-Awwal in the year 12 of *al-bi'thah*.

ii. From the Date of *Hijrah*

Hijrah = 27 Safar 14 of *al-bi'thah* (1 AH) / 9 September 622 CE

18 months before *Hijrah* = 27 Rajab 12 *al-bi'thah* (2 BH) / 25 February 621 CE.

If calculated from the date of his migration, by subtracting eighteen months (1 ½ years) from the date, the supposed date for the Night Journey should be on 27 Rajab in the year of 12 *al-bi'thah*.

If we are to take this latter calculation, it would thus mean that the Night Journey happened within eleven years of *al-bi'thah* and not in year 11 ½ of *bi'thah*, as argued earlier.

Gregorian (Common Era) Based Calculation

The researcher next attempts to calculate the date for the Night Journey by using the Gregorian calendar.

i. From the date of *al-bi'thah*:

Al-bi'thah = 16 August 610 CE/21 Ramadān 1 of *al-bi'thah* (13 BH)

11 ½ years after *al-bi'thah* = 16 February 622 CE / 29 Rajab 1 BH

If calculated from the date of his *al-bi'thah*, by adding 11 ½ years to this date, the Night Journey should be on 16 February 622 CE / 29 Rajab 1 BH (12 of *al-bi'thah*).

ii. From the date of *Hijrah*

Hijrah = 9 September 622 CE / 27 Safar 14 of *al-bi'thah* (1 AH)

18 month before *Hijrah* = 9 March 621 CE / 9 Sha'bān 2 BH

If calculated from the date of his migration, by subtracting eighteen months (1 ½ years) from the date, the supposed date for the Night Journey should be on 9 March 621 CE / 9 Sha'bān 2 BH. According to this calculation, it would thus mean that the Night Journey occurred in the year 11 ½ and twenty three days of the *al-bi'thah*.

From these calculations, the researcher is inclined to accept that the date of the Night Journey is likely to be on the 27 Rajab in the 12 years of *al-bi'thah* (2 BH), the date calculated by using the *Hijrī* calendar and based on the scholars' opinion that the Night Journey occurred eighteen months before *Hijrah*.

The reason for this inclination is twofold. Firstly, two of the scholars mentioned by Ibn Hajar, namely Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Qutaybah were in favour of the date that being eighteen months before *Hijrah*. Secondly, 27 Rajab 12 *al-bi'thah* (2 BH) is the most popular and acceptable date of the Night Journey among scholars, as has been admitted by Sabhah (1991: 236). Consequently, the researcher thus rejects all the other dates calculated here for the supposed date of the Night Journey.

Where did the Night Journey happen?

Apparently, there are several references to this event in the Qur'ān and the traditions of the Prophet with regard to the location of the Night Journey. In the Qur'ān, Chapter al-Isrā' verse 1, one can noticed that the Night Journey was to *al-Masjid al-Aqṣā*. The common narration of this event is that *Jibrīl* (Gabriel) took Prophet Muhammad on a supernatural animal (*al-Burāq*) from Makkah to Islamicjerusalem and then to Heaven, where he received the commandment for the five daily prayers.

Source: This map is taken and modified by the researcher from al-Ratrout's file presentation for the 2004 International Academic Conference on Islamic Jerusalem Studies.

One of the *Ahādīth* mentions that, on arriving at *Bayt al-Maqdis*, the Prophet tied his *Burāq* and then he entered the Mosque. While in the Mosque, he offered prayers two *rak'ah*, and in another *Hadīth* it is mentioned that Prophet Muhammad led the other prophets in prayer. Here, the researcher attempts to highlight the example of the *Hadīth* that mentioned the Prophet prayed just after he had arrived at *Bayt al-Maqdis*. The *Hadīth* says: "then I entered the Mosque and I prayed two *rak'ah*".⁷ This *Hadīth* is *sahīh* (authentic), narrated by Anas Ibn Mālik and recorded by Muslim.⁸ Thus the *Hadīth* shows that the Prophet had offered prayers when he entered 'the Mosque'.

One might argue that the Prophet led the prayer after he descended from Heaven. Logically, it may have happened after the Prophet had met with the other prophets in his *Mi'rāj*; then, when he descended to Islamic Jerusalem, he led the prayer with other prophets. Nevertheless, the *Hadīth* of Muslim has clearly stated that the Prophet prayed before the Ascension. So, the existing of the authentic *Hadīth* which mentioned that he entered and offered prayer in *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* when he arrived from Makkah shows that the prayer was offered before the Ascension. Additionally, Ibn Hajar and al-Qazqī highlight that the greatest likelihood is that the Prophet prayed before the Ascension.

⁷ ثم دخلت المسجد فصليت فيه ركعتين

⁸ This *Hadīth* is compiled in *Sahīh Muslim, Kitāb al-Imān, Bāb al-Isrā' bi Rasūlillāh sallāllāhu 'alayhi wa sallam ilā al-Samāwāt, Hadīth* no. 259.

There were prophets at that time and Prophet Muhammad was the *Imām* in that prayer (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 209 – 210; Al-Qazqī, 2003: 97, 103).

Subsequently, the tradition that mentioned Prophet Muhammad led other prophets in prayer at *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* has led the researcher to argue that this shows the respect of the previous nations for him. In addition, it shows a great recognition of Prophet Muhammad as the seal of prophets and that he had been sent on a mission to all nations. To become a leader of the previous prophets in prayer also shows that Islam is the final religion and fully recognised by prophets before Prophet Muhammad. It should also be noted that the Prophet's Night Journey from Makkah to IslamicJerusalem and to Heaven, shows that Islam is not a new doctrine but a continuation of the same divine message preached by the earlier prophets, who had IslamicJerusalem as their spiritual home.

Undoubtedly, his meeting with other prophets, mentioned in this historical connection, symbolises the same idea. Therefore, the well-known traditions to the effect that on the occasion of his Night Journey the Prophet led prayers in *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* of IslamicJerusalem, in which all other prophets arranged themselves behind him, expresses in a symbolic manner the doctrine that Islam is the fulfilment and perfection of mankind's religious development, and that Prophet Muhammad was the last Messenger of Allah. Although several interpretations can be made, Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi (2005: 46) argues that one of them supports the argument that "IslamicJerusalem is not exculsive but inclusive, and should be

opened to everyone in the universe.” This means that the present of other prophets proved that IslamicJerusalem is a ‘global common space’⁹ to everyone.

