

# Isra' and Mi'raj from Modern Perspective: An Analytical Study of Fazlur Rahman's Views

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## Abstract

This paper examines the concept of Isra' and Mi'raj from a modern perspective giving a special reference to Fazlur Rahman, a modernist and a controversial figure in the western academia. According to Islamic orthodoxy, Isra' and Mi'raj refer to two segments of Prophet Muhammad's miraculous night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and his subsequent ascension to heaven. The historicity of the journey as well as its authenticity, however, has continued to be debatable. While a majority of Muslim scholars consider the journey real and physical, Rahman argues that it is just a dream or vision contending that a physical ascension to the heaven is by no means possible. Furthermore, he denies the possibility of seeing angels physically condemning all traditions related to that as fictions. Indeed, this theory has generated criticism within academia and beyond. This paper critically analyses Rahman's views in the light of the authentic traditions demonstrating that the journey is real and physical. Similarly, it establishes that Prophet Muhammad's Ascension is not a concocted narration as Rahman claims, but an authentic historical fact which constitutes an integral part of the Prophet's message.

## 1. Introduction

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 Prophet Muhammad. *Isra'* describes Prophet Muhammad's miraculous journey from *Masjid al-haram* (the sacred mosque) of Mecca to *Masjid al-Aqsa* (the farthest mosque) of Jerusalem (N. Robinson, 1996). On the other hand, *miraj* refers to the second part of the journey: the Prophet's Ascension through the spheres of heaven from the site of *Masjid al-Aqsa* (Michael Sell, 2001). Thus, Prophet 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 Prophet Muhammad's migration to Medina (Heribert Busse, 1998). 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 (Regiald, Hyatte, 1997). 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.

## 2. Literature Study

### Fazlur Rahman: Historical Background

Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988) was considered to be the most learned modern thinker, who excelled in both “classical Islam and western philosophical and theological discourse” in the second half of the twentieth century (Rahman, F. (2009). 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 honored. Rahman died in 1988 after a successful life dedicated to building critical scholarship in the area of Islamic intellectual inquiry and discourse. 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 (Rahman, F. (2017). For example, he held the view that angels have never existed and that Prophet 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.

Fazlur Rahman was intensely studying the Qur’an within its historical and socio-historical contexts (Rahman, F. (2009). His intellectual background is deeply rooted in addressing the challenge of interpreting Islamic texts in a way that dialogues effectively with contemporary realities while remaining faithful to the original moral ideals of the Qur’an. Rahman’s most influential methodological contribution is his “Double Movement” hermeneutic approach (Rozaq, A. 2023; Yusuf, M., & Sadat, A. 2021; Irawan, R. 2020). Historically, this approach involves two stages:

- i) Reconstructing the social and historical context where Qur’anic verses were revealed. This is crucial to understanding the moral and sociological background behind specific injunctions, such as the prohibition of usury or social ethics depicted in the text (Rahman, F. (2017).
- ii) Updating and contextualizing the universal moral values extracted from this historical understanding to make them relevant within modern contexts, including present-day economic systems and societal conditions. This enables the Qur’an to maintain its vitality and applicability across changing times and cultures (Rahman, F. (2017).

Rahman emphasizes that errors in interpretation often arise from detaching the Qur’anic text from its historical context. By engaging in a dynamic dialogue between text and contemporary context, his method revitalizes Islamic thought and promotes a paradigm of religious moderation and reform (M., & Sadat, A. 2021). This approach not only uncovers the original ethical intents of the Qur’an but also constructs a concrete worldview (*weltanschauung*) aimed at guiding both individuals and communities in the modern world (Irawan, R. 2020). Moreover, Rahman’s background involved using normative theological methods that prioritize the foundational symbols of Islam—the Qur’an and Sunnah—while simultaneously being open to historical awareness and contextual changes. His thought is situated within the larger intellectual efforts of contemporary Muslim scholars to bridge traditional Islamic principles with current political, economic, and social challenges worldwide (Amir, A. N., & Rahman, T. A. (2025).

## 3. Methodology of Research

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology to examine Fazlur Rahman’s interpretation of the Isra’ and Mi’raj within the broader framework of modern Islamic thought. The research is primarily based on textual analysis of Rahman’s major works, particularly *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, along with his essays and lectures where he discusses prophetic experiences and Qur’anic hermeneutics. The study further incorporates relevant Qur’anic verses (e.g., Surah Al-Isra 17:1) and classical Hadith literature that narrate the events of the Night Journey and Ascension. Through thematic analysis, the research identifies key motifs in Rahman’s interpretation—such as his symbolic understanding of miraculous events and his emphasis on the ethical and spiritual dimensions of revelation—contrasting these with classical and literalist readings.

