

## Article

# Re-Evaluating the Notion of Isrâ and Mi'râj in Ibadi Tradition: With Special References to the Modern Sirah Readings

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**Abstract:** The notion of mi'râj (the heavenly journey of Prophet Muhammad) is an important non-homogenic topic, although it is not often handled in Ibadi intellectual, sîrah (biography of the Prophet) and exegetical traditions. In this article, we analyse the treatment of the subject chronologically in the Ibadi tradition. We discuss the Ibadis' main concerns on the subject, how they differ, what inferences they make from the related verses, sîrah, hadith and exegetical (tafsir) reports, and most importantly whether they accept the notion of mi'râj. This article analyses the notion of isrâ because of its close relationship to mi'râj. In summary, there are variations on the issue of mi'râj among the North African and Omani Ibadis. Even more interesting is the existence of significant nuances among the Omani Ibadis. In short, while all North African Ibadis accept mi'râj as an event, it is observed that some Omani Ibadis accept it, while others sometimes reject it for religious and sometimes rational grounds.

**Keywords:** Prophet Muhammad; the Qur'an; tafsir; sîrah; isrâ; mi'râj; Ibadi; Oman; North Africa



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## 1. Introduction

We discussed the issue of *nuzul Isa* (the return of Jesus) in the Ibadi intellectual tradition in a long chapter a few years ago (Albayrak and Shueily 2020). The main argument of the chapter was that the rich Ibadi tradition is not monolithic or homogenous. We pointed out that the Ibadis of North Africa and Oman sometimes have sharp differences in their approaches to the subject, and with modernity, their views have become more similar. The notion of *mi'râj* (the heavenly journey of Prophet Muhammad) is yet another non-homogenous topic, although it is not often handled in the Ibadi intellectual tradition. In this article, we analyse the treatment of the subject chronologically in Ibadi exegetical, *sîrah* and juristic works. The Ibadis' main concerns on the subject and how they differ are examined in detail. We will also discuss which scholars accept *mi'râj* narratives without question, the nuances between those who accept and do not accept them, and what approaches Ibadi scholars have taken on the subject in the contemporary period.

It is also important to note that *sîrah* and (*kalam*) theology are two intertwined disciplines in the Ibadi tradition from the beginning to the present. As Abdulrahman al-Salimi rightly stated, we see that dogmatic issues constitute an important aspect of the *sîrah* literature among early and medieval Ibadis, especially the Nizwa and Rustaq schools (Al Salimi 2009, pp. 475–514).<sup>1</sup> This article is also very important in terms of showing the reader not only classical but also contemporary *sîrah* discussions in the Ibadi tradition with special reference to the issue of *mir'aj*. In this way, the article contains information about the Ibadi *sîrah* debates in the modern period, and the evolution of the direction and approaches of these debates. As Sertkaya pointed out, in the late 19th and early 20th century, with the advent of Islamic modernism, a new era in the field of Sunni *sîrah* also began (Sertkaya 2022, p. 14). Similarly, we will try to extract the modern version of the official and civil Ibadi understanding of the notion of *mi'râj* from the general readings of *sîrah*, exegesis and other sources.

The miracles of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*, which are very rich and discussed in detail in Sunni and non-Sunni traditions, are briefly: after the year of sorrow, when the Prophet Muhammad lost his wife (Khadija) and uncle (Abu Talib) and faced unexpected mistreatment from the people of Taif, he was taken from *masjid al-haram* (Mecca) to *masjid al-aqsa* (Jerusalem) on a mount named *Buraq* sent by God. From Jerusalem, he ascended to *bayt al-ma'mur* (lit. 'the Flourishing House' but it is generally considered as the heavenly counterpart of al-Bayt al-Harâm in Mecca) and *sidrat al-muntaha* (*Sidr* tree that marks the utmost boundary in the seventh heaven), accompanied by the angel Gabriel. It is mentioned in the sources that this journey is physical and spiritual. After this brief sketch of the narrative, we start with the Ibadî commentator Hud b. Muhakkam's (c. 210–280/825–893) evaluations.

## 2. *Isrâ* and *mi'râj* in the Works of North African Ibadis: Chronological Survey

Hud b. Muhakkam is one of the earliest Ibadî exegetes who gave the most detailed information on *isrâ* (night journey) and *mi'râj* (heavenly journey). Hud discusses various hadith, *sîrah* and exegetical reports about the events of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*. Thus, it is easy to follow his presentation of the event in his exegesis.<sup>2</sup> As is known, Hud's work is heavily based on Yahya b. Sallam's (d. 200/816) exegetical work; therefore, he rarely goes beyond the information given by Yahya in these narratives. For this reason, Hud's comments on the first verse of Surah *Isrâ* contain small details that cannot be separated from the exegeses of Yahya and Ibn Abi Zamînîn (d. 399 AH).<sup>3</sup> One reason why this rich information did not have serious impacts on later Ibadî scholars may be that Hud's exegesis was not widespread. Second, unlike some North African Ibadis, there was no clear-cut Ibadî view on this issue (*isrâ* and *mi'râj*) in the east, especially in Oman. From Hud's work, it is safe to assume he has no doubt about the authenticity of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*. In fact, Hud accepts that the Prophet went on this heavenly journey with his body and soul (al-Hawwârî 2005). When one looks at his presentation, it can be seen that every detail about the journey is mentioned, such as the Prophet's chest being opened and heart washed with *zamzam* water, his heart being filled with faith and wisdom, and details about the mount named *Buraq* (al-Hawwârî 2005). Hud's exegesis contains information not only about the preparations for the journey but also what happened during it—for example, the Prophet being offered milk and wine and his preference for milk, the Prophet's prayer in *al-Aqsa* mosque and his visitation to the other prophets one by one on the *mi'râj* journey, his long dialogue with Moses, the reduction in prayers from 50 times to five and the names of the rivers in heaven (al-Hawwârî 2005). Hud also talks about what happened after the Prophet returned from his heavenly journey, such as the questions raised by the Meccan polytheists and their refusal, plus Abu Bakr's approval of the Prophet and becoming a *siddiq* (confirmer) in this tafsir (al-Hawwârî 2005).

It is remarkable that Hud occasionally uses different verses of the Qur'an in his explanations. His presentation in this way, which he probably received from Yahya, responds not only to the confessional but also the pastoral expectations of interlocutors. In particular, Prophet Muhammad's meeting with other prophets and the scenes of heaven and hell he witnessed on his journey (those who take interest/usury, unjustly consume the wealth of orphans,<sup>4</sup> scholars and preachers who tell people what they did not do, those who kill their children for fear of living, etc.)<sup>5</sup> are good examples in this regard (al-Hawwârî 2005). For example, when describing the situation of people who take interest, Hud mentions verse 2:175 (al-Hawwârî 2005). In addition, Prophet Muhammad's meeting with Moses and Moses' statement, "The Children of Israel think I am the best of the creatures, whereas this (Muhammad) is better than me" (al-Hawwârî 2005) are remarkable in terms of showing pious envy.<sup>6</sup> In these narratives, which are full of messages, Hud goes into interesting details. The long and many hairs on Moses' chest are good illustrations of this narrative. According to the report, they were visible even if Moses wore two shirts. This anecdote is not mentioned by Yahya but is by Muqatil b. Sulayman (d. 150/767). However, it should not be dismissed as a baseless report of *isrâiliyyat* but should be evaluated in the context of a Muslim response to prophetic tradition, which describes Moses as a hairy man. Again,

other anecdotes are not mentioned in the commentary of Yahya and Ibn Zamīnīn but we see them in the commentary of Hud. According to one, an unnamed prophet, who went on a night (*isrâ*) journey before Prophet Muhammad, saw an angel on the road and, without being aware, he mistook this angel for God and prostrated before him. That angel has been waiting there with a spear in its hand to this day (al-Hawwārī 2005). The question of why Hud mentioned this anecdote loses its legitimacy when one understands the nature of his exegesis. This anecdote has interesting connotations for him; not only was the narration wasted by not telling it, but also different considerations may have been pursued, including pedagogical and pastoral concerns.

