

ORIENTALISTS' VIEW ON THE NIGHT JOURNEY: AN ANALYSIS

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Introduction

The Night Journey and Ascension is one of the key events that happened to Prophet Muḥammad during his life. The usual Qur'ānic reference to the Night Journey is in Chapter 17, known as "Night Journey" (*al-Isrā'*) or "Children of Israel" (*Banī Isrā'īl*), verse 1. However there are other verses which also relate indirectly to the Night Journey, which are Chapter 53, "The Star" (*al-Najm*), verse 1 – 18 and Chapter 81 (*al-Takwīr*), verse 15 – 24. The general story of the Night Journey and Ascension involves many events whose details are not mentioned in the Qur'ān, but can be found in the Ḥadīth. It is another series of events which is mentioned in the two core Islamic sources that determined the relation between Islamic Jerusalem and Islam. Others include the story of Prophet Ibrahim and Luṭ who were taken to the *Land of Barakah* and the story of Musā who asked his followers to enter the *Holy Land*, among others.

Critics on Orientalist Approach

Edward Said's (1978) criticism of Orientalists' approach to the Orient has caused controversy among scholars in Oriental Studies. Through his book, he openly criticised the western influence, believing that prejudice towards the Orient has undermined the clarity of their interpretation on the subject. This approach has been shaped by European mentality during the Imperialism period of the 18th and 19th century. As a result Said's criticism has sparked

a debate among Oriental scholars in this discipline to re-address the issue of Orientalist approach in interpreting the East ever since (Said, 1978: 1 – 15).

Meanwhile, Aisha al-Ahlas (2004: 7) has rightly pointed out that there is a lack in academia of study on Islamic Jerusalem. She refers to El-Awaisi whom from his academic works, was concerned and painfully aware that research done on studies in Islamic Jerusalem was inadequate, especially on those addressing the issue of Islamic Jerusalem from Arab and Islamic viewpoints (al-Ahlas, 2004: 7; Editorial notes 1997).

El-Awaisi argues that the history of Islamic Jerusalem has "suffered distortion, falsification and alteration. Most of our historical researches, specifically those related to the history of Islamic Jerusalem [Islamic Jerusalem] before the Islamic conquest, are limited to Biblical and Orientalist studies" (El-Awaisi, 1998: 48; al-Ahlas, 2004: 7). He reminds us carefully that [some] "Orientalists tend to underestimate the relevance of the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth to the thinking of Muslims, and may indeed regard allusions to the Qur'ān and the Prophet as merely a sort of general piety with little direct bearing on the postures and politics of the Muslims vis-à-vis Islamic Jerusalem [Islamic Jerusalem]" (El-Awaisi, 1998: 48).

El-Awaisi's (2000) strong criticism on the Orientalist approach lies in his argument saying that Orientalists in their studies in general "tend to approach the subject in ways that Muslim scholars would see as an outsiders' viewpoint, and therefore inevitably lacking balance". This is based on his observation especially of the historical account of Islamic Jerusalem that the "attempt by some Israeli academics and Orientalists to play down the importance of Islamic sources relating to the period of the first Muslim conquest of Islamic Jerusalem [Islamic Jerusalem] and in particular to undermine the significance of the region of Islamic Jerusalem [Islamic Jerusalem] from a single biased point of view" (El-Awaisi, 2000: 52).

Nevertheless, the contribution of several Orientalists on the study of Islam and Muslims cannot be denied. This becomes clear from the fact that the first journal published that was devoted to Oriental Studies, Josef Von Hammer Purgstall's *Fungruben des Orients* (1809 – 1818), originated in Austria. It was not until 1885 that a journal was exclusively devoted to Islam (Varisco, 2007: 88). This was the *Reveu de l'Islam* published in Paris and followed by *Der Islam* in 1910, published in German and *The Moslem World* a year later in America. In 1873 the first international congress of Orientalists was held in Paris. The discourse was becoming gilded, as Said rightly mentioned, during the age of European expansion (Varisco, 2007: 88-89).