Despite of his earthly journey on that night, the Qur’ān proved that Prophet Muhammad was taken to the Heaven, namely the *Sidrat al-Muntahā* (lote-tree of the utmost boundary) which was shrouded in indescribable colours. Allah said in the Qur’ān: “And certainly he saw him in another descent, at the farthest lote-tree (*Sidrat al-Muntahā*); Near it is the Garden of Abode. When that which covers covered the lote-tree; The eye did not turn aside, nor did it exceed the limit. Certainly he saw the greatest signs of his Lord.” (Qur’ān, 53: 13 – 18).

Why did the Night Journey go through IslamicJerusalem?

Contemplating on the occurrences of this remarkable night, it can be argued that Allah had a very good reason for Prophet Muhammad to be transported from Makkah to IslamicJerusalem and then to the Seven Heavens. In this regard, Allah could take Prophet Muhammad straight from Makkah to Heaven. However, Allah took him through IslamicJerusalem, which once again shows the significance of IslamicJerusalem to Muslims. It indicates that IslamicJerusalem was the ‘ultimate goal’ in which to place hope, find peace of mind and freedom

⁹ Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi has regarded IslamicJerusalem as a ‘global common space’ in a statement during the launching of his latest book ‘Introducing IslamicJerusalem’ at the Scottish Parliament at Edinburgh on 30 January 2006. See *New Interpretation by Leading Academic Will Help to Promote Better Understanding*. Al-Maktoum Institute Home Page. 30 January 2006. <http://www.almi.abdn.ac.uk/public/main.aspx?MenuItems=81>

from social oppression. This event also demonstrates to believers the greatness of Allah and His caring and kind attention to His Prophet, who was facing hardships before the Night Journey.

The fact that Prophet Muhammad was transported to Heaven from IslamicJerusalem is indeed interesting and should be explored. Why was the Ascension taken from IslamicJerusalem? One of the arguments claims that IslamicJerusalem is the point of ascent to Heaven, so Allah took the Prophet to Heaven through IslamicJerusalem. This is according to Ibn Hajar, who quotes a narration saying that the gate of Heaven, *Mas'ad al-Malā'ikah* (The angels' point of ascent) faces *Bayt al-Maqdis* (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 237; Hajjāj, 1993, p. 15). Although this narration came from a Jewish convert, Ka'b al-Ahbār, in a way it could be argued that from *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* in *Bayt al-Maqdis*, the Prophet could be taken straight up to Heaven. This would show that *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* is like an 'airport' for Heaven, where the journey to Heaven is through this point of Ascension.¹⁰

One could also argue that, going through IslamicJerusalem, the Prophet could explore and visit both Muslims *Qiblah* on that remarkable night. This has inevitably strengthened the link between *al-Masjid al-Harām* in Makkah and *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* in IslamicJerusalem. It could also be argued that, since IslamicJerusalem had been the place where

¹⁰ This point was argued by FatimatuZahra Abd Rahman during her presentation in November 2003 at Al-Maktoum Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, UK.

most previous Prophets had visited, so Prophet Muhammad had been taken there to have the same virtues as they had had. (Hajjāj, 1993: 15).

Moreover, Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373 CE / 774 AH) argues that the Qur'anic verse, which mentioned 'to *al-Masjid al-Aqsā*,' meaning that the area is in Islamic Jerusalem, originated from the time of the previous prophets, since the time of Prophet Ibrāhīm. Although Ibn Kathīr argues that the land related to the time of Prophet Ibrāhīm, one could argue and date back that its relations started from the first prophet, Ādam. Ibn Kathīr adds that the previous prophets all gathered there, and Prophet Muhammad led them in prayer. This indicates that he is the greatest leader of all (Ibn Kathīr, 2000, 5: 551). So, the reason of the Night Journey went through Islamic Jerusalem clearly to show that there was a relation between Prophet Muhammad and other previous prophets, and to show that Islamic Jerusalem is central in Islam.

The Night Journey: Re-Strengthened link between Makkah and Islamic Jerusalem

The Night Journey seems to have recreated a symbolic link between Makkah and Islamic Jerusalem. Factually, the link between these two important lands had been established by the previous prophets, and can be dated back from the time of Prophet Ādam. Since the miraculous Night Journey of Prophet Muhammad took place more than fourteen centuries ago, Muslims have established an inspiring and everlasting relationship with Islamic Jerusalem. The fact that the Prophet was taken from *al-Masjid al-Harām* in Makkah to *al-Masjid al-*

Aqsā in IslamicJerusalem has indeed strengthened the inter-relationship between these two places. The researcher is inclined to argue that this event has re-established a twinning relation between the two mosques, *al-Masjid al-Harām* and *al-Masjid al-Aqsā*, which initially had been started by previous prophets. One might argue that the relationship was established as early as the time of Prophet Ādam, for he was the one who built *Ka'bah* and forty years later, *al-Masjid al-Aqsā*. The Night Journey, therefore, is one of the most important events that relating to two important places in Islam, Makkah and IslamicJerusalem, with the latter being the first *Qiblah* for Muslims.

Prophet Ibrāhīm had earlier strengthened the link between IslamicJerusalem and Makkah

The link between IslamicJerusalem and Makkah perhaps begins in the time of Ādam according to the Hadīth from Abū Dharr, of which mosque was built first on earth. This link was strengthened further with the journey that Prophet Ibrāhīm undertook when he was in IslamicJerusalem. Prophet Ibrāhīm went to IslamicJerusalem at a critical moment where the emperor and the people wanted to kill him. Prophet Ibrāhīm then went to Makkah after spending some time in IslamicJerusalem, seeking hope, calm, courage and protection from Allah. To the researcher, this shows that there is a close relation between IslamicJerusalem and Makkah. Prophet Ibrāhīm's visit to Makkah seems to be a completion of physical and spiritual connection between these two lands. In addition, there are so many associations between Makkah and Prophet Ibrāhīm especially *Hajj* (Muslims pilgrimage) that take place every year

in Makkah which apart from the act of worshipping Allah, in a way is a kind of commemoration of Prophet Ibrāhīm. To add to this, the rebuilding of *Ka'bah* and *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* were also both related to him.