Hud does not skip the interesting narrations mentioned in Yahya b. Sallam's exegesis but rarely found in other commentaries. While describing what the Prophet saw in *sidrat al-muntaha*,<sup>7</sup> Hud describes the birds and pomegranates there: "its bird is like a hummingbird, and a pomegranate is like the domed skin of a camel" (al-Hawwārī 2005). In this context, another example is given by Hud that, when the Prophet reached the nearest heaven (*al-sama al-dunya*), he met an angel named 'Ismail', who had an army of 70,000 angels. Then he reminds the reader about verse 74:31<sup>8</sup> (al-Hawwārī 2005). Finally, an interesting anecdote is mentioned with different additions and subtractions in a few tafsir (such as Abd al-Razzaq, Yahya b. Sallam, Tabari and Ibn Zamīnīn). On the way to Jerusalem, the Prophet was called by a beautiful woman from his left side and the Prophet did not look at her. Like Yahya's narration, Hud has pointed out that, if the Prophet had turned to the woman, his community would have become Jewish or Christian (al-Hawwārī 2005).

The main purpose of describing all these details is that Hud, an early Ibadi scholar, seems not to have doubted the authenticity of the *isrâ* and *mi'râj* reports, and he narrates the events that took place that night in a full story package down to the smallest detail. It is also clear from his narration that Hud does not have serious dogmatic concerns about the occurrences of the events of *isrâ* and *mi'râj* in contrast to some later Ibadi scholars in the east. This is perhaps due to the narration-oriented nature of his exegesis or because he accepts the subject as indisputable. However, he is careful and sensitive not to enter discussions about the possibility of the Prophet's meeting with God (seeing Him) in this journey. Regarding the interpretation of the famous verse in Surah Najm (53:18),<sup>9</sup> he is satisfied with the comment that God did not say the Prophet saw his Great Lord; on the contrary, He told that he saw great signs of God—*laqad ra'â min âyâti rabbihî al-kubrâ wa-lam yaqul ra'â rabbahu'l-kubrâ* (al-Hawwārī 2005). Similarly, another point to be noted is the last part of the first verse of Surah Isrâ: *linuriyahu min âyatina* (in order that We might show him of Our signs) and *innahu samiun basir* (He is the All-Hearer, the All-Seer). While interpreting this part, Hud clearly expresses his school's view regarding the impossibility of the vision of God by saying: God showed signs to the Prophet on the way of *bayt al-maqdis* (Jerusalem) and He (God) is the one who hears and sees himself (*nafsahu*), otherwise no one else can hear or see Him (al-Hawwārī 2005: II.263). In brief, Hud is not an impartial narrator from Yahya.

Another work that points to the events of *isrâ* and *mi'râj* is *Kitab al-Tartib*. The work titled *Tartib al-Jami al-Sahih Musnad al-Rabi* was edited and arranged by the famous Ibadi scholar Abu Ya'qub Yusuf b. Ibrahim al-Warjilani (d. 570/1175). For this reason, we mention Hud's interpretations before the narration of *Musnad al-Rabi b. Habib* and its famous annotations. In a narration mentioned in *Musnad* compiled by Warjilani (Abu Ubayda-Jabir b. Zayd-Ibn Abbas-the Prophet), it is stated that the five daily prayers were made obligatory two years before the *hijrah* (Rabī b. Ḥabīb 2003, p. 191). In this narration, the Prophet turned towards the Ka'ba direction in Mecca until he went to *bayt al-maqdis*. Interestingly, the word used in this report is *urija* (mainly refers to *mi'râj*, but probably includes *isrâ* and *mi'râj*); after that, *bayt al-maqdis* became a *qibla* (direction for prayer) (Rabī b. Ḥabīb 2003). It is also noted in this report that the Ansar took *bayt al-maqdis* as the *qibla* for two years in Madina until the Prophet emigrated (Rabī b. Ḥabīb 2003). The existence of this narration in *Musnad*, which was arranged by Warjilani, shows he saw this narration as authentic and accepted the events of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*.

Warjilani does not deal with this issue (*isrâ* and *mi'râj*) in his works. As far as we can see, when replying to a question, he opens a new section under the title *fasl* then indirectly mentions the events of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*. In short, Warjilani deals with the issue through the questions of whether the Prophet followed and applied the *shari'ah* (law) of another prophet before Islam or abrogated the *shari'ah* of all previous prophets. Warjilani discusses various views and says the issue is disputed among jurists and, without naming the authorities, he says some said this while others said that. According to this, some have put forward opinions that the Prophet obeyed the *shari'ah* of Noah, Abraham and even Jesus for a while. These views are supported by Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions. Then, by saying *wa qala ba'dhum* (some said) that the Prophet worshipped with the *shari'ah* of Moses, then he argues "do you not see that the burden of prayer times was lightened on the night of the *mi'râj*", meaning it was reduced from 50 to five times (al-Warjilâni 1984). As can be deduced from these explanations, although Warjilani does not make a systematic evaluation on the notions of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*, he accepts the authenticity of the *mi'râj* report.

After Warjilani came the explanation of Abu Umar Muhammad b. Umar (Ibn Abi Sittah) (d. 1088/1678) from Jarba, the commentator of *Tartib* among the North African Ibadi world, on the related narration. Ibn Abi Sittah, reminding readers of the long hadith mentioned by Bukhari in addition to the hadith in *Tartib*, says the prayer times on the night of *mi'râj* were reduced from 50 to five for the *ummah*. He interprets the expression *urija bihi* (heavenly journey) in the hadith of *Tartib* as *usriya bihi* (night journey). Although he seems to approach the issue of *mi'râj* cautiously with this expression, the fact he mentions the hadith of Bukhari shows he accepts *isrâ* and *mi'râj*. He also says, after the *isrâ* incident, the *qibla* changed towards *bayt al-maqdis* (Ibn Abi Sittah 1982).

After Hud b. Muhakkam, Muhammad b. Yusuf Atfayyish (d. 1914) extensively deals with the subject. He summarises almost the entire Islamic intellectual tradition in his interpretation of the first verse of Surah Isrâ, over about 75 pages.<sup>10</sup> These long narratives, which include *tafsir*, *hadith*, *fiqh*, *kalam*, *tasawwuf*, *sîrah*, *qisas al-anbiya*, *tarikh*, *tarikh al-adyan* (history of religions), *al-milal wa al-nihal* (history of sects), language, geography and *adab* (general pastoral literature), tell us not only Atfayyish's view on the subject, but also give us information about his general mindset. It is useful to draw attention to a couple of issues before concentrating on Atfayyish's analysis, which dealt with the subject of *mi'râj*, which many Ibadi scholars almost never touched, in his broad and rich exegesis *Himyan al-Zad ila Dar al-Ma'ad*, which he wrote at the age of 25. First, Atfayyish's treatment of the subject is too versatile and broad to be explained within the boundaries of one article. This section in his exegesis, which was probably written in different time periods, contains some expressions that are not very systematic at first glance, even mixed and contradictory. However, those who know the style and methodology of Qutub Atfayyish will see that he wrote a comprehensive salvation history in the context of the *isrâ-mi'râj* events. A sensitive reading of Atfayyish leads to a smooth connection, analysis and conclusion rather than a contradiction. This rich narrative, dominated by religious technical terms, sometimes goes out of context to seek answers to some dogmatic concerns, whereas other times we witness the expansion of the pastoral and guiding-priority (*irshad*) narrative. As he states in the interpretation of verse 17:1, he blends many of the narrations he deals with and brings them together by adding some things from himself. Although the concept of time is sometimes lost in the narrations of Sheikh Atfayyish, we do not know of any other commentator in exegetical tradition who deals with the subject in such a versatile way. If the internal dynamics and logic of Atfayyish's approach and interpretation of the verse are not understood, his explanations can be called simply *isrâliyyat* reports and rejected altogether. However, his success can be understood clearly when the nearly 50 scholars and various opinions he mentions in the interpretation of the relevant verse are considered. He brought many reports and views together in one neat piece of narrative. He successfully formulates a wealth of sources on and insights into one narrative, and the richness of the mentioned anecdotes lies in the fact that they present all kinds of connotations and lessons to be learned.

