

Isra' and Mi'raj in the view of Fazlur Rahman

Modern research has, since the beginning of the century, called into question the traditional Islamic interpretation of the terms *isra'* and *mi'raj*, which refer to two parts of a night journey undertaken by Muhammad. *Isra'* describes Muhammad's miraculous journey from *Masjid al-Haram* (the sacred mosque) of Mecca to *Masjid al-Aqsa* (the farthest mosque) of Jerusalem.¹ On the other hand, *mi'raj* refers to the second part of the journey: the Prophet's Ascension through the spheres of heaven from the site of *Masjid al-Aqsa*.² Thus, Muhammad first travelled to Jerusalem, and subsequently ascended into heaven, where he had an audience with God. According to Islamic tradition, the journey happened in the late Meccan period. Although there is much debate over its historicity, the fact remains that it happened prior to Muhammad's migration to Medina.³ The journey itself has remained a matter of debate and endless commentaries among modern scholars, as it rests largely upon traditions, some of which are more or less questionable.⁴ Traditionally, a majority of Muslim scholars have subscribed to the belief that the journey was a physical one, while other scholars consider it just a dream or vision. In more recent times, however, prominent thinkers such as Fazlur Rahman have rejected the possibility of a physical ascent by giving an alternative spiritual interpretation to the Ascension. The aim of this paper, therefore, is not only to analyse critically Rahman's view of *isra'* and *mi'raj*, but also to examine the extent to which he broke with the tradition of medieval scholars in the interpretation of the Ascension.

Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988) was considered to be the most learned modern thinker, who excelled in both "classical Islam and western philosophical and theological

¹ N. Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (London: SCM Press, 1996), p. 192; Heribert Busse, 'Jerusalem in the Story of Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension,' *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 14 (1991), 1-40.

² Michael Sell ' "Muhammad Night Journey" Ascension', in *Encyclopaedia of the Quran*, 4 vols (Brill: Leiden, 2001), I, 176-180; Jamel Eddine Bencheikh, 'Mi'raj', in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), VII, 100-103.

³ Heribert Busse, 'Jerusalem in the Story of Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension', in *The Life of Muhammad*, ed. by Uri Rubin (Sydney and Singapore: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 277-318 (p. 277).

⁴ Reginald, Hyatte, *The Prophet of Islam in Old Fench: The Romance of Muhammad (1258) and the Book of Muhammad's Ladder (1264)* (Brill: Leiden, 1997), pp. 3-8.

discourse” in the second half of the twentieth century.⁵ Rahman came from a Punjabi family well versed in traditional Islamic learning. After attending Punjabi University he went on to Oxford University, where he developed modern critical skills, and thereafter to Durham and McGill University, where he taught for some years. From 1961 until his death, he held the position of Professor of Islamic Thought at the University of Chicago. In 1983, he received the prestigious award of Giorgio Levi Della Vida, becoming the first Muslim scholar to be so honoured. Rahman died in 1988 after a successful life dedicated to building critical scholarship in the area of Islamic intellectual inquiry and discourse.⁶ Although his popularity never really extended beyond intellectual circles, he was successful in offering a constructive vision and reshaping Muslim heritage through his influential works such as *Islam, Major themes of the Quran* and *Islamic Methodology in History*. However, his dynamism and viewpoints concerning some issues generated criticism. For example, he held the view that angels have never existed and that Muhammad’s Ascension to heaven was not physical. This paper sets out to examine his hypothesis concerning the Ascension in the light of the traditional accounts of Muslim scholars.

According to Islamic orthodoxy, Muhammad travelled at night from Mecca to Jerusalem and subsequently ascended into heaven.⁷ This journey has, however, continued to be a matter of scholarly debate, stemming from the fact that the Quran makes only one direct reference to this whole episode, which is to be found in the following passage:

Glory to (Allah) Who did take His servant for a Journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the farthest Mosque, whose precincts We did bless,- in order that We might show him some of Our Signs: for He is the One Who heareth and seeth (all things). 17: 1.

This verse is more or less vague in the sense that it only describes the ‘signs’ of Allah that were shown to him, without giving details of those signs. Moreover, the verse only mentions Muhammad’s journey to Jerusalem, without making any reference to the Ascension. As a result, Ibn Ishaq’s (d. 768) famous biography of Muhammad

⁵‘Fazlur Rahman’ in *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopaedia* [online]
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fazlur_Rahman (accessed 20 April 2007)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah; The Life of Muhammad*, trans. by A Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press,), pp. 181-185.