One could argue that the effort taken by Prophet Ibrāhīm to rebuild *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* and *Ka'bah* shows that there was a strong relation between these two important places, physically and spiritually. Physically, relating to the efforts of Prophet Ibrāhīm to rebuild them, and spiritually related to the fact that both places have special merit and those who offer prayer at these two places will receive a specific reward from Allah. Undoubtedly, it gives a clear example of a strong relationship between the two most important sites for Muslims, namely Makkah and Islamicjerusalem.

Disputes on the Night Journey and its response

During that remarkable night, Prophet Muhammad returned to Makkah after the Ascension took place. It was no easy task for the Prophet to explain what had happened to him on the previous night. Ibn Hajar comments that, when the Prophet told the people what had happened to him on the night before, most people did not accept what the Prophet was trying to explain and mocked him, saying, “We need a month to get there and back, and you are claiming to have done all this in one night?” They said to Abū Bakr, “Look at what your companion is saying. He says he went to Islamicjerusalem and came back in one night.” Abū Bakr told them, “If he said that, then he is truthful. I believe him concerning the news of the heavens - that

an angel descends to him from the heavens. How could I not believe he went to IslamicJerusalem and came back in a short period of time - when these are on earth?" At that, the Companion, Abū Bakr, was called "*al-Ṣiddīq*" because he showed how strongly he believed all that the Prophet said (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 250).

The people questioned the Prophet: "If you are truthful, then describe to us *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* and its surroundings." They asked this because they knew Prophet Muhammad had never been there before the previous night. In this regard, according to a *Ḥadīth*, Allah enabled the Prophet to see *al-Masjid al-Aqsā*, and he described the *Masjid* and its surroundings in exact detail. Moreover, the Prophet said, "On my way back, I saw some of your shepherds grazing their animals in a particular location. They were searching for a camel they had lost." The Prophet continued by giving the description of the camel. When these shepherds came back, they told their people what happened to them precisely as the Prophet had already told them. (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 251 – 252). Because the stories of the shepherds and the Prophet were precisely the same, the people admitted the Prophet's description was correct. Despite that, they were still stubborn and rejected the faith. Although many people were rejecting this event, it gave a different to believers. Ibn Hajar quotes Abū Muhammad Ibn Abī Jamrah who argues that one of the benefits of the Night Journey is it increase the faith of believers (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 252).

Indeed, describing the Night Journey is very challenging because it is beyond human imagination. As has

been mentioned, when the Prophet reported the event to the people of Makkah, they challenged him to prove it by asking the Prophet to describe Islamicjerusalem to them, because they were at some point familiar with the region through their caravan trading. They tried to use their road experience to undermine his credibility as a Prophet, for they knew that the journey from Makkah to Islamicjerusalem would take several weeks during that time in each direction. In one of the *Hadīth Sahīh*}, narrated by Jābir bin Abdullah, the Prophet said:¹¹

“When the Quraysh (a tribe of people in Makkah) did not believe me (about the Night Journey), I stood in the *Hijr*¹² and Allah revealed to me *Bayt al-Maqdis* (Islamicjerusalem) and I began describing its signs to them while I was looking at it.”¹³ (Al-Bukhārī, 1981, 2 (2): 247 – 248; Muslim, 1994, 1: 535; Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 247; Al-Qazqī, 2003: 108 –111).

This *Hadīth* seems to provide the setting for interpreting Chapter al-Isrā’ verse 1, and explains why Muslims believe that the location of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* is in Islamicjerusalem. Furthermore, Qur’anic commentators take this particular verse

¹¹ The *Hadīth* in Arabic is as follows:

حدثنا يحيى بن بكير حدثنا الليث عن عقيل عن ابن شهاب حدثني أبو سلمة بن عبد الرحمن سمعت جابر بن عبد الله رضي الله عنهما أنه سمع رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم يقول لما كذبتني قريش قمت في الحجر فجلا الله لي بيت المقدس فطفقت أخبرهم عن آياته وأنا أنظر إليه

¹² *Hijr Ismā’īl* is an area considered to be part of the *Ka’bah* but ended up outside it when it was rebuilt before Muhammad became a prophet.

¹³ *Sahīh Bukhārī Hadīth* no. 3886, (*Kitāb al-Manāqib, Bāb Hadīth al-Isrā’*); *Sahīh Muslim Hadīth* no. 278, (*Kitāb al-Īmān, Bāb Zikr al-Masīh Ibn Maryam wa al-Masīh al-Dajjāl*).

of the Night Journey seriously and confirm that the location of *al-Masjid al-Harām* is in Makkah and the *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* is in IslamicJerusalem. As far as the researcher is concerned, there have been no Muslim scholars who have disagreed on this position throughout the Muslims' intellectual history.

Another dispute which arose after examining the Night Journey was whether it was only a spiritual journey, or was it in the physical body as well. In this regard, the Qur'anic verses and *Hadīth* provide the proof that the Night Journey is included both the body and soul of Prophet Muhammad. The verses, in particular, describe that the Prophet undoubtedly had seen Allah on this journey. Allah said: "The (Prophet's) heart did not lie in what he saw. Will you then dispute with him about what he saw?" (Qur'ān, 53: 11 – 12). In another verse, Allah said: "And We made not the vision which We showed you (O Muḥammad) but a trial for humankind" (Qur'ān, 17: 60).

In addition, there are several *Aḥādīth* which support the claim that the Night Journey was actually both physical and spiritual. These *Aḥādīth* is recorded by al-Bukhārī (d. 870 CE / 256 AH), al-Tirmidhī¹⁴ (d. 892 CE / 279 AH) and Imām Ahmad (d. 855 CE / 241 AH), and narrated by Ibn 'Abbās, which Ibn 'Abbās explains the meaning of verse 60 in Chapter al-Isrā'. He made it clear that the vision of the Prophet in the Night Journey was a 'real vision' (*Ru'yā 'Ayn*).

According to these evidences from the Qur'ān and *Hadīth*, therefore, it is clear that Prophet Muhammad traveled physically

¹⁴ *Sahīh Bukhārī Hadīth* no. 3888, 4712 and 6613. *Sunan al-Tirmidhī, Ḥadīth* no. 3134.

and spiritually and that he did not lie on explaining the Night Journey event. The fact that he did not lie in what he saw and the explanation of Ibn ‘Abbās of verse 60 in Chapter al-Isrā’ confirms that the Prophet, on the event of *al-Isrā’* and *al-Mi‘rāj*, experienced the journey both physically and spiritually.