As stated above, the inner integrity of Atfayyish's analysis and explanations, which seems to be scattered into superficial approaches, requires careful reading. After the linguistic explanations of words such as *subhan* (glorification of God) and *laylan* (night) in 17:1 (Atfayyish 1991), Atfayyish deals with many issues directly or indirectly related to the notions of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*. The exact time of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*, how many times they happened, how they happened, whether the Prophet made this journey while asleep or awake, whether with his soul and body or just one of them, the nature of the famous mount (*Buraq*), detailed information about *masjid al-haram* and *al-aqsa*, the events the Prophet encountered on his journey, and the persons, angels, prophets and interesting scenes the Prophet witnessed are the main topics Atfayyish focuses on in his exegesis and vividly describes (Atfayyish 1991). Someone looking at the narration of the lively scenes from the outside may even think that Atfayyish accompanied the Prophet on his night and heavenly journeys. In all these narratives, Atfayyish includes some dogmatic concerns and engages in intra-school and denominational debates. Sometimes his inferences are dominated by the juristic point of view and sometimes comments are made about the linguistic<sup>11</sup> and literary<sup>12</sup> aspects of the narrated reports and anecdotes. In short, if we specify Wansbrough's category, Atfayyish deals with the *sîrah* reports and anecdotes he conveys from *haggadic* (narrative), *halakhic* (legal), *masoratic* (linguistic), *rhetorical* and *allegorical* aspects (Wansbrough 1977). Atfayyish, who bases his writing mainly on Sunni sources rather than Ibadi literature (mostly he precedes the narration of Bukhari and Bukhari's commentaries on the subject), sometimes even uses the terms *isrâ* and *mi'râj* interchangeably. In *Taysîr*, however, he does not use the word *mi'râj*; instead, he prefers to just use the word *isrâ* for both notions.<sup>13</sup> Atfayyish and many contemporary Ibadi scholars frequently use Sunni sources on *sirah* and *tafsir*. However, it does not go beyond the general practices related to Ibadi dogma. An important point worth mentioning here is that although we cannot see it in Atfayyish, some recent Ibadi scholars have emphasized the issue of *fiqh al-sirah* (internalizing the notion of *sirah*). Unfortunately, we do not dwell on this approach, which was inspired by Muhammad Ghazzali (d. 505/1111) and Ramadan al-Buti (d. 2013), because it did not come to the fore regarding incidences of *isra* and *mi'raj*.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, while narrating the events the Prophet encountered and saw on the night of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*, Atfayyish rewrote a script from the existing materials and did not miss almost any anecdotes in his *Himyan*. He evaluates each alternative by mentioning the year, day and place of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*, sometimes by mentioning the narrators or conveying it with the formula *qila* (it was said). He also criticises some anecdotes. For example, it is possible to see narrations in which *isrâ* is realised with the soul and body; it is also mentioned in the Qur'an. It is also possible to strange comment such as *mi'râj* occurs 33 times. Atfayyish talks extensively about the opening of the Prophet's heart (chest or stomach) before the heavenly journey and it being washed with *zamzam* water, the nature of *Buraq*, its gender, saddle, bridle, etc., which Prophets<sup>15</sup> rode *Buraq* before Prophet Muhammad, descriptions and situations<sup>16</sup> of the *masjid al-haram* and *al-aqsa*, *sidrat al-muntaha* (utmost boundary), and the Pharaoh's daughter (Atfayyish 1991). Moreover, it is possible to see extensive explanations in Atfayyish's *Himyan* about the milk and wine presented to the Prophet as well as the rivers he saw in his *mi'râj*. Contrary to the limited information given by other commentaries, Atfayyish says that besides milk and wine, the Prophet was offered honey and water. As for the rivers, Atfayyish adds the Sayhun and Jayhun rivers; Kawthar (Abundance) and Rahmat (Mercy) are in heaven and the Nile and Euphrates are situated in the world (Atfayyish 1991).

In fluent and gripping narratives, Atfayyish has a tendency to write information about the *sirah*, which we do not encounter in other sources, in the light of the *isrâ-mi'râj* incident. It is almost as if Atfayyish reads the *isrâ-mi'râj* incident in the light of the events in the Prophet's later life and makes original comparisons and comments. He establishes a relationship between the meeting of Abraham and the Prophet in the seventh heaven and the first *umrah* (minor pilgrimage) that took place in the seventh year of the migration. The key word here is the number "seven" (Atfayyish 1991). Atfayyish gives the issue a

rational basis by saying that this meeting means reviving the sunnah of Abraham, whom he encountered in the seventh heaven, during the *umrah* of the Prophet in the seventh year of Hijra. There are also interesting comparisons about the other prophets, not only in heaven, but also on the earth (in the vicinity of *masjid al-aqsa*). For instance, the post-prayer conversation with some prophets is presented from a purely Islamic and Qur'anic perspective. Interestingly, Atfayyish narrates that the Prophet is talking to Jesus in the *masjid al-aqsa* whereas no heavenly conversation is recorded between the two in their meeting (Atfayyish 1991).

Atfayyish often gives dogmatic messages between the lines of his exegesis and *sīrah* reading. The issue of whether the rank of Abraham as *khalil Allah* (friend of God) at the seventh heaven is superior to the spiritual level of Prophet Muhammad as a *habib Allah* (beloved of God) is a good illustration. Atfayyish says *al-habibu a'la martabatin min al-khalil* (Being a beloved is a higher level than being a friend) concludes the subject (Atfayyish 1991). Another issue Atfayyish problematizes is the term used by all prophets when they address Prophet Muhammad, namely *ghulam* (young, child or slave), during *mi'rāj*. With a linguistic and allegorical manoeuvre, Atfayyish leaves no question in the mind, stating *ghulam* means *sayyid* 'master' (Atfayyish 1991). It is also worth mentioning the comparative narratives of Moses about Prophet Muhammad and his community are also beautifully explained from an Islamic framework. In addition, Atfayyish states no prophet performed ascension (*mi'rāj*) with the soul and body apart from Prophet Muhammad. Furthermore, other prophets were informed in advance like Moses, who was told he would stay for 40 days and nights on the mountain of Tur. Atfayyish emphasises that Prophet Muhammad suddenly ascended to his heavenly journey, *mi'rāj* (Atfayyish 1991).

Regarding the virtue of *zamzam* water, Atfayyish combines the descriptive (*khābar*) and prescriptive (*insha*) nature of the reports or brings *sīrah* (biography of the Prophet) and *kalam* (theology) together by saying *zamzam* is more virtuous than all waters except that which comes out of the fingers of the Prophet (Atfayyish 1991). This is a common practice in modern times among many *sīrah* writers. In our opinion, Atfayyish uses the Prophet's encounter with many prophets as an argument for his universality. He even harshly criticises the Mutazilite school, which holds the view that there is no difference among the prophets. As the Qur'an and prophetic traditions make clear, Atfayyish reiterates his belief that the Prophet was sent as a mercy to the worlds and a herald of good news to all humanity (Ibid). This is the gist of the topic, which constitutes a different manifestation of Atfayyish's main approach.<sup>17</sup> Atfayyish goes on and frequently points to the virtue not only of the Prophet, but also of the scripture (the Qur'an) that was sent and the community that follows him. Regarding virtue, he even divides angels into categories and talks about their special characteristics (Atfayyish 1991).