Orientalists on the Night Journey

Colby (2008), who focused his study on Ibn 'Abbas' narration on Night Journey, mentioned that until the beginning of the past century, many of those who found an interest in studying the other worldly journeys of religious heroic figures in other cultural spheres knew little of Prophet Muḥammad's Night Journey and Ascension. Then, due to the work of a few Orientalist scholars in the past century, since then the account of Prophet Muḥammad Night Journey has become more widely known, if not much better understood. Indeed, substantial studies dedicated to analysing the narratives in the context of its formation and development have been quite rare, leading to a situation in which contemporary scholars of apocalyptic and ascension narratives in other religious traditions have largely ignored or dismissed Islamic narratives (Colby 2008: 7).

Some of the first European scholars to study the Night Journey and Ascension narratives, for instance Schrieke in "Die Himmelsreise Muhammeds" in *Der Islam* (6, 1916: 1-30) and Horowitz in "Muhammeds Himmelfahrt" in *Der Islam* (9, 1919: 159 – 183) seem founded those stories that ignore Jerusalem in favour of an ascension to heaven directly from Makkah.¹

Despite those who seem inclined to acknowledge the Night Journey, there are a number of Orientalists who doubt that the

event even took place. Sam Shamoun, one of the Orientalists who try to argue on the Night Journey, says that it is confusing to relate the verse 17: 1 to the mosque in Islamic Jerusalem (Shamoun, n.d.):

The problem with all of this is that the first Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian armies in 587 BC. Furthermore, General Titus and his Roman soldiers levelled the Second Temple in A.D. 70, more than five centuries before this alleged night journey to Jerusalem took place. In fact, the Temple that eventually became Masjid al-Aqsa did not come into existence until A.D. 691 when Amir Abd-ul-Malik built it.

These preceding factors make it highly improbable to date Sura 17:1 to the time of Muhammad. This passage could have only been written sometime after the erection of Masjid al-Aqsa. This is further substantiated by the fact that Masjid al-Aqsa contains no early references to the supposed night journey. This is a strange omission since Muslims claim that Masjid al-Aqsa was erected in commemoration of this alleged event. The inscriptions that do mention the night journey are later additions made by Abdul Hamid II in 1876, nearly eleven centuries later.

Another claim states that:

No one witnessed that night journey that Muhammad claimed to have gone through. Neither did Muhammad show any tangible evidence to prove that it actually took place. Therefore, this claim remains unsubstantiated. In addition, the farthest mosque (masjid al-Aqsa) of Jerusalem did not exist at the time of Muhammad. It was built in 691 A.D. by Abdul-Malik ibn Marwan about sixty years after Muhammad's death. How could he have prayed in it then?²

It could be argued that the problem of acknowledging this event is part of Orientalists' inability to understand the reference to Islamic Jerusalem in the two core sources of Islam. Some of the Orientalists failed to understand the terms mentioned in the Qur'ān which refer to Islamic Jerusalem. Talhami (2000) mentioned that the Israeli writer Izhak Hasson claims there was no direct reference to Jerusalem in the Qur'ān by any of its known names (Aelia, Bayt al-Maqdis, al-Quds, etc.). He stated that when the *tafsīr*

or exegesis of the Qur'ān began, a century after the emergence of Islam, Arab scholars deduced that such names as *al-Zaytūn* (Mount of Olives), *mubawwa sidq* (safe residence), *rabwah* (high ground) *that qarār* (having a meadow) [means the eternal hill], and *al-Masjid al-Aqṣā* (the furthest mosque), were explicitly identified with Jerusalem. Talhami argues that it is unclear, however, why these identifications should surprise Hasson, especially the latter reference, which occurs in the opening line of the chapter describing Muḥammad's Journey. The fact that the earliest Muslim scholars considered *al-Masjid al-Aqṣā* to be at Jerusalem "from time immemorial" did not impress him. He even makes the unsubstantiated claim that early Muslim authorities interpreted *al-Masjid al-Aqṣā* to be similar to the Judaic concept of a heavenly Jerusalem or a heavenly temple. Hasson then mentions that later Qur'ānic exegesis and various biographies of Muḥammad rejected this interpretation. The fact that the heavenly-Jerusalem concept was only enshrined in Shii literature in order to make the ascription of holiness to Kufa more palatable should have persuaded Hasson against this theory (Talhami 2000: 113 – 129).