Did *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* exist during the Night Journey?

To some people, the Night Journey is only in the imagination of the Prophet. One of the arguments they always use to deny this event is to say that the present building of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* was built after the death of Muhammad. Thus, it is utterly impossible that Muhammad visited it on his Night Journey. They also argue that, at the time verse in the Qur’ān, 17: 1, was revealed (about 622 CE), Islamic Jerusalem was in fact ruled by Christians and there was no mosque in the region. For instance, a Jewish writer, Sam Shamoun who wrote an article titled “Muhammad’s Alleged Night Journey to the Jerusalem Temple” argues that:

“... General Titus and his Roman soldiers levelled the Second Temple in 70 A.D., more than five centuries before this alleged night journey to Jerusalem took place. In fact, the Temple that eventually became *Masjid al-Aqsā* did not come into existence until 691 A.D. when Abd al-Mālik built it.”¹⁵

¹⁵ *Muhammad’s Alleged Night Journey to the Jerusalem Temple*. Temple Answering Islam Home Page. Sam Shamoun. 22 March 2004. <http://www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/nightjourney.htm>.

Shamoun continues, “these preceding factors make it highly improbable to date Chapter al-Isrā’ 17:1 to the time of Muhammad.” Without hesitation, he claims, “this passage could have only been written sometime after the erection of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā*. This is further substantiated by the fact that *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* contains no early references to the supposed Night Journey. This is a strange omission since Muslims claim that *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* was erected in commemoration of this alleged event.”

In addition, in ‘The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam’, Glassé (1989: 102) claims that when the Arabs conquered IslamicJerusalem they found *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* abandoned and filled with refuse. ‘Umar ordered it to be cleaned and performed a prayer there. He also argues that the sanctuary (the Dome of the Rock) was built by Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwān around 72 AH / 691 CE and that the proper building of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* was also built only at the end of the 7th Century CE, again years after the event of *Isrā’* and *Mi‘rāj* itself.

The researcher found another attempt to deny the event of the Night Journey and claims that IslamicJerusalem was not important to Muslims. Daniel Pipes denies the importance of IslamicJerusalem to Muslims by pointing out in his article that Muslims never mention IslamicJerusalem in their prayer (it does not appear in any Qur‘anic verses), nor has it been the capital of any Islamic state (Pipes, 2001).¹⁶

¹⁶ *The Muslim Claim to Jerusalem*. Daniel Pipes Home Page. Pipes, Daniel. 2001. 12 March 2004. <http://www.danielpipes.org/article/84>.

Pipes accuses Muslims of inserting Islamic Jerusalem as the meaning of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* into the Qur'ān and making it more central to Islam. He claims that, when the Qur'ān mentions Muhammad's Night Journey, it uses the term '*al-Aqsā Mosque*'. Pipes alleges that early Muslim commentators (exegetes) thought that this term was a metaphorical one or that it was a place in Heaven, and thus the Qur'ān is basically contradicting itself. He claims that the Qur'ān previously noted that Palestine is the closest land by referring to the word '*adnā al-ard*' (Qur'ān, 30: 1 – 2). Furthermore, in commenting on Chapter al-Isrā' verse 1, Pipes claims:

“When this Quranic passage was first revealed, in about 621, a place called the Sacred Mosque already existed in Mecca. In contrast, the “furthest mosque” was a turn of phrase, not a place. Some early Muslims understood it as metaphorical or as a place in Heaven. And if the “furthest mosque” did exist on earth, Palestine would seem an unlikely location, for many reasons. Some of them: Elsewhere in the Qur'ān (30: 1), Palestine is called “the closest land” (*adnā al-ard*). Palestine had not yet been conquered by the Muslims and contained not a single mosque. The “furthest mosque” was apparently identified with places inside Arabia: either Medina or a town called *Ji'rana*, about ten miles from Mecca, which the Prophet visited in 630. The earliest Muslim accounts of Jerusalem, such as the description of Caliph 'Umar's reported visit to the city just after the Muslims conquest in 638, nowhere identify the Temple Mount with the “furthest mosque” of the Qur'ān” (Pipes, 2001).

Basically, disagreement concerning the Night Journey occurs mostly among orientalist and Israelis scholars because they claim that the physical building of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* was built in a later period, and the mosque did not exist at the time of Prophet Muhammad. The researcher notices that such a pattern of allegation could be found by anyone who studies this particular event. Even if someone looks at Muslims' historical sources, it would seem that the historical sources are in favour of there being no building called *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* existing at the time of the Night Journey. The sources appear to argue that 'Umar (d. 644 CE / 24 AH) was the first person who demarcated an area for the construction of a physical building of the *al-Aqsā* Mosque. Al-Azdī (d. 805 CE / 190 AH) and al-Wāqidī (823 CE / 207 AH) for example reported that 'Umar sets the *mihṛāb* (prayer niche) there to the east, which is the place of his mosque (Al-Azdī, 1970: 259; Al-Wāqidī, n.d., 1: 151). This happened when 'Umar came to Islamicjerusalem during the first Muslim Conquest of Aelia. It could be argued that, because 'Umar set the prayer niche, this could mean that there was no prayer niche and even the physical building of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* before he came to that area at that time.

Moreover; Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān (d. 150 AH / 767 CE) gives the earliest clear reference that the Muslims built a mosque in Islamicjerusalem only in the time of 'Umar (Ibn Sulaymān, 1969, 1: 62 – 63). Al-Muhallabī (1958, 1: 54) is in agreement with Muqātil and he states that 'Umar cleared the site of the *Harām*, and the Muslims built a mosque there (Duri, 1990: 108). Although the above reports have shown that 'Umar

demarcated an area for the construction of the *al-Masjid al-Aqsā*, there is another report that suggests ‘Umar himself had built it. For example, al-Mutahhar al-Maḡdisī reports that ‘Umar built a mosque in *Bayt al-Maḡdis* (Al-Maḡdisī, 1899 – 1907, 5: 185). However, with regard to this confusion, al-Tel in his recent book, strongly argues that ‘Umar came to Islamic Jerusalem and he just demarcated an area for *al-Masjid al-Aqsā*, and did not build it (Al-Tel, 2003: 171 – 203). Despite this debate concerning the *al-Aqsā* Mosque, it shows here that there was no physical building of *al-Aqsā* Mosque during the Night Journey.