Atfayyish, who often goes off topic and tries to give messages with intermediate sentences, is also involved in semi-juristic and semi-pastoral matters, such as debt or charity and the virtues of cupping, *hijama* (Atfayyish 1991). Regarding the reduction of 50 prayers to five, which was made obligatory on the night of *mi'rāj*, the subject also covers technical issues such as *naskh* (abrogation) or *badā* (renouncing). Here, Atfayyish asks the question of whether it is possible to abrogate the relevant provision before it is communicated or put into practice. Then he argues this is a *bayān* (declaration) and *īdāh* (explanation) rather than *naskh* or *badā* (Atfayyish 1991). With this brief but right approach, he solves the problem theologically and juristically. As far as we can see, in the interpretation of verse 17:1, in which no detail is omitted, Atfayyish does not mention Hud b. Muhakkam's name, but includes a few anecdotes that we think were taken from Hud's exegesis. The anecdotes seem to be taken from Hud's exegesis but in a more elaborate fashion (Atfayyish 1991)—for example, there are narrations about the existence of an angel named Ismail and his protection by 70,000 angels, the Prophet being called but not responding to a man on his right and a beautiful woman with open arms on his left, one representing Judaism and the other representing Christianity, and the words of the Prophet about what he saw, such

as the birds and pomegranates. It can also be mentioned among these quotations that, if Moses had two shirts, the hairs on his chest would stick out (Atfayyish 1991).

Atfayyish sometimes gives contradictory statements. In the interpretation of verse 17:1, he says “as the Ibadi community, we say that it is a spiritual journey (meaning *isrâ* and *mi'râj*)” (Atfayyish 1991), while in another place he holds the view “as we have mentioned, it (*isrâ* and *mi'râj*) took place while the Prophet was awake with spirit and body, this is the general (majority) opinion (*jumhur*) and people have accepted it as true” (Atfayyish 1991). When we look at the interpretation by Atfayyish, he has no doubt about the occurrences of *isrâ* and *mi'râj* with the spirit and body while the Prophet was awake. The details described in the pages are the clearest proof of this conclusion. The only point to which Atfayyish objects is related to the notion of *ru'yat Allah* (whether the Prophet saw God in his heavenly journey). As it is known, the report from Aisha states the Prophet did not see God whereas the narration from Ibn Abbas says the opposite. Atfayyish considers such a claim as slander (*al-firyah*) in Surah *Isrâ* and falsehood (*batil*) in Surah *Najm* (Atfayyish 1991). This is understandable and a natural interpretation by Atfayyish because his approach to this subject is in tune with the theology of the Ibadi school. Atfayyish refers to one Ibadi source, *Musnad al-Rabi b. Habib*, on this topic. Most of the quotations and narrations are from Sunni sources. For Atfayyish, the Prophet saw everything except God (*ghayr Allah*) during his heavenly journey and witnessed the realm of *mulk* (material) and *malakut* (spiritual) (Atfayyish 1991).

After Atfayyish, it is seen that Ibrahim b. Umar Bayyud (d. 1981), one of the North African commentators, handled the subject more carefully. Bayyud argues Prophet Muhammad may have seen Gabriel in his real identity while he was going back and forth between Moses and God regarding the verse *wa-laqad ra'ahu nazlatan ukhra* (And indeed he saw him another time). However, it should not be understood from this statement by Bayyud that the Prophet saw God. In the verse of *mâ-zâgha al-basar wa ma-taghâ* (the eye neither went wrong, nor did it exceed the limit), Bayyud argues that the Prophet can see what his Lord revealed to him as truth. Bayyud, who focused mostly on the Prophet's vision of Gabriel in his real identity, accepted *isrâ* and *mi'râj*, but, unlike Hud and Atfayyish, he is cautious not to exceed the boundaries because they are related to the unseen news, *ghayb* (Bayyud 2009).<sup>18</sup>

Farhat Ja'biri, one of the greatest living Tunisian Ibadi scholars, deals with the issue entirely within the framework of whether God is seen in the world by the Prophet, and says Ibadis agree with most of the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites. Ja'biri also says some Ash'arites talked about the possibility of the Prophet seeing God based on *mi'râj* narratives, whereas the Ibadis firmly reject this. According to Ja'biri, the main source of Ibadis is the narration from Aisha, who says the Prophet saw Gabriel in his original form (al-Ja'biri 1987). Although the basic line of approach of North African Ibadis to the subject after Atfayyish is preserved, it is seen that many details are gradually decreasing, and they becoming more similar to the Omani Ibadis in their presentation of the events. However, it is also safe to assume we have not yet come across a single North African Ibadi scholar who openly rejects the notion of *mi'râj*. Now it is time to evaluate the approaches of the eastern Ibadi world on the subject.

### 3. The Views of Omani Ibadi Scholars on the *Isrâ* and *Mi'râj* Events

When it comes to the approach of Omani Ibadi scholars to this subject, we encounter an interesting picture. As stated in the introduction, the early and pre-modern Omani Ibadi scholars did not touch very much on the issue of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*. Even in some encyclopaedic works (it could at least be mentioned in the prayer section, *kitab al-salat*) and *sîrah* texts, we unfortunately witness the subject was only briefly covered. For example, as far as we have researched, the writers of the book titled *Kitab al-Jami*, like Abu al-Hasan Ali b. Muhammad al-Bisyuwi (d. 370), Ibn Baraka al-Bahlawi (4th/10th century) and Izkawi (b. 1150/1737), do not enter the subject of *mi'râj*. Similarly, Salama b. Sa'd al-Awtabi (5–6th centuries) in his *Kitab al-Diyâ* and Ahmad b. Abd Allah al-Kindi (d. 557/1162) in his *al-Tawhid* and *Kitab al-Salat* do not mention this issue. Sheikh Salih b. Sa'îd al-Zamili

from Nizwa, who was a blind scholar but active in the Ibadi community (mid-11th/17th century), did not refer to this topic.<sup>19</sup> Sheikh Khamis b. Sa'id al-Shaqsi (d. 1034/1565), who lived two centuries before the exegete Kindi, in his work called *Minhaj al-Talibin wa Balagh al-Raghibin* (al-Shaqsi n.d., I.412–13; II.359–60), only mentions the notion of *isrâ* and does not deal with *mi'râj*. Different speculations can be made about the reason for this silence,<sup>20</sup> but for now, it is useful to look at the approaches by Omani Ibadi scholars who have conducted evaluations of the subject, whether short or long, positive or negative.

When we look at the Omani commentator Sa'id b. Ahmad al-Kindi (d. 1207/1792) on the verses about *isrâ* and *mi'râj*, he made a concise and short comment. Without stating his preference for verse 17:1, he cites two views: he (the Prophet) travelled spiritually or physically. Kindi, who gave both the formula *qila* (it was said), says in the 18th verse of chapter Najm that the Prophet observed the greatest proofs of the *mulk* (seen) and *malakut* (unseen) world of God on the night of *mi'râj* (al-Kindi 1998). As can be understood from this presentation, Kindi accepts *isrâ* and *mi'râj*, but does not elaborate. Kindi, who generally deals with many subjects briefly and concisely, has sufficed to indicate this subject.