In addition to primary texts, the study engages secondary sources including critiques and commentaries on Rahman’s work by both traditional and reformist scholars. The comparative element is central to the methodology, enabling a critical assessment of Rahman’s modernist epistemology vis-à-vis traditional theological frameworks. His “double movement” theory—moving from the historical context of the Qur’an to its moral message for the present—is employed as a lens for understanding his interpretive method (Rahman, 1982). The study situates Rahman’s views within the broader discourse on modernist approaches to Islamic theology, offering an evaluative perspective on their significance and limitations in contemporary Islamic thought.

## 4. Discussion on Findings

### 4.1 *Isra'* and *Mi'raj* from Islamic Perspective

According to Islamic orthodoxy, Prophet Muhammad travelled at night from Mecca to Jerusalem and subsequently ascended into heaven (Ibn Ishaq, n.d). This journey has, however, continued to be a matter of scholarly debate, stemming from the fact that the Qur'an 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 Prophet Muhammad's journey to Jerusalem, without making any reference to the Ascension. As a result, Ibn Ishaq's (d. 768) famous biography of Prophet Muhammad (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 (Smith, R. B. (2024). Scholars who hold the view that Prophet 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 Prophet 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 (*The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, 2005).

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 Prophet 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 Prophet Muhammad's wife at the time the journey was said to have taken place. Fazlur Rahman (1966) 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.

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 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 Prophet Muhammad's *Mi'raj*." (Tisdall, W. S. C. (1911). 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 Prophet Muhammad's Ascension is not convincing (Porter, J. R. (1974). 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 (Prophet) 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 Prophet Muhammad can be viewed as temporary (a matter of hours) (Fazlur Rahman (1966).

### 4.2 Rahman's Objection to Conventional Version of the Narrative

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" (Rahman, F. 2009). Grounding his arguments in the paradigm of a modern interpretation of the impossibility of physical *isra'*, Rahman advocated that Prophet Muhammad never physically saw an angel during his Prophetic career (Rahman, F. 1966). 'Spirit' is the term used repeatedly in the Qur'an 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 (Rahman, F. 2009). "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...” (Rahman, F. 2009). 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 obviously cannot be physical...” (Rahman, F. 2009). 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.*” (Rahman, F. 2009). In support of this hypothesis, Sarwar argues that since Prophet “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” (Sarwar, H. G. 2000). 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 Prophet Muhammad’s heart (prior to the journey) clearly show the spiritual nature of the Ascension (Asad, M. 1980).

### 4.3 Rahman’s Argument: An Assessment

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 Prophet Muhammad’s heart has nothing to do with the nature of the Ascension, as authentic hadith indicates that the incident happened when Prophet 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 skeptical 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 (Abu Muhammad, 2006). 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 Prophet Muhammad saw the angel of revelation on the night of the Ascension, hence the journey “was spiritual and not physical-locomotive” (Rahman, F. 2009). However, in his attempt to challenge the idea of the ‘externality’ of angels, in his book *Islam* he contradicts this view by insisting that Prophet Muhammad saw “something” instead of the angel of revelation as an expansion of his religious experiences (Rahman, F. 1982). 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 Prophet 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.” (Ibn al-Hajjaj, 1993) 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 Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet’s heart was the Holy Spirit (Gabriel), as depicted in various places in the holy Qur’an for example; (26:193) (2:97) (42:24) (42:52). However, Rahman makes no attempt to differentiate between various different types of revelation. Historical records confirm the physical appearance of Gabriel to Prophet 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 Prophet Muhammad the ethics of seeking knowledge and to establish that asking good questions results in better learning and as well as teaching (The hadith in forty hadith.com [online]. That is to say, he comes to the prophet in spirit only when he reveals the Qur’an; hence it is inaccurate to assert that Gabriel never comes to Prophet Muhammad in body at all. As a result, the evidence of Rahman in challenging the physical nature of the Ascension is not convincing.

## 5. Conclusion

This study clearly shows that Prophet 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 Judeo-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 skeptical about the episode. The fact remains, however, that the journey was a real and physical one.

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## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

## Author Contribution

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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