Another report comes from al-Mutahhar al-Maḡdisī, which according to Duri is the only report in its kind (see endnote no. 47 in Duri, 1990: 122). Al-Mutahhar al-Maḡdisī reports that *Bayt al-Maḡdis* remained in ruins until it was built (*‘ammarahu*)¹⁷ by ‘Umar, then Mu‘āwiyah Ibn Abī Sufyān (Al-Maḡdisī, 1899 – 1907, 4: 85). If the area was in ruins, there could not possibly be any proper building as such including a mosque.

Furthermore, reports from other scholars suggest that *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* was built by ‘Umar. Duri highlights that these reports come from Theophanes, Michael the Syrian and Eutychius (Duri, 1990: 108; Michael The Syrian, 1963, II: 423). The first states that ‘Umar started the building of the mosque in 643 CE / 22 AH, while the other two emphasise that the mosque

¹⁷ Duri (1990: 122) has a small mistake here, which he quotes al-Maḡdisī to use the word *‘ammarahā*. However, after the researcher re-checked al-Maḡdisī’s book, it is found that the author used the word *‘ammarahu*.

was built by ‘Umar. Duri quotes Eutychius who says that: “‘Umar built the mosque and left the Rock at the back of the mosque” (Duri, 1990: 108; Eutychius, 1905 – 1909, II: 18; Theophanes, 1982: 42).

These evidences could lead to confusion and misunderstanding. One might think that *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* only existed in the time of ‘Umar. This perception may be true if they refer to the physical building of ‘the mosque’. Subsequently, with regard to the physical building of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā*, the researcher inclines to the argument that ‘Umar may not have built the present and physical building of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* by himself; however, he gave an order to build the mosque soon after he visited the region. This is also the opinion of al-Tel who argues that ‘Umar demarcated the building of the mosque during his visit to IslamicJerusalem. He argues, “there is no doubt that ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattāb did nothing, rather than demarcate the reconstruction of a mosque in Aelia on his first visit” (Al-Tel, 2003: 203).

Even though one might disagree, it is undoubtedly true that, according to these reports, the construction of the physical building of the mosque started in the time of ‘Umar, when he demarcated an area to build the mosque. The caliphs after him paid great attention to IslamicJerusalem. In the time of the Umayyads, for example, the great monuments were erected in order to gain respect and renown among Muslims (Duri, 1990: 110). For instance, ‘Abd al-Mālik, the second founder of the Umayyad dynasty, is renowned for building the *Qubbah al-*

Ṣakhrāh (the Dome of the Rock) in 69 – 72 AH / 688 – 691 CE (Cresswell, 1969, I: 65; Al-Wāsitī, 1979: 87).

In spite of one may disagree, all these reports show that the physical building of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* was built only after the time of ‘Umar who first initiated the demarcation of the area of the mosque. If someone comes across these historical sources, he/she would agree that there is no proper building of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* during the Night Journey, because it was built after the time of Prophet Muhammad. So, the question arises to which mosque was the Prophet taken to during the *Isrā’* and *Mi‘rāj*?

The difference between *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* and *al-Jāmi’ al-Aqsā*

It seems to the researcher that the key question here is whether the mosque, *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* mentioned in the Qur’ān, as a physical building was already existed or not at the time of *Isrā’* and *Mi‘rāj*. This could be a result of confusion or perhaps misunderstanding of the meaning of the Arabic terminology which refers to *al-Masjid*. Thus, there are at least two basic Arabic terminologies which need to be examined, *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* (*al-Aqsā* Mosque) and *al-Jāmi’ al-Aqsā* (*al-Aqsā* Congregational Mosque).

In this matter, the researcher agrees that *al-Jāmi’ al-Aqsā* or ‘the congregational mosque’ was built in the time of the Umayyad Caliph, ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwān in order to provide a proper place for Muslims to pray and for other activities. However, it does not mean that the Prophet did not complete his Night Journey, simply because there was no ‘building’ or proper

mosque at that time. It is worth referring back to the verse in Chapter al-Isrā' verse 1, which stresses that the Night Journey was indeed from *al-Masjid al-Harām* to *al-Masjid al-Aqsā*, not to *al-Jāmi' al-Aqsā* (*al-Aqsā* Congregational Mosque). Therefore, the researcher argues that it is important to examine the conceptual meaning of *al-Masjid* (mosque) in Islam, in order to answer the dispute of whether or not there was a mosque at the time of the Night Journey. Perhaps this would give an answer concerning the alleged Night Journey to scholars who do not believe this event happened.

The concept of *Masjid* (Mosque): A response to the dispute on the Night Journey¹⁸

Since there could be misunderstanding of the concept of *Masjid* in Islam, the researcher in the first instance will examine the meaning of *Masjid* literally and terminologically. The word *Masjid* is originally an Arabic word, and it is usually translated and known in English as “mosque”. From a linguistic point of view, the word *Masjid* means a “place of prostration (*sujūd*)” (Al-Zarkashī, 1976: 26). *Masjid* is one of the proper places for Muslims to perform their ritual worship. Al-Ratrout (2004: 154) states that the Qur'ān has mentioned the word *Masjid* some twenty-eight times in two forms, singular (*Masjid*) and plural (*Masājid*), both referring to a general and undefined mosque, as well as to a specific and defined mosque.

¹⁸ Part of the argument has been discussed by al-Ratrout (2004) in his book titled: *The Architectural Development of al-Aqṣā Mosque in the Early Islamic Period: Sacred Architectural in the Shape of the 'Holy'*.

Additionally, apart from *Masjid*, there are however, several other terminologies that refer to the place of worship for Muslims. In this regard, Al-Ratrout argues that several terminologies are used to refer to Muslim places of worship, namely, *Masjid* (Mosque), *Bayt* (the house of prayer) and *al-Jāmi'* (the congregational Mosque). He argues that: "...although these terms seem generally to describe one thing, they do indeed differ in their detailed meaning" (Al-Ratrout, 2004: 152). Nevertheless, in this section, it would be better if the researcher were to concentrate more on the discussion of the concept of *Masjid*.

