

9 | The Significance of al-Isra'

AL-ISRA' IS the defining moment for Muslims in emphasizing the significance of Jerusalem. It is a clear indication that Allah ﷻ chose Jerusalem over any other place on earth from which to take the Prophet ﷺ on the Night Journey. More specifically, He ﷻ could have taken the Prophet ﷺ directly from Makkah to the heavens but instead He chose this city which He has blessed. Thus, it should become apparent to the Ummah that Jerusalem holds *barakah* or blessings and this should remain at the forefront of our minds. It is also of note that Jerusalem did not become important to Muslims because of the Night Journey but rather the Prophet ﷺ was taken via Jerusalem because of its prior importance. Jerusalem is thus eternally tied to the consciousness of the believers.

The taking of the Noble Prophet ﷺ to Jerusalem indicates several factors:

1. This was to link the first Masjid built on earth, the Ka'bah, with the second Masjid built on earth, Masjid al-Aqsa.
2. During the Night Journey, the Prophet ﷺ became the imam of the two Blessed sites of the Ka'bah and al-Aqsa, when neither were under his control. This was to show the Islamic heritage of both of these cities and the need to bring them under Islamic rule. Events led first to Makkah being liberated and, in 17AH/637CE, Jerusalem being liberated.
3. The ascent of the Prophet ﷺ beyond the Sidrat al-Muntaha, where even Jibra'il could not go, is a clear indication of his high status.

The Prophet's ﷺ presence in the court of the Almighty stamped the authority of his closeness to Allah ﷻ and the responsibility of this Ummah.

4. The Night Journey binds the Ummah to the two qiblahs which were united through this journey. The Muslims' first qiblah (the direction in which to face when in prayer) for approximately 14 years was Jerusalem, and thereafter it has been the Ka'bah. It is no coincidence that these two holy places were linked through the Prophet's ﷺ journey via Jerusalem.
5. It also serves to link the universal significance of the Prophet ﷺ, the Ka'bah and Jerusalem. The Holy Qur'an, referring to the Prophet ﷺ states, "We have not sent you, but as a mercy for all beings" (wa ma arsalnaka illa rahmahtan lil'alamin). (21:107) It further refers to the Ka'bah as "Full of blessing and of guidance for all kinds of beings", (3:96) and to Jerusalem as the "land which We have blessed for all people". (21:71) Al-Isra' bound the Prophet ﷺ and these two holy places together during this one great night.
6. In addition, with regard to the route of the journey from Makkah to Jerusalem, Ahmad Rabi' Yusuf argues that it has a special significance. Yusuf argues that the journey "went through all the places where a revelation has been brought to earth throughout history; it started from Makkah, where the revelation to Muhammad ﷺ started, and went by Madinah, in which the revelation continued to Muhammad ﷺ, then it passed near Sinai, where Musa ﷺ had the revelation, and it ended where the revelation came to Zachariah ﷺ, Isa ﷺ, Dawud ﷺ and Sulayman ﷺ". This argument is very interesting since it connects the final element in the study of the significance of the place, namely the route. This link is also made in the Qur'an (95: 1-3), where Allah ﷻ takes an oath by three places, Jerusalem, Sinai, and Makkah.¹

وَالْتِينِ وَالزَّيْتُونِ ۖ وَطُورِ سَيْنَاءَ ۖ وَهَذَا الْبَلَدِ الْأَمِينِ ۖ لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي أَحْسَنِ تَقْوِيمٍ ۖ ثُمَّ رَدَدْنَاهُ أَسْفَلَ سَفَلِينَ ۖ

By the Fig and the Olive, And the Mount of Sinai, And this City of security, We have indeed created man in the best of moulds, then do We abase him (to be) the lowest of the low.

(Al-Tīn 95:1-5)

The events that took place in al-Aqsa are of profound importance and further show the magnitude of al-Isra' and the significance of Jerusalem:

1. The Prophet ﷺ led the salah in al-Aqsa with all the other Messengers of Allah ﷺ who have been sent to earth praying behind him. This historic and exclusive event, the only one of its kind to our knowledge, placed the Prophet ﷺ as the leader of the Prophets ﷺ. This honourable elevation of the Prophet ﷺ adds a significant dimension to both our understanding of Jerusalem and al-Isra'.
2. Al-Aqsa became the only known site on the entire planet where all the Prophets and the Messengers ﷺ performed salah together at one given time, led by the final Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.
3. It is extremely significant that Allah ﷻ assembled all the Prophets and Messengers in Jerusalem, as this indicates the inclusiveness of Islam, whereby Islam does not undermine nor differentiate between the Prophets and Messengers. In fact, the Qur'an says:

قُولُوا ءَامَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْنَا مِن قَبْلُ ۚ وَنَحْنُ لَهُم مُّسْلِمُونَ ۖ

Say! We believe in Allah and the revelation given to Ibrahim, Isma'il, Ishaq, Ya'qub and the tribes. And that given to Musa and 'Isa and that given to all Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between one and another of them and we bow to Allah (in Islam).

(Al-Baqarah 2:136)

4. The presence of all the Prophets and Prophet Muhammad ﷺ leading the salaah also indicates the finality of Allah's ﷻ message to humanity. On this night, while all the Prophets and Messengers respected the leadership of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, he ﷺ was also acknowledged as being the final Messenger, whose responsibility it was to complete the message that had begun with Adam ﷺ.
5. The fact that Allah ﷻ chose to make al-Aqsā a station in this incredible journey is worthy of note; and it must be recalled that Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ not only stopped at al-Aqsā on his journey from Makkah to the Sublime Throne, but he also stopped there on the return journey. The visit of the Prophet ﷺ to Jerusalem before returning to Makkah adds permanency to the importance of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa. This undermines the arguments of those who contend that the importance of Jerusalem ceased after the ascension. This fact indicates the importance of Jerusalem until the end of time for the believers.
6. Besides al-Aqsa being a station in the Night Journey, the fact that such major events took place there rather than anywhere else highlights the primacy of al-Aqsa.