(although fragmentary) became a point of departure as far as the account of the Ascension is concerned. In addition, historians prefer to rely on his work rather than the relevant Quranic verse, because of the debate surrounding its meaning. Modern thinkers, however, have accused traditional Muslim scholars of concocting baseless traditions to amplify the miraculous nature of the journey.⁸ Scholars who hold the view that Muhammad had actually made the journey in body and awake constitute the overwhelming majority of the Muslim Ummah. Imam al-Tabri, for example, argues that if the journey was spiritual it would not have been denied. Also, the service of *Burak* (the animal Muhammad rode during the journey) would not have been needed either, since animals carry body and not spirit. Furthermore, the Quran makes reference to ‘his servant’ and not to the ‘spirit of his servant’. This clearly shows that the journey was in body and awake.⁹

On the other hand, some scholars argue that the journey was no more than a dream or vision. They further support their argument by a tradition narrated from Aisha, maintaining that the journey was a spiritual one. She reasoned that Muhammad’s body remained perfectly still on the night in question. This, however, was rejected on the grounds that Aisha was still young and, although espoused, had not become Muhammad’s wife at the time the journey was said to have taken place. Fazlur Rahman holds this second view; indeed, he goes so far as to challenge the authenticity of the traditional account of the Ascension. He explains that these accounts are more or less the product of pious fantasy, observing that:

...the doctrine of a locomotive ‘Ascension’ developed by the orthodox (chiefly on the pattern of the Ascension of Jesus) and backed by Hadith is no more than a historical fiction whose materials come from various sources.¹⁰

This view is predicated on the assumption that there exists a similarity between traditional Muslim accounts and those of Christianity and Judaism. In support of this, William Tisdall concisely argued that the traditional Muslim account seems to have “incorporated elements from many quarters”, to the extent that “it is unnecessary to

⁸ Reginald Bosworth Smith, *Mohammed and Mohammedanism* (London: Kissinger Publishing, 2005), p. 186.

⁹ ‘Mi‘raj’ in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, ed. by Lindsay and Others, 2nd edn, 17 vols (London: New York: Thomson, Gale, 2005) IX, 6058-6061.

¹⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 14.

point out how great is the resemblance between all this [Zoroastrian works which are strikingly parallel to the Mi'raj] and the Mohammedan legend of Muhammad's Mi'raj."¹¹ This view has been vigorously challenged in recent years by a number of writers. JR Porter, for example, points out that the evidence offered by some scholars to establish a Judeo-Christian influence on Muslim traditions of Muhammad's Ascension is not convincing.¹² He goes on to explain that there is no parallel between the two narrations in question: "when we compare the narratives of the ascension of Muhammad with the gospel accounts of the ascension of Jesus it is difficult to find a single point of identity." Indeed, the two episodes have no similarity of any kind. For example, Jesus' ascension to heaven is a permanent one, while that of Muhammad can be viewed as temporary (a matter of hours).¹³

One particular reason for Rahman denying physical *isra'* is his position on the 'externality' of the angels in general. He rejects all traditions that indicate the possibility of seeing angels physically by saying: "those hadith stories, then, where the angel Gabriel is depicted as a public figure conversing with the prophet whose companions saw him, must be regarded as later fictions."¹⁴ Grounding his arguments in the paradigm of a modern interpretation of the impossibility of physical *isra'*, Rahman advocated that Muhammad never physically saw an angel during his Prophetic career.¹⁵ 'Spirit' is the term used repeatedly in the Quran to refer to the spiritual agent who passed down the revelation to Prophet Muhammad. Thus, using the word 'Angel' in this context to mean 'Spirit' is technically speaking erroneous.¹⁶ "Perhaps the spirit", he argues, "is a power or a faculty or an agency which develops in the Prophet's heart and which comes into actual revelatory operation when needed..."¹⁷ In adhering to this belief, Rahman advocates that the final stage of the Prophet's experience as far as the two episodes (of *isra'* and *mi'raj*) are concerned is denoted by the phrases 'remotest mosque' and 'clear horizon'. "Since the experiences are spiritual in nature", he maintains, then "the entities mentioned in these passages

¹¹ William Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'an*, (London and New York: E.S. Gorham, 1905), p. 229.

¹² J.R. Porter, 'Muhammad's Journey to Heaven', *Numen*, 21 (1974), pp. 64-80, (p.68).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Quran* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), p. 97.