When examining North African Ibadis, they often use the terms *isrâ* and *mi'râj* interchangeably. We have pointed out that almost all of them accept *mi'râj* except for the issue of the Prophetic vision of God. When it comes to Omani Ibadi scholars, they make a sharp distinction between the notions of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*. For example, Sheikh Nasir b. Abi Nabhan (d. 1263/1847) says there is no doubt about *isrâ* because it is confirmed by Qur'anic verse. As for *mi'râj*, he makes interesting comments. He mentions many alternatives and discusses the positive and negative aspects of all these. According to Ibn Abi Nabhan, the Prophet's spiritual or mental *mi'râj* is possible, but the available data (Qur'an, sunnah, *ijma*) do not support its occurrence. Therefore, Ibn Abi Nabhan argues that it is not correct to say that someone who does not accept *mi'râj* as an event has made a mistake. He even describes anyone who makes such a claim as cruel, sinful and heretic. He believes the reports are inauthentic regarding the details about *mi'râj* (reducing the prayers to five times, the Prophet's meeting with other prophets in heaven, etc.) (Jumayyil 2015). For Ibn Abi Nabhan, the issue of *mi'râj* is not from religious dogma and creed. The biggest evidence on this issue is the report from Aisha, the Prophet's wife. The body of the Prophet did not somehow ascend to the heavens (*uruj*).<sup>21</sup> Ibn Abi Nabhan argues the related verses of Surah Najm cannot be proof for the authenticity of *mi'râj*. With this approach, he seems selective about sunnah and consensus (*ijma*), unlike Atfayyish. Although Ibn Abi Nabhan speaks clearly about the fact *isrâ* is realised in soul and body because of verse 17:1, he rationalises his doubts about *mi'râj*. With simple logic, Ibn Abi Nabhan states *isrâ* is a smaller miracle than *mi'râj*, and if *mi'râj* was certain, it would not be reasonable for God to leave a greater miracle and mention the smaller one.<sup>22</sup> Omani scholar Sa'id b. Khalfan al-Khalili (d. 1287/1871), on the other hand, repeats and simplifies Ibn Abi Nabhan's comments then points out Ibn Abi Nabhan made right and authentic determinations about *mi'râj* because it is not a necessity of the religion (*darurat al-diniyya*).<sup>23</sup>

Ibn Abi Nabhan and Muhaqqiq Khalili are not exceptions and are cautious about *mi'râj*. Sheikh Jumayyil b. Khamis (d. 1278/1861) is one scholar who put forward serious dogmatic concerns about *mi'râj*. As clear as he is about *isrâ*, he is just as sceptical about the notion of *mi'râj*. The point is that it does not make much sense to mention the minor miracle (*isrâ*) in the Qur'an instead of the great miracle (*mi'râj*). This argument, which is given by many Omani Ibadis, is still important in Jumayyil b. Khamis' *magnum opus*, *Qamus al-Shari'ah*. But he is not satisfied with this argument alone. According to Sheikh Jumayyil, the fact that all the reports about *mi'râj* are *khobar ahad* (come from a few people rather than masses, *mutawatir*) means that it is not sufficient to be verified knowledge. Second, these reports are not valid in the eyes of the community, *inda al-qawm*. At first glance, it can be understood that he refers to the Ibadi community with this expression (*inda al-qawm*), but when one looks at the textual context of this expression, it immediately becomes clear that he refers to Ahl al-Sunnah. Sheikh Jumayyil is probably of the opinion that there is no authentic narration about *mi'râj* in Sunni sources. It is unthinkable that the writer of



*Qamus al-Shari'ah* lacked this basic knowledge about the Sunni view of the *mi'râj* event, but it seems he considers the *mi'râj* hadiths as being *âhâd*; therefore, they are not enough to establish dogma. Third, there are issues involving *tashbih* (anthropomorphism) due to the notion of *ru'yat Allah, visio beatifica*, etc. Fourth, he says it is *badâ* to abrogate something before it is put into practice, such as reducing the prayers from 50 to five times. *Badâ* is impossible for God (Jumayyil 2015).

Unlike Nasir b. Abi Nabhan and Said b. Khalfan, the famous Omani Ibadî scholar Nur al-Din Abu Muhammad Abd Allah b. Humayd al-Salimi (d. 1332/1914) follows a different path regarding *isrâ* and *mi'râj*. Although Salimi sometimes does not make a sharp distinction between the two concepts, he evaluates the subject from different points in his various works. Although it is not a tidy and ordered narrative, it generally provides interesting information about the events of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*, which he evaluates from the perspectives of a traditionalist (*muhaddith*) and jurist. In the commentary of the related hadith, Salimi first deals with the determination of the night of *isrâ*, which some have said is the 17th of Rabi al-awwal, while others have said is the 27th. It has also been said to be the 27th of Rabi al-akhir and the 27th of Rajab. It has even been called Dhu al-hijjah. Salimi notes the two times of ritual prayer mentioned in Surah Muzzammil were abrogated on the night of *isrâ* and five daily prayers were made obligatory. He also mentions, after 12 years in Mecca, people turned their face towards *bayt al-maqdis* as the *qibla* after the *isrâ* event. (al-Salimî n.d.). In his work *Ma'arij al-Âmâl ala Madârij al-Kamâl*, Salimi touches on similar issues to those in *Sharh al-Jami al-Sahih*. Furthermore, he repeats the fact that five times of prayer became obligatory (*fard*) on the night of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*. An important point that draws one's attention in *Ma'arij al-Âmâl* is the quotation Salimi takes from two Shafi'i scholars who lived in Egypt. One of them is the author of *al-Sirat al-Halabiyya*, Ali b. Burhan al-Din al-Halabi (d. 1044/1635) while the other is Ibn Hajar al-Haythami (d. 807/1404). In the part quoted from al-Halabi, the obligatory prayer is mentioned, and from Haythami, the events observed on the night of *mi'râj* are briefly pointed out (al-Salimî n.d.).

Apart from *Sharh* and *Ma'arij*, Salimi deals with this issue with the eyes of a jurist in his works *Tal'at al-Shams* and *Jawabat al-Imam al-Salimi*. The main debate is how the prayers were reduced from 50 to five on the night of *mi'râj*. Salimi asks many questions in this context. For instance, is this a *naskh* (abrogation), if the *naskh* was abolished before the first proposal was put into practice and another proposal came? Is this easiness and mercy for the Prophet or *ummah*, or is there any possibility it is a *badâ* (changing thought, which is impossible for God)? Salimi gives a more concise presentation in *Jawabat* and does not go into much detail. He says "our knowledge of the way it was reduced from fifty to five is limited; God has reduced it from fifty to five times as a blessing to this ummah. Five times are worth fifty times" (al-Salimî n.d.). Here, he reminds of verse 62:4, "Such is Allah's favour: He bestows it on whomsoever He pleases. Allah is the Lord of abounding favour" (al-Salimî n.d.). He even says it is not right to speculate on events that did not happen in the end (al-Salimî n.d.). In short, Salimi is more interested in reality and practical repercussions of the matter, rather than focussing on unseen issues and abstract speculation.

In *Tal'at al-Shams*, on the other hand, contrary to the above approach, Salimi goes into detail. He draws attention to the narrative of the sacrifice of Ismail (son of Prophet Ibrahim). According to this Qur'anic narrative (37:102–7), the story was abrogated before the sacrificial order was fulfilled and a ram was sent instead of Ismail. However, the question is asked whether the time between abrogating (*nasikh*) and being abrogated (*mansukh*) was sufficient for the fulfilment of the order. In response, Salimi says: "All of that time is steadfastness in the matter, clarification of the ruling, and preparation for compliance, not negligence in action" (al-Salimî 2008). After that, Salimi, who went into the subject of *mi'râj*, reminds the reader that it was reduced from 50 to five times without using a similar approach. Here, too, Salimi, who deals with the issue of the abrogation of the ruling before its implementation, says the Mutazilites rejected the hadith because of this, while those who accepted the narration rejected the abrogation. Salimi's response to them is explicit. First, the *mi'râj* hadith is famous and accepted by the Muslim community.