Literally, the word *Masjid* derives from its root word, *sa-ja-da*, meaning to submit and prostrate (Ibn Manzūr, n.d., 2: 482; Al-Ratrout, 2004: 153). Technically, the further meaning of *Masjid* should include a place of cleansing oneself and a place for prostration to Allah (Ibn Manzūr, n.d., 1: 98). Prostration is the action where one places the forehead on the ground as part of the prayer ritual and is the most honourable act in prayer because of the nearness of the servant to Allah. Thus, this is the reason behind its being called *Masjid*, which means the location of *sujūd* or prostration.¹⁹

Muhammad al-Sālih in his recent book "*al-Masjid*" mentioned that *Masjid* for previous people is attributed to the

¹⁹ See *Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey To al-Masjid al-Aqṣā - The Farthest Mosque*, Islamic Awareness Home Page. Muhammad Ghoniem, Mansur Ahmed, Elias Karim, 'Abd al-Rahman Robert Squires & M S M Saifullah. 10 April 2004. <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Contrad/External/aqsa.html>

place of *sujūd*. However, now *Masjid* is known more as the location equipped with surrounding walls used for congregational prayer five times daily and for *‘Īd al-Fitr* and *‘Īd al-Adhā* (Al-Sālih, 2000: 17). It seems, in reality, that *Masjid* may refer to any corner on earth since the Prophet did not specify which land; in a *Hadīth* he said: “The earth was made for me a *Masjid* and a means of purification”.²⁰

It could be argued that *Masjid* would constitute every place on earth that is fit for prostration. In other words, *Masjid* does not necessarily designate an actual building. In fact, it can be a small area on the earth as a basic “place of prostration”, which needs neither a proper roof nor walls. This is in accordance with a *Hadīth* mentioned in *Sahīh Bukhārī* and *Sahīh Muslim* (*muttafaq ‘alayh*), which Jābir Ibn Abdullah narrated:

The Prophet said, “I have been given five things which were not given to any among the Prophets before me. These are: **ii. The earth has been made for me** (and for my followers) **a “*Masjid*”** (a place for prostration) **and a means of**

²⁰ (وجعلت لي الأرض مسجداً وطهوراً) See Al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Sahīh*, (*Kitāb al-Tayammum*), *Hadīth* no. 335, in (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 1: 565 – 569); Muslim, *Sahīh Muslim* (*Kitāb al-Masājid wa Mawādi‘ al-Salāh*), *Hadīth* no. 521, in (Muslim, 1994, 2: 411 – 412). This *Hadīth* also corresponds to the *Hadīth* of Abū Dharr who reported from the Prophet when he asked about the first mosque been built on the earth, the Prophet said: “...Wherever the time for the prayer comes upon you, perform the prayer, for all the earth is a place of worshipping for you.” See Al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Sahīh*, *Hadīth* no 3366, 3425 (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 1: 492, 557); Muslim, *Sahīh} Muslim* (*Kitāb al-Masājid wa Mawādi‘ al-Salāh*) *Hadīth* no. 520 (Muslim, 1994, 2: 409).

purification. Therefore, my followers can pray wherever the time of a prayer is due;”²¹

Ibn Hajar (1997, 1: 565 – 569) in his commentary on *Sahīh Bukhārī* did not indicate any weak narrators from those who narrated this *Hadīth*. This means that this *Hadīth* is *Sahīh* (authentic and reliable). Hence, according to this *Hadīth*, any place on the earth is a *Masjid* for Muslims.

Therefore, based on this argument, when the Prophet was taken to the location of the *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* during the Night Journey, it was irrelevant as to whether or not the actual physical building of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* existed. Perhaps Hillenbrand’s explanation could help towards understanding the concept of *Masjid*. He argues that, “no roof, no minimum size, no enclosing walls and no liturgical accessories are required” (Hillenbrand, 1994: 31).

Consequently, it seems inappropriate for someone to claim that the word *Masjid* in Islam refers directly to a physical building. Ibn Hajar, for example, confirms this opinion in his magnum opus, *Fath al-Bārī*: “Prostration is not restricted to any particular place of the earth. It may also be a symbol of a construction built for prayer. This is due to the fact that once prayer is authorised everywhere on earth it becomes like a mosque for that purpose.” (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 1: 565 – 569). Thus, it helps to understand that the *Masjid* in Islam should not be restricted to an actual building; rather it could be a mosque without walls or roof.

²¹ See *Sahīh Al-Bukhārī*, (*Kitāb al-tayammum*), *Hadīth* no. 335, in (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 1: 565 – 569).

Surely the comments of Ibn Hajar is based on the above *Iadīth* when the Prophet said: “my followers can pray wherever the time of a prayer is due.”²² In addition, Ibn Hajar (1997, 1: 565 – 569) quotes al-Dawūdī who argues that the previous generations were authorised to perform prayer in places known for sure to be pure, and also this ‘*ummah* (society) is authorised to pray anywhere on earth except in the places known for sure to be impure.

The researcher stresses that it has already been shown that the word *Masjid* does not necessarily refer to a building but rather to a location. In other words, the terminology of ‘*al-Masjid*’ in Chapter al-Isrā’ verse 1 clearly refers to a location, a basic place of prostration, which is *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* in IslamicJerusalem, regardless of the presence or absence of a physical building at the time of the Prophet Muhammad’s Night Journey.

Furthermore, it seems that al-Ratrout has strengthened the concept of mosque as he argues that mosque comprises at least three basic elements. He says that the elements of a mosque are location, boundaries and direction of prayer (*Qiblah*), which interrelate to construct the meaning of mosque. It is important to note that an actual building is not one of these elements. These elements may be demonstrated as below:

²² (فأیما رجل من أمتي أدركته الصلاة فليصل)

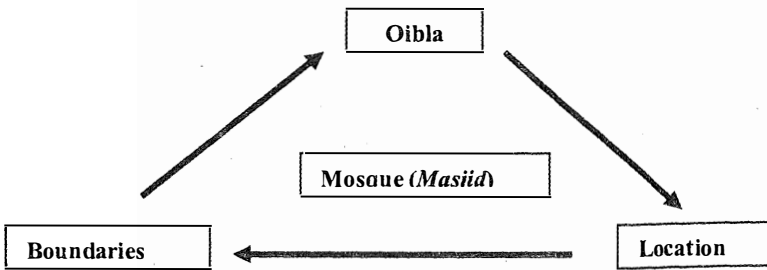


Fig. 35: The Elements that Construct the Meaning of *Masjid*

Source: Al-Ratrout, 2004: 160.