¹⁵ Rahman, *Islam*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁶ Rahman, *Major Themes*, p. 97.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.97.

obviously cannot be physical...”¹⁸ In view of these arguments, the journey “was spiritual and not physical-locomotive”. He supports his contention with the following verse: “*his heart did not lie about what it saw.*”¹⁹ In support of this hypothesis, Sarwar argues that since “Muhammad’s Ascension is a matter of seconds or minutes instead of being days, months or years” and the term is used to describe spiritual Ascension, *mi’raj* can best be interpreted as “inspiration or revelation raised in degrees”.²⁰ Following closely in the footsteps of Rahman and Sarwar, Muhammad Asad insists that the concept of faith and the traditions referring to the cleansing of Muhammad’s heart (prior to the journey) clearly show the spiritual nature of the Ascension.²¹

There are serious weaknesses in this argument, however; first, the fact that the journey took place within a very short time is not enough to reject its physical possibility, since Allah’s order is not dependent on time, instruments, means, or any conditions whatsoever. Muslims believe that the moment Allah wills a thing it becomes order and forthwith comes into existence. Second, the cleansing of Muhammad’s heart has nothing to do with the nature of the Ascension, as authentic hadith indicates that the incident happened when Muhammad was a child. While it is true that most features of the story of *isra’* and *mi’raj* are taken from Jewish literature, Rahman would appear to be overambitious in his claims. He is generally sceptical about the traditional sources of Islamic literature, including hadith. Moreover, he is largely influenced by Orientalists like Joseph Schacht, as most of his works indicate.²² It is not surprising in these circumstances that there are some discrepancies in his arguments. For example, in his book *Major Themes of the Quran* he agrees that the spirit of Muhammad saw the angel of revelation on the night of the Ascension, hence the journey “was spiritual and not physical-locomotive”.²³ However, in his attempt to challenge the idea of the ‘externality’ of angels, in his book *Islam* he contradicts this view by insisting that Muhammad saw “something” instead of the

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 93.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 92.

²⁰ Muhammad Sarwar, *The Holy Prophet* (Lahore: 1974), pp.119-122

²¹ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Quran* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus), p. 997.

²² Abu Muhammad, ‘Revisiting Fazlur Rahman’s Ordeal’ in *Non Skeptical Essays*, [online] <http://hangingodes.wordpress.com/2006/11/10/revisiting-fazlur-rahmans-ordeal/> (updated 10 November 2006, accessed 20 April 2007)

²³ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 92.

angel of revelation as an expansion of his religious experiences.²⁴ This, of course, is a clear contradiction, because the reference in the verses in question was explicitly made to Gabriel, regardless of the situation. Aisha explains that the verses under review refer to an independent occasion where Muhammad had a vision of Gabriel in the sky on the night of ascension. She further observes: “it implies Gabriel, he used to come to him in the shape of men; but he came at this time in his true form and blocked up the horizon of the sky.”²⁵ Thus, she confirms the possibility of seeing an angel physically, albeit on an independent occasion.

It is true that the only ‘agency’ of revelation through whom the Quran was revealed to the Prophet’s heart was the Holy Spirit (Gabriel), as depicted in various places in the holy Quran.²⁶ However, Rahman makes no attempt to differentiate between various different types of revelation. Historical records confirm the physical appearance of Gabriel to Muhammad in various instances, such as in hadith number two of al-Nawawi collection. Gabriel was reported to have come to teach the companions of Muhammad the ethics of seeking knowledge and to establish that asking good questions results in better learning and as well as teaching.²⁷ That is to say, he comes to the prophet in spirit only when he reveals the Quran; hence it is inaccurate to assert that Gabriel never comes to Muhammad in body at all. As a result, the evidence of Rahman in challenging the physical nature of the Ascension is not convincing.

This study clearly shows that Muhammad’s Ascension is not a concocted narration invented by pious fancy as Rahman claims, but an authentic historical fact which constitutes an integral part of the Prophet’s message. However, it has to some extent been influenced by Judaeo-Christian sources. The nature of the journey has remained a matter of debate among scholars, given that no direct reference to the journey is made in the Quran and that its accounts rely heavily on unsound traditions. As a result, some modern scholars have become more or less sceptical about the episode. The fact remains, however, that the journey was a real and physical one.

²⁴ Rahman, *Islam*, p.14.

²⁵ Ibn al-Hajjaj, Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, trans. by A.H. Siddiqi, 4 vol (Lahore: Ashraf, 1993), I, p.112.

²⁶ This is confirmed in various places in the Quran, for example; (26:193) (2:97) (42:24) (42:52).

²⁷ “The hadith” in *forty hadith.com* [online] <http://fortyhadith.iiu.edu.my/hadith02.htm> (updated 18 may 2002. accessed 10 April 2007)

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