The reports and hadiths of *mi'râj* and the hadiths of the reduction in the obligation from 50 times to five are mentioned in the same narrations in the collection of Bukhari and Muslim and many other hadith books. For this reason, Salimi argues it is possible there is a test on the night of *mi'râj*, either directly or indirectly, about the *ummah* of the Prophet. He even says the Prophet might be tested because of his compassion for his *ummah*. Evaluating the decrease from 50 to five times within the framework of testing, Salimi also criticises the approach of Mutazilite scholar Abu al-Husayn (d. 436/1044). According to Abu al-Husayn, it is not permissible to abrogate a religious (*shari'ah*) decree of God without specifying it, making it felt (*al-ish'âr bihi*) or hinting and pointing it out (al-Sālimī 2008). To support this view, Abu al-Husayn mentions verses 4:15 and 65:1, which are related to divorce issues. Abu al-Husayn writes that if this Divine hint does not occur, the addressee thinks the decree will continue and this is not permissible. Salimi flatly denies this. The word *amr* (command) does not require continuation in terms of language, the custom of the community, law / religion, *lughatan*, *urfan* and *shar'an* (al-Sālimī 2008).

Salimi next takes up a different issue on the subject. Is abrogation permissible without offering any equivalent (*badal*)? (al-Sālimī 2008). Saying that Davud al-Zahiri did not allow this, Salimi quotes a couplet and draws attention to the permissibility of abrogation without an equivalent and the possibility that the new provision may be lighter or more severe. He cites many examples in this regard. For example, he says the verse about almsgiving before meeting with the Prophet privately and secretly was abrogated (58:12). Salimi, who opens the subject even more, also encounters issues such as the specification of the general, *takhsis al-umum* (al-Sālimī 2008). As a result, Salimi accepts the notion of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*, but does not clearly state the nature of *mi'râj* (whether it is spirit and body or just a spiritual event).

Like Salimi, other scholars from Oman put *isrâ* and *mi'râj* on the agenda. Sa'id b. Nasir b. Sa'id al-Ghaythi (b.1882 in Zanzibar) (See al-Harithi (2013)) succinctly states in his famous theological poem (*Îdâh al-Tawhid bi-Nur al-Tawhid*) that the Prophet went up to seven layers of the heaven on the night of *mi'râj* and witnessed interesting scenes, but did not see his Lord (*la-qad irtaqa sab'a al-tibaq nabiyyuna fi laylat al-mi'râj minha, fa-ra'â min al-âyat duna ilâhihi*) (al-Ghaythi 1996, p. 107). Al-Ghaythi seems to follow the North African Ibadis. Mansur al-Umani,<sup>24</sup> on the other hand, accepts *mi'râj* in his work called 'Discussion between those who accept and reject the subject of *ru'yat Allah*', but rejects the notion of *visio beautifica* in the context of the Aisha hadith that the Prophet did not see his Lord that night (Mansur al-Umani, Maktaba Shamela Ibadî CD Program: I.16). Sheikh Sa'id al-Qannubi, on the other hand, states there is a clear *nass* (Qur'an verse) about *isrâ* and there is an obvious implication and indication of *mi'râj* in Surah Najm. However, al-Qannubi concentrates on the discussion about the time of the fast to be held on the night of *mi'râj* but is careful because there is no transmission from the Companions on this issue (al-Qannubi 2018). Bakri,<sup>25</sup> a contemporary Ibadî scholar, gives a brief answer to the question in *al-As'ilat wa al-Ajwibat al-Nathriyya* of whether *mi'râj* was realised while awake or asleep, or whether the prayer was made obligatory during *mi'râj*. According to him, there are those who accept it was only a spiritual journey, whereas others say the Prophet was awake with the soul and body during *mi'râj*. Bakri does not neglect to state that the second opinion is held by the majority (al-Bakri n.d., Bakri, Maktaba Shamela Ibadî CD Program: I.92).

Recently, it has been observed there is no single voice among Omani scholars on the issue of *mi'râj*. Another author who preferred the path of Ibn Abi Nabhan instead of his predecessor Salimi is Zakariyya al-Muharrami. Muharrami is a medical doctor and works at Sultan Qaboos Hospital but is actively involved in many religious and cultural debates. Muharrami is one of the rare contemporary writers who deals with the subject of *mi'râj* in detail. Probably, he is also classified by many religious scholars and the establishment in Oman as a rationalist who denies some of the authentic and established hadiths; therefore, he is not acceptable to them. Muharrami rejects the ascension by using classical and modern arguments with semi-philosophical and semi-logical discussions in the contemporary period. He begins his discussion by stating the evidence supporting *mi'râj* contains too many uncertainties. Mentioning verses 3–18 from Surah Najm, he says

these do not prove or point to *mi'râj*. As Aisha stated, according to Muharrami, the claim that the Prophet saw his Lord is the greatest sin. These verses indicate the Prophet saw Gabriel in his original form. Muharrami goes even further to reject the view of the authors of *sirah* and the history that the Prophet used to pray before his prophethood in the cave of Hira (Muharrami 2004). Muharrami claims the verses of Surah Najm show the first revelation began in the Prophet's dream. According to Muharrami, these verses indicate the revelation was frightening to the Prophet rather than the event of *mi'râj*. Muharrami, who warns the interlocutors, also draws attention to the fact the story of the Prophet worshipping in the cave of Hira allows the enemies of religion to use these stories against Islam. According to Muharrami, one of the important problems in the narrations about the cave of Hira is that the revelation received by the Prophet is the result of his long-term asceticism. Thus, Muharrami likens the revelation to interesting and extra-ordinary events experienced by mystics who go through material and spiritual abstinence for a long time. However, the revelation of all the prophets, according to Muharrami, came down suddenly (*fujâiyya*). In this context, he gives the examples of Moses (20:9–12) and Talut (2:247) (Muharrami 2004).

He also rejects the details about the place or tree of *sidrat al-muntaha* mentioned in Surah Najm. Muharrami analyses the *sīrah* and *tafsir* sources about it with a semi-mystical, semi-rational approach. *Sidra* is a *nabq* tree (Ziziphus lotus) that is located between the desert and residential areas (*bayn al-badiya wa al-hadira*) and always keeps its leaves. Because of the tree's strategic location, Muharrami accepts the *sidra* as a metaphor and considers it as the meeting point of the human (the Prophet) and Divine realms (Gabriel) (Muharrami 2004). For this reason, Muharrami does not perceive *sidra* as a final destination where everything after the seventh heaven mentioned in the books of *sirah* and *tafsir* ends. Muharrami is of the opinion that the definitions and explanations made for *sidrat al-muntaha* in the *sīrah* and *tafsir* literatures such as above the head of the throne, the last stop of all client angels and prophets etc. are all fabrications. For him, no one knows these places except God. Muharrami discusses the Jewish convert Ka'b al-Ahbar (d. 32/652-3?) spread the idea that *sidra* is in the seventh heaven among Muslims. Muharrami also indirectly presents Ka'b al-Ahbar al-Yahudi (Muharrami 2004), who was presented as the first Zionist by the Egyptian scholar Abu Rayya (d.1970),<sup>26</sup> as the fabricator of the *mi'râj* reports.<sup>27</sup>

Muharrami deals with the issue in the context of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslimism in the later parts of his chapter. For example, he focuses on the fact that all the prophets that Prophet Muhammad met on the night of *mi'râj* were people adopted as prophets by the Children of Israel. According to him, even the degrees or layers of the prophets in question in heaven indicates they were designed according to a Jewish perspective. At this juncture, Muharrami argues, if this was not so, Adam would not be in the first layer, and Abraham, Moses and Aaron would not be at the top. More interestingly, the fact that prophets such as Shu'ayb, Hud, Salih<sup>28</sup> and even Noah are not mentioned is related to the fact the subject is told from the Jewish perspective (Muharrami 2004). In addition, a different argument put forward by Muharrami about the origin of the *mi'râj* story is that Moses knew the situation of the community of Muhammad better than God. In the footnote of the discussion, by quoting Sheikh Ahmed b. Sa'ud al-Siyabi, he conveys the question of why Moses was chosen as a guide for Muhammad, not Abraham, and points out the fiction of the *mi'râj* story within the framework of *isrâ'iliyyat* (Muharrami 2004). Muharrami, who came to this subject at the end of the discussion, evaluates Moses' position of advising the Prophet as preferring the Jews over the Muslims.