Additionally, these elements are based on arguments among Muslims scholars, which may be summarised to complement the understanding of mosque. To understand the first element which is location, Al-Zarkashī (d. 1391 CE / 794 AH) (1976: 57), for example, says that the mosque is “just an open space around *al-Ka’bah*, surrounded by houses from all sides.” He calls this open space *fadā’*. This argument was supported by al-Māwardī (d. 1058 CE / 448 AH) (1996: 254) and al-Azraqī (d. 1441 CE / 845 AH) (1969, 1: 307) who called it *finā’*, that is, an area defined by national or physical boundaries. Accordingly, al-Ratrout (2004: 158) argues that *fadā’* and *finā’* indeed mean one thing. Subsequently, the evidence which shows the importance of boundaries in defining *Masjid* may be seen when Prophet Muhammad established his mosque in Madīnah. He chose the location first, and then followed this by establishing its boundaries.

The third element seems to be the most important one, determining the direction of prayer. Taking this as an important element, one may note that Prophet Muhammad had determined *Qiblah* for his mosque in Madīnah, the direction of prayer for

Muslims (Ibn Hishām, 1955, 1: 494; Ibn Kathīr, n.d., 2: 302; al-Ratrout, 2004: 162). It is known that, before the order from Allah to change the *Qiblah*, Muslims had prayed toward *Bayt al-Maqdis*. This is according to a report from al-Zuhrī, who reports that the mosque built by the Prophet had its *Qiblah* towards *Bayt al-Maqdis* (Ibn Sa‘d, 1997, 1: 184). Ibn Sa‘d (d. 230 AH / 845 CE) claims that reports differ on whether it was 16 or 17 months before Muslims were directed to face *Ka‘bah* at Makkah in their prayers (Ibn Sa‘d, 1997, 1: 186 – 187).²³

Therefore, these allegations concerning the Night Journey could be countered by the fact that mosque or *Masjid* in Islam does not necessarily mean building (see also al-Maqdisī, 1899 – 1907, 4: 82 – 86). The researcher inclines to al-Ratrout’s argument on this matter and would like to stress that it is as much as is necessary to have three elements that construct the concept of mosque. With these three elements, it is not necessary to have a specific building for a mosque. Consequently, it could be argued that the three elements that construct a mosque, location, boundaries and *Qiblah*, were already there when the Prophet was taken for the Night Journey to Islamicjerusalem. So, it could be concluded that the allegation which claims there was no *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* on the Night

²³ Al-Bukhārī mentions five *Aḥādīth* related to the first *Qiblah*. These *Aḥādīth*, interestingly are narrated by the same person, namely al-Barā’ Ibn ‘Āzib, with multiple chains of narrators and slight differences in the text, but generally carrying the same meaning. The researcher highlights that al-Barā’ Ibn ‘Āzib narrated that Prophet Muḥammad would pray facing *Bayt al-Maqdis* (Islamicjerusalem) for 16 or 17 months. He also reported that the first *salāh* offered while the Prophet was in Madīnah was *salāt al-‘Asr*, where the people of Madīnah turned out to pray with him and faced Islamicjerusalem.

Journey is without basis and could be the result of improper and incomplete understanding of Islamic sources, especially Qur'ān and *Hadīth* in their original Arabic texts. It could also be argued that this is a result of misunderstanding of the core references to the event. It is in particular the misunderstanding of the verse in Qur'ān, 17: 1.

This picture shows the concept of Mosque in the Early Muslims Era

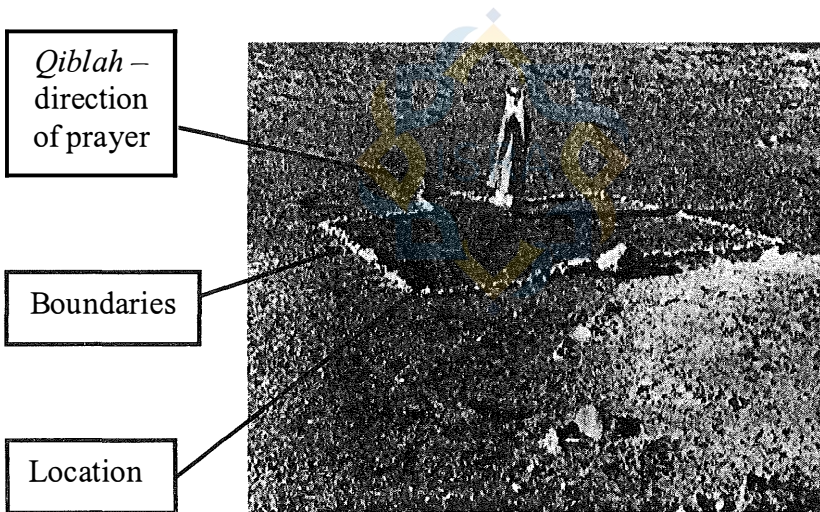


Fig. 36: The concept of mosque in early Islam

Source: [http://www.islamic-](http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Contrad/External/Aqsā.html)

[awareness.org/Quran/Contrad/External/Aqsā.html](http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Contrad/External/Aqsā.html).

This picture shows the concept of mosque, which includes the three elements: location, boundaries and Qiblah.

It can be noted that there was no physical building, as such, of *al-Aqsā* Congregational Mosque existed at the time of *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj*. But, another contradiction and major problem

arises if there was no an actual physical mosque at Islamic Jerusalem during the Night Journey, what is the explanation of the *Hadīth* which states that Allah had brought or revealed (a picture of) *Bayt al-Maqdis* to Prophet Muhammad while he stood in front of *Hijr* and he began revealing this to the *Quraysh* who did not believe in the Night Journey? The text of the *Hadīth* as narrated by Jābir Ibn Abdullah, is as follows:

“and Allah revealed to me *Bayt al-Maqdis* and I began describing its signs to them while I was looking at it.”²⁴ (Al-Bukhārī, 1981, 2 (2): 247 – 248; Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 247; Muslim, 1994, 1: 535; Al-Qazqī, 2003: 108 –111).