Hasson then cites the work of Goitein in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (1986, v: 324 – 327), in which the historian of the Geniza Records commented on the connection between the early verses of the Nocturnal Journey chapter and references to *al-Masjid al-Aqṣā* in the seventh verse. According to Goitein, this linkage can only be explained by the manner in which the Qur'ān itself was collected and recorded. It was during the period of the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan (644-656), that the Qur'ān, hitherto committed to Muḥammad's companions' memory, was finally written down. Referring to this process as "editing", Goitein claimed that it was only then that the two aforementioned verses were placed within the same chapter or *surah*. Collecting the Qur'ān, claims Hasson, involved placing Qur'ānic verses in a special order and fixing titles to various untitled chapters. He further makes the claim that identifying Jerusalem as the site of the Nocturnal Journey was not mentioned in the early decades of Islam, even when the glorification of Jerusalem was a primary objective of the Umayyad dynasty. According to Talhami, Hasson does not explain the

apparent contradiction between this assertion and the Umayyads' success in establishing the sanctity of Jerusalem in the minds of the believers (Talhami 2000; Hasson 1996: 352 – 357).

Additionally, another Orientalist, Daniel Pipes, argues (2001: 49 – 66):

Where does Jerusalem fit in Islam and Muslim history? It is not a place to which they pray, not once mentioned by name in prayers, and it is connected to no mundane events in Muhammad's life. The city never served as capital of a sovereign Muslim state, and it never became a cultural or scholarly centre. Little of political import by Muslims was initiated there.

Comments by Lactantius Jr to Pipes' argument read as: Jerusalem is never mentioned by name in the Qur'ān. In contrast, it is mentioned 823 times in the Bible, and Zion (which usually means Jerusalem, and sometimes "the Land of Israel"), appears 161 times. Of the 823 mentions of Jerusalem by name in the Bible, 669 of them are in the Old Testament, and 154 times in the New Testament (Lactantius Jr, nd).

This shows that Orientalists of his type failed to understand the terminologies or names in the Qur'ān which refer to Islamic Jerusalem. Not only in the Qur'ān, but also in various terms in Ḥadīth, confirming the centrality of Islamic Jerusalem in Islam.

If we look back at the Night Journey, it seems that the doubters on the event among Orientalists were not able to locate al-Masjid al-Aqṣā beyond Arabia. When this *Surah* was revealed – 621 CE, the Sacred Mosque already existed in Makkah, but where was "the farthest mosque"? For Lactantius, it was apparently identified with places inside Arabia: either Madinah, or a town called Ji'ranah, about ten miles from Makkah, which Muḥammad visited in 630 CE. Palestine had not yet been conquered by the Muslims, and contained not a single mosque (Lactantius Jr, nd).

Although there are denials of the Night Journey's destination to Islamic Jerusalem, there are Orientalists who did not subscribe to

this idea. Grabar, for instance, has argued that by the end of the seventh century the Prophet's Night Journey had already been connected with the vision of his ascent to heaven, an event associated at that time with the whole precinct rather than just the Rock (Grabar 1996: 114). This connection was articulated in Ibn Ishaq's *The Life of the Prophet* in which the Night Journey and Ascension are linked with the sanctuary in IslamicJerusalem (Necipoglu 2008: 43).

In reflecting on Grabar's argument, Nasser Rabbat argues that Muslims all over the world believe that the Dome of the Rock was built to commemorate a decisive event in the Prophet Muḥammad's mission, namely his Night Journey from Makkah to IslamicJerusalem, and his subsequent ascension (*mi'rāj*) from the Rock to heaven where he received from God the doctrinal principle of new religion (Rabbat 1089: 12).