Muharrami prefers to use all kinds of arguments and hermeneutical tools to reject the *mi'râj* reports. Sometimes one feels there is a limit to the polemic. It is possible to see the flexibility and comfort of not approaching the subject via traditional learning of classical Islamic disciplines directly from the respected sheiks or scholars, as in Muharrami's case. There is a serious gap, as wide as the distance between east and west, between the evaluations of Muharrami and the explanations of Sheikh Ahmad Khalili, which will be discussed on the same issues a little later. In this context, it can be remembered that

Muharrami holds the view that the original story of the *mi'râj* is mentioned in the books of Jews and Christians. He cites this information from the work of Jordanian scholar Hasan Thaqqaf (b. 1961). Accordingly, it is also mentioned in the book of Idris (Book of Enoch, *Kitab Ikhnuh*), which is considered as one of the ancient Jewish works. This book, which is still respected by the Abyssinian church, has not been accepted as canonical by contemporary Western churches. Muharrami states some early Muslim scholars and commentators were familiar with this work. Accordingly, just like the expression "And We raised him to a high station" (19:57) mentioned in the Qur'an, the Jewish story of Enoch raises Idris to the seventh heaven (Muharrami 2004). Moreover, Muharrami says that the rivers mentioned in the Jewish story are explained in a way that Arabs can understand, such as Sayhun, Jayhun and the Euphrates. According to Muharrami, the narrators of this story do not know geography either. He says this especially in the context of the rivers mentioned in the reports (Muharrami 2004).

Muharrami also criticises the transmitters of the long *mi'râj* hadith because of the details contained in it (he mentions *Buraq* plus the opening and cleaning of the Prophet's chest with *zamzam* water). For him, these reports and narrations, despite their length and many hermetic details (*wa kathrat tafasiliha al-harmasiyyati*), never mention the great night journey (*isrâ*) mentioned by God in the Qur'an. Muharrami also criticises the narration, which is presented as if the Prophet ascended directly to the seventh heaven from Mecca. On the other hand, these reports imply not only Jewish and Christian influences, but also the influence of Greek philosophy (Muharrami 2004). Muharrami also criticises some people (post-Companion period) in the chain of *isnads* and various versions of the narration, in terms of *jarh* and *ta'dil* (the discipline of criticism, impugment and validation of hadith scholars). For example, Hammad b. Salama (d. 167/784), who is said to be reliable by hadith scholars such as Yahya b. Ma'in, Ahmad b. Hanbal, Abu al-Hasan al-Ijli and Nasâi, is heavily criticised by Muharrami (Muharrami 2004).

Another detail that Muharrami criticises is the encounter and conversation of Prophet Muhammad with other prophets during his heavenly journey. According to Muharrami, these prophets passed away before the Prophet and no dead person will be resurrected until the Day of Judgment. In this context, he, who also mentions some verses (45:26; 3:185), rejects these details totally (Muharrami 2004). It does not go unnoticed that Muharrami sometimes takes a reductionist and literal view of the reading. In our opinion, he simplifies his arguments and makes simple pseudo-logical comments to support the view he previously accepted. To put it another way, he had already made up his mind and the discussion is provided to prove his pre-conceived perception.

We also observe that Muharrami defines the expression *wa dana al-jabbaru rabb al-izzati* ... / "and Glorious God approached ...", which is also narrated in the context of the verse of Surah Najm *thumma dana fa-tadalla* / "he drew near and came down" (53:8), as the ugliest explanation. He does not neglect to record the statement he quoted from Khattabi to support his view. Muharrami also records the opinion of Sheikh Ibn Abi Nabhan that there is neither explicit textual evidence (*nass*) nor a consensus on the issue of *mi'râj* (Muharrami 2004). In summary, it is not a matter of religious creed. He also quotes the commentary of Abu Tahir of Mutazilite and argues it is not permissible for God to mention the smaller miracle (*isrâ*) while evidence of a greater miracle (*mi'râj*) exists (Muharrami 2004). It is important to underline North African Ibadis did not find this argument convincing, a fact that some Omani Ibadis sometimes emphasise.

Muharrami believes the reports and hadiths about *mi'râj* should be rejected based on *ahad* transmission. Similar to Sheikh Jumayyil, Muharrami explains it is not authentic among the community, *annahu laysa min al-sihah inda al-qawmi* (Muharrami 2004). However, it is not clear that Muharrami associates the community (*al-qawm*) with Sunnis or Ibadis. Even so, Muharrami provides many other arguments to reject these reports. Some of them are: the fact that prayer was reduced from 50 to five times means there is *badâ* (change of the thought which is impossible for God); the Jewish role in the blending of the narrations; and the creation and dissemination of a whole from a Jewish perspective necessitates the

rejection of the *mi'râj* narration. Even more interestingly, according to Muharrami, it is claimed that telling *mi'râj* as it is in the books of *sirah* and tafsir will spoil religious feelings and spirituality (Muharrami 2004). It is observed that Muharrami evaluates the subject mostly according to the positivist perception of the contemporary period. The rule that one should use the narration if possible (*i'mal*) rather than neglect it (*ihmal*) completely disappears in Muharrami's dry rationalist approach.

The grand mufti of Oman, Sheikh Ahmad b. Hamad al-Khalili (b. 1943), also extensively covers this subject in his weekly talks. Since the Sheikh's exegesis does not include the relevant verses, the subject is dealt with obliquely and in a completely different context in his *Jawahir al-Qur'an*. Sheikh Khalili indirectly addresses verse 17:1, which deals with the expression *abd* (servant) in a theological and spiritual framework (al-Khalili 2004). He sincerely and openly answers the questions asked about *isrâ* and *mi'râj* in the program on Oman TV titled *su'âl ahl al-dhikr*/"Question for Someone Who Knows". We are not sure whether the opinion of the official mufti of Oman is binding on all Ibadis, but it is impossible for Sheikh Khalili not to know about the different approaches of Omani scholars on the subject. As we will discuss in detail below, our first impression of his response to various questions related to *isrâ* and *mi'râj* is that he tried hard to find the middle ground away from any dogmatic sharpness.<sup>29</sup> Some of the 16 questions asked to Sheikh Khalili are: Can you evaluate the time and historical context of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*? Are *isrâ* and *mi'râj* confirmed and fixed by the main sources of Islam? Is belief in them (*isrâ* and *mi'râj*) considered to be a necessity of religion, *darurat al-diniyyah*? Could we use modern scientific data to calculate the time of this event and how accurate would such an approach be for the miracle? What is the ruling of fasting on the days of *isrâ* and *mi'râj*? What are the lessons that Muslims will learn from *isrâ* and *mi'râj*? What is the authenticity of the speculations about the characteristics of *Buraq* (mount) and this mount asking for intercession from the Prophet? Is this heavenly journey just spiritual or is it spiritual and physical? Is it true what the Prophet witnessed on the night of *mi'râj* or are these superstitions or fabrications from the transmitters and narrators? It is also noted that most of these reports come from Ibn Abbas. Therefore, the question that arises is the reliability of different and sometimes contradictory narrations to discussion; they also ask about the Sheikh's general approach to this issue. It is also observed that different questions and doubts about *mi'râj* have been expressed. For example, the question of the existence or possibility of different *mi'râj* events from the Qur'anic expression *nazlatan ukhra* (another descending) in Surah Najm is one of the issues discussed in detail. Also, did the Prophet lead the other prophets in prayer during his heavenly journey? If so, are these prophets still alive? What exactly is *mi'râj*, what is its nature, how did it happen and what is the religious situation of those who do not accept it? Sheikh Khalili was given the opportunity to evaluate the subject in all its aspects in the light of well-thought-out questions (al-Khalili and al-Qannubi 2004).<sup>30</sup> Khalili handled the issue well with his knowledge and considered all the alternatives in several episodes of the program.