According to this *Hadīth*, one could argue that there must have been a *Masjid* in its actual shape because the Prophet had been asked about it in detail, and he answered in detail too. Nevertheless, the *Hadīth* does not mention the word *Masjid* though it mentions the word *Bayt al-Maqdis*. Therefore, the *Hadīth* does not literally refer to the physical building of the *Masjid*.

Moreover, it could be argued that Allah revealed *Bayt al-Maqdis* to Prophet Muhammad, particularly the *al-Aqsā* enclave, conceptually. Hence, it could be argued that the foundation of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* was already there and Prophet Muhammad could have described it to the *Quraysh*. This can be noted from the *al-Aqsā* enclave which already had its foundation when the Night Journey took place. For instance, the Prophet had been asked about the doors of *al-Aqsā* and he described them to the people (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 247 – 250). If we look into history,

²⁴ (فجلا الله لي بيت المقدس فطفت أخبرهم عن آياته وأنا أنظر إليه)

we can find that the *al-Aqsā* enclave has many doors, most of them dating back to the time before Prophet Muhammad (Al-Ratrout, 2004: 260 – 263).

So, it is possible that what the Prophet had explained and described was the *al-Aqsā* enclave. In other words, what the Prophet described was not *al-Jāmi' al-Aqsā* (*al-Aqsā* Congregational Mosque) because its physical building was not there at that time. Then, it can be confirmed that the foundation and structure of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* was there during the Night Journey. Thus, the researcher argues that the foundation of the *Masjid* had existed, and can be traced back to a time even earlier than the time of Prophet Ibrāhīm, perhaps to the time of Prophet Ādam. This is in line with the *Hadīth* of Abū Dharr saying that *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* had been built forty years after the building of *al-Masjid al-Harām* (*Ka'bah*).

In this regard, the researcher totally disagrees with Shamon and Pipes for who do not agree with the Night Journey. If one translates the Arabic term, '*al-Masjid al-Aqsā*,' one finds that its meaning in English is 'the furthest mosque', though the researcher does not fully favour this translation. Although it has been translated into English as 'the furthest mosque', nevertheless, *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* does not necessarily mean an actual building with a prayer hall.

It was argued earlier that *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* comprised a considerably large area, is not specifically referring to the structure or building of the congregational mosque. Even though one may argue otherwise, to say that the mosque is an actual building, the researcher is inclined to accept al-Ratrout's (2004:

205 – 207) argument.²⁵ He says that the concept of mosque in Islam is not limited to physical structure; it could be any piece of land designated to worship. This is also in line with the *Hadīth* which explains that any piece of land can be a *Masjid*.

At the time of the Night Journey and Ascension, the only two originally built mosques ever mentioned on earth were the *al-Masjid al-Harām* in Makkah, and *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* in IslamicJerusalem. Thus, if Prophet Muhammad was at *al-Masjid al-Harām* in Makkah, then the second one should be *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* in IslamicJerusalem, the mosque which have been referred to in the Qur’ān. Therefore, the researcher argues that Shamon and Pipes’ arguments are unjustifiable and cannot be accepted. It seems that they were confused when it came to understanding the actual physical building of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā*. They subscribe to the theory that *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* was built a century after the Qur’ān; this actually referring to the physical structure of the mosque. It should be stressed here that *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* was not built “a century after the Qur’ān” as they understand it, except for its physical structure and building of *al-Aqsā* Congregational Mosque.

To sum it up, the researcher agrees that, according to historical facts and arguments, there was no physical building of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* during *al-Isrā’* and *al-Mi’rāj*. What was there is most likely the foundation of the mosque, which had been

²⁵ One of the definitions of mosque is that: “building for worship used by members of the Islamic faith. Muhammad’s house in Madīnah, with its surrounding courtyard and hall with columns, became the prototype for the mosque where the faithful gathered for prayer.” See Encyclopedia Online. 15 March 2004. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/m1/mosque.asp>.

built by Ādam and remained in ruins in the time of Prophet Muhammad. This, however, does not undermine the Quranic verse in Chapter al-Isrā' verse 1. Certainly *al-Isrā'* and *al-Mi'rāj* did happen and Prophet Muhammad was indeed taken from *al-Masjid al-Harām* to *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* and then to Heaven, as can be explained by a thorough understanding of the conceptual meaning of the word 'mosque', as has been discussed in this section.

This could be the counter-argument to those who point to the ambiguity of the verse, and question the fact that *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* was only established later, after the Night Journey took place. Their arguments are questionable and are basically rooted in their lack of understanding of the event in broad-spectrum and the problem of interpreting this event. Additionally, it can also be their misunderstanding of the concept of mosque in Islam. Thus, it seems that, through an understanding of the concept of mosque, this issue could be resolved.

Conclusion

The event of the Night Journey and Ascension has indeed further reinforced the link between Makkah and Islamicjerusalem as the 'twin' key lands for Muslims. It could be argued that the connection serves as an example of every Muslim's deep devotion and spiritual connection with Islamicjerusalem. In addition, the Night Journey also shows that the land serves as a hub in physical and spiritual relations as well as in the relation between earth and Heaven. Essentially, Prophet Muhammad indeed re-established the link between

Makkah and Islamicjerusalem which materialised during this remarkable event.

Meanwhile, the dispute among scholars regarding the Night Journey has been accordingly discussed, especially with regard to the dispute as to the date of the Night Journey and the meaning of the phrase *al-Masjid* which appears in the Qur'anic verse related to the Night Journey. Clarification of the dispute is extremely important in order to clarify the ambiguity to some about the event; thus, the researcher has examined and addressed these issues in this article.

Significantly, concerning the date of the Night Journey, the researcher has found that this event most likely occurred on the 27 Rajab 12 of *al-bi'thah* (2 BH). Apart from these issues, the researcher highlights that according to the *Ḥadīth* which has been discussed, it could be concluded that the Prophet led the prayer before the Ascension. Above all, in this article, the researcher has shown that the event of the Night Journey has a great significance ensuring that Muslims cannot ever ignore Islamicjerusalem.

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