Problem to Locate the Mosque

The debate on the Night Journey is believed to be over the destination to which the Prophet had travelled. Qur'ānic chapter 17 verse 1 is the only clear Qur'ānic verse which mentions the destination of the Prophet on the Night Journey event. There are no other verses giving a clear explanation about the earthly destination of the Night Journey. So, it gives plenty of space to be investigated, and some would speculate, about this nocturnal journey.

It is problematic because references to IslamicJerusalem in the Qur'ān do not use the words that are common in Biblical variations. Such words as "Jerusalem" (اورشاليم) or "*al-Quds*" (القدس) are never used in the entire Qur'ān. Instead, there are words / terms such as *al-arḍ al-mubārakah*, *allaḏī bāraknā ḥawlahu*, *al-arḍ allatī bāraknā fīhā* and *al-arḍ al-muqaddasah*.

The term used in the Qur'ān, *al-Masjid al-Aqṣā*, equally means "the furthest mosque" or "the furthest place of prayer" and has caused a debate as to which mosque it actually means. Eventually a general consensus formed around the idea that Muḥammad's

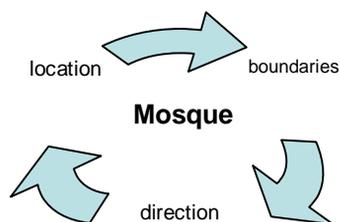
Night Journey did indeed take him to Islamic Jerusalem (Colby, 2008: 15).

So, where is the location of the mosque during the Night Journey? One would notice that the earliest building built on the al-Aqṣā area³ was the Dome of the Rock, built in 691 CE during the time of Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan. This would mean that the building of the mosque in Islamic Jerusalem was completed nearly 70 years after the event of the Night Journey took place. Does that mean the Night Journey was a dream or does it mean that the destination was actually at other mosques in Arabia? If either is so, then possibly the Qurʾānic verse 17: 1 was added later on by Muslims in Islamic history. This could also indicate that Muslims were not able to locate the exact area where the Prophet had gone during his Night Journey.

Although the author has given a quite clear answer to this in his article published in 2006, it will still need to be re-addressed in order to be sure what the real destination was during the Night Journey and to look at the meaning of al-Masjid al-Aqṣā.

When one examines the meaning of Arabic term *al-Masjid*, it becomes clear that it is the place of worship, which includes acts of prostration. Ironically, a place of worship does not have to be a specific building to be called a mosque. According to Muslim scholars as well as linguists, there are three components which make a place that can be called a mosque. These three elements clearly exclude physical building: they concentrate on location, direction and boundaries. The most important of those elements is the direction, which is the *Qiblah*, towards al-Masjid al-Ḥaram in Makkah.

Hillenbrand's explanation could also 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).



This also conforms to the Ḥadīth of the Prophet, which means the earth was created clean, so wherever you are being alerted about prayer, then perform your prayer. The Ḥadīth mentioned: (وجعلت لي (الأرض مسجداً وطهوراً⁴ – "The earth was made for me a *Masjid* and a means of purification" (Ibn Ḥajar, 1997, 1: 565 – 569; Muslim, 1994, 2: 411 – 412), and (فأبما رجل من أمتي أدركته الصلاة فليصل) – "my followers can pray wherever the time of a prayer is due" Ibn Ḥajar (1997, 1: 565 – 569).

This Ḥadīth does not mention at all that prayer can only be performed in a physical building that is a mosque. However, once the area is recognised or being gazetted as a mosque, its status will normally be kept clear because it will have other consequences for Muslims. I will not touch on this issue because it is related to the understanding of Islamic jurisprudence.

Another Ḥadīth confirmed 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 Ḥadīth it is mentioned that Prophet Muḥammad led the other prophets in prayer. Here, the researcher attempts to highlight the example of the Ḥadīth that mentioned the Prophet prayed just after he had arrived at *Bayt al-Maqdis*. The Ḥadīth says clearly: "Then I entered the mosque and I prayed two *rak'ah*" (ثم دخلت المسجد فصليت فيه ركعتين). This Ḥadīth is *ṣaḥīḥ*(authentic), narrated by Anas Ibn Mālik and recorded by Imam Muslim.⁵ Thus the Ḥadīth shows that the Prophet had offered prayers when he entered "the Mosque".

As mentioned earlier, there are Orientalists who claim that IslamicJerusalem was not the destination of the Prophet during the Night Journey. Nevertheless, a number of Orientalists seem of the opinion that al-Masjid al-Aqṣā was referring to the area in Palestine, specifically in IslamicJerusalem. One of them, Herbert Busse, agreed that verse 17: 1 was intended to mean IslamicJerusalem (Busse, 1991: 1 – 40).

It is clear that no physical building, as such, of *al-Aqṣā* Congregational Mosque existed at the time of *Isrā'* and *Mi'raj*. But another contradiction and major problem arises. If there was no actual physical mosque at IslamicJerusalem during the Night Journey, what is the explanation of the *Ḥadīth* which states that Allah had brought or revealed (a picture of) *Bayt al-Maqdis* to Prophet Muḥammad while he stood in front of *Hijr* and he began revealing this to the *Quraysh* who did not believe in the Night Journey? (Nor, 2006) The text of the *Ḥadīth* as narrated by Jābir Ibn Abdullah is as follows (Al-Bukhārī, 1981, 2 (2): 247 – 248; Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 247; Muslim, 1994, 1: 535; Al-Qazqī, 2003: 108 – 111):

فجلا الله لي بيت المقدس فظفقت أحرهم عن آياته وأنا أنظر إليه

And Allah revealed to me Bayt al-Maqdis and I began describing its signs to them while I was looking at it.

According to this *Ḥadīth*, one could argue that there must have been a *Masjid* in its actual physical shape because the Prophet had been asked about it in detail, and he answered in detail too.

Nevertheless, the *Ḥadīth* does not mention the word *Masjid* though it mentions the words *Bayt al-Maqdis*. Therefore, the *Ḥadīth* does not literally refer to the physical building of the *Masjid* (Nor, 2006).

Moreover, it could be argued that Allah revealed *Bayt al-Maqdis* to Prophet Muḥammad, particularly the *al-Aqṣā* enclave, conceptually. Hence, it could be argued that the foundation of *al-Masjid al-Aqṣā* was already there and Prophet Muḥammad could have described it to the *Quraysh*. This can be noted from the *al-Aqṣā* enclave which already had its foundation when the Night Journey took place. For instance, the Prophet had been asked about the doors of *al-Aqṣā* and he described them to the people (Ibn Hajar, 1997, 7: 247 – 250). If we look into history, we can find that the *al-Aqṣā* enclave has many doors, most of them dating back to the time before Prophet Muḥammad (al-Ratrout, 2004: 260 – 263).

Dispute among Muslims

In describing the reality of the Night Journey and Ascension, Muslim traditionalists and biographers provide many details and yet come to two different opinions. Those who speak of them as good dreams conclude that the Night Journey and Ascension were spiritual experiences. But those who agree that they were actual events are certain that they happened to the Prophet in both spiritual and physical form. This is because they believe that these incidents took place while the Prophet was in a state of complete wakefulness (Rahnamaei, 2009: 16).

Rahnamaei points out that the idea of the Night Journey and the ascent to heaven refers to some of the narratives related by Ibn Ishaq and some other Sunni biographers. The text recorded by Ibn Hisham is as follows:

On the night of al-Isra', Muhammad was staying in the house of his cousin, Hind, daughter of Abu Talib, who was also called Umm Hani. Hind related that "The Prophet spent the night in my quarters. He recited his night prayers and went to sleep. Just before dawn, the Prophet awoke us and we all prayed the dawn prayer together. When the prayer was through, he said, "O Umm Hani, I prayed with you the night prayer in this place; then I went to Jerusalem and I prayed there, and as you see, I have just finished praying with you the dawn prayer (Ibn Hisham, 1987, 2: 52 – 53).

This miraculous journey seems accepted by Muslim scholars in that it involves body and soul altogether. This is based on the Qur'ānic verses as well as the Ḥadīth of the Prophet regarding this event. If one looks in particular detail, the word "servant" (*'abd*) in these two Qur'ānic passages contains both the soul and body together. This is a clear reflection of the Qur'ānic verse 17:1. Rahnamaei argues that if the Night Journey and Ascension happened in the Prophet's sleep, the text should read "*His servant's soul*" instead of "*His servant*" (*bi rūḥi 'abdihi* instead of *bi 'abdihi*). Furthermore, these verses were revealed to indicate God's favour toward His Prophet (Rahnamaei, 2009: 20 – 21).

El-Khatib explains that "... there is great support amongst Muslim exegetes, traditionalists (*muḥaddithūn*), historians, as well as geographers for the view that the Prophetic nocturnal journey was to Jerusalem [Islamic Jerusalem] first, and that the ascension of the Prophet Muḥammad to heaven (*mi'raj*) started from Jerusalem [Islamic Jerusalem], from *al-Sakhra*, known now as *Qubbat al-Sakhra* (the Dome of the Rock), during the same night of *isra'*" (El-Khatib 2001: 34).

From this verse (17:1), it can be noticed that Islamic Jerusalem serves as a central connection between earth and heaven. It seems there are no other verses in the Qur'ān which mention something of this kind that can be assumed to be the journey from earth to heaven.

It should also be highlighted that there are many views on the date of the Night Journey. The author has stated his own views in his earlier article with regard to this issue. 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* (Nor, 2006). 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 Ḥajar, 1997, 7: 254 – 255; Al-Qurṭubī, 1998, 10: 210; Al-Nawāwī, 1996, 2: 209 – 210). In that early study, the author was inclined to accept that the event took place on the 27 Rajab in the 12 years of *al-bi'thah* (2 BH), the date calculated by using the *Hijri* calendar and based on the scholars' opinion that the Night Journey occurred eighteen months before *Hijrah*.

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 discover that this could be in line with Chapter *al-Isrā'* in which the Chapter is placed in the middle of the Qur'ān (Nor, 2006). The reason for this inclination is as follows: Firstly, two of the scholars mentioned by Ibn Ḥajar, namely Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Qutaybah, were in favour of the date 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 Şabḥah (1991: 236).

Conclusion

Although there are attempts by Orientalists to reject the importance of IslamicJerusalem in Islam by denying the existence of al-Masjid al-Aqṣā in IslamicJerusalem, it cannot actually be denied that the event of the Night Journey and Ascension indeed happened there. The attempts to reject it are based on inability to understand Qur'ānic terms referring to IslamicJerusalem. Another attempt made to challenge the existence of al-Masjid al-Aqṣā by the Orientalists shows that they are not able to understand the concept of a mosque in Islam which does not take physical building into its elements. The whole area of al-Aqṣā covered by a wall in IslamicJerusalem is a mosque in which the Prophet was able to explain its pillars, doors etc, when asked by his expert-traveller companions who were familiar with the al-Shām area in general and IslamicJerusalem in particular. The ability of the Prophet to answer such questions and explain to his companions about al-Aqṣā has indeed confirmed the existence of al-Masjid al-Aqṣā, which included the walled area even though there was no single building on top of that area. This basically denies the claim by Orientalists and provides a clear answer to them that the Night Journey and Ascension happened from Makkah to IslamicJerusalem, and nowhere else in Arabia.

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- 1 See note no. 9 for pages 15 – 20 in Frederick Stephen Colby (2008), *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey*, p. 243.
 - 2 See "Why The Qur'an Is Not A Miracle?" <http://3lotus.com/en/Islam/Quran-Not-a-Miracle.htm>, accessed on 17 October 2010.
 - 3 Apart from the small structure built by 'Umar after the Muslim takeover.
 - 4 Al-Bukhārī, al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ, (Kitāb al-Tayammum), Ḥadīth no. 335; Muslim, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (Kitāb al-Masājid wa Mawāḍi' al-Ṣalāh), Ḥadīth no. 521.
 - 5 This Ḥadīth is compiled in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Kitāb al-Īmān, Bāb al-Isrā' bi Rasūlillāh sallāllāhu 'alayhi wa sallam ilā al-Samāwāt, Ḥadīth no. 259.