Sheikh Khalili begins his discussion by saying *isrâ* is clearly stated and the notion of *mi'râj* is implied in the Qur'an, so there is no dispute or conflict. As for determining the exact time, Khalili says, there is no evidence from the Qur'an or Sunnah, so it is difficult to verify the exact timing. However, he does not neglect to mention the general approach to the issue of time. It is safe to assume one can re-write *sirah* text based on the Sheikh's reply to the first question only. According to Khalili, who gives the general historical perspective from his comprehensive and cautious explanation, *isrâ* and *mi'râj* took place before the migration, *hijra*. We will not go into every detail given by the Sheikh but can easily say it is eye-opening. Regarding the religious position of the person who does not accept *isrâ* and *mi'râj*, Sheikh Khalili makes a straightforward distinction. He, for example, declares someone as a disbeliever, even *kufri shirk*, if they do not accept *isrâ*, because there is a clear text about it. Regarding *mi'râj*, he says this is a situation close to an explicit text (*nass*). For the Sheikh, when Surah Najm and various hadiths are considered, there is cumulative evidence for *mi'râj*. The expression he uses in this regard is: *takâdu takunu sarihatan* (close to

clear evidence) (al-Khalili and al-Qannubi 2004). For this reason, he calls the one who rejects *mi'râj* as a sinner (*fasiq*) but not a disbeliever (*kafir*). According to the Sheikh, whoever denies *isrâ* is an unbeliever, but a person who denies *mi'râj* is not faithless/an infidel. He even states those who accept *mi'râj* as a spiritual event and interpret it that way are not sinful (*fasiq*) (al-Khalili and al-Qannubi 2004). With this approach, Sheikh Khalili also puts the negative discourses of some Ibadi scholars about *mi'râj* into a framework. His answer on whether *isrâ* and *mi'râj* should be explained by the laws of nature or accepted as a miracle is rich in content. In short, since the prophethood of the Prophet was general, the miracle he showed must be general; in this context, Sheikh Khalili argues the greatest miracle of the Prophet is the Qur'an. We will not dwell on the indirect explanations of Sheikh Khalili, who deals with the subject in the context of salvation history a little more. From these answers, which contain many details, we observe that Sheikh Khalili accepted *isrâ* and *mi'râj*. Contrary to some Omani scholars who were more cautious about *mi'râj*, we can easily say the Sheikh, who represents the official religion at the highest level, resembles the North African Ibadis in his approach. However, he is clear on the impossibility of the issue of *ru'yat Allah* (al-Khalili and al-Qannubi 2004), which is the hallmark of Ibadi theology, and he maintains a good balance in his evaluations.

#### 4. Conclusions

Ibadi sources do not give much credence to the events of *isrâ* and *mi'râj* despite the fact it is one of the longest narrations in hadith and *sīrah* sources in Muslim tradition. Presumably, the *mi'râj* incident includes the issue of *ru'yat Allah* in some narrations, which may be a reason for this silence. However, some people, such as Hud b. Muhakkam, Atfayyish, Muharrami and Sheikh Ahmah Khalili, deal with the issue quite extensively. Others focus only on the time of *isrâ* and *mi'râj* and the special aspects of some events that took place on this night. Salimi, who brings up the subject in many of his works, is a good example of this approach in this regard. In the contemporary period, we witness that some Ibadi scholars prefer not to go into any detail about *isrâ* and *mi'râj* although they generally accept them in principle. Bayyud's approach is a good illustration in this regard. The North African Ibadis (Hud and Atfayyish), who deal with the subject exhaustively, focus on the narrative aspect whereas Omani Ibadis read these notions more from juristic and theological points of view. In this context, the issue of abrogation and comparison between smaller or bigger miracles constitute the most remarkable arguments among Omanis. If we specify using Wansbrough's classification, North African Ibadis read *isrâ* and *mi'râj* events from a *haggadic* perspective (*sīrah* and *tarikh*) whereas Omani Ibadis read them from *halakhic* (*fiqh*) point of view.

As stated in the introduction of this article, Ibadis do not display a monolithic approach, especially regarding the notion of *mi'râj*. We saw in Sheikh Jumayyil's analysis that the hadiths and reports about *mi'râj* are not authentic, even in the eyes of Sunnis/*annahu laysa min al-sahih inda al-qawmi*. This is mentioned later by some Omani Ibadis as extra evidence to prove their own stance. In the light of our analysis, it becomes clear this is not correct even if the community (*al-qawm*) is referred to as Sunnis. It has been observed that scholars and intellectuals, such as Ibn Abi Nabhan and Muharrami, who openly reject *mi'râj*, use all kinds of arguments and sometimes engage in rational and polemical discussions. Atfayyish, on the other hand, reconstructs almost a new *isrâ* and *mi'râj* narrative, re-writes *sīrah* and uses each report to support these two events to create a pastoral and confessional *sīrah* text. There are Ibadis who consider these two events (*isrâ* and *mi'râj*) as *muttafaqun alayh* (agreed upon by consensus) or *mujma' alayh* (agreed upon) because of the *mi'râj* narrations that are often mentioned in famous hadith collections. In other words, Ibadis' perceptions of *mi'râj* encompass a wide spectrum. As can be seen here, some Ibadi scholars, such as Atfayyish, take a different approach. We wonder if this difference is an Ibadi distinction or a specific feature of Atfayyish himself, which is the subject of another article. However, with a few exceptions, North African Ibadis' readings of *Siyar* seems to reflect the general framework.

In the post-Atfayyish period, more cautious and precise explanations are prioritised rather than the details of the narrations, which narrow the rich connotations of *isrâ* and *mi'râj* in the eyes of the Ibadis. Nevertheless, we do not see frequent discussions about the importance and usefulness of *mi'râj* in modern Ibadi circles, which are similar to the philosophical and mystical discussions developed by Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) and Said Nursi (d. 1960). In addition, we see that the alternative meaning of the phrase *sa-nuriyahu* in the first verse of Surah Isrâ does not come to the fore in Ibadi sources. While the first meaning of the verse is “showing Our signs to him (the Prophet)”, the alternative meaning of the verse is to show or introduce him (the Prophet) as one of God’s signs/proofs to the inhabitants of the heavens (Waheed 2018, pp. 99–113), which is not covered in the Ibadi works. Moreover, the discussions about the notion of prophecy, which are built on the alternative meaning, do not enter the agenda of the Ibadis. As Iqbal stated, they do not comment on the Prophet’s heavenly journey (going to the top, *sidrat al-muntaha*) and coming back to his community out of love and concern for them (Waheed 2018). On the other hand, considering the literal meaning of *masjid al-aqsa* (the farthest mosque), we do not often come across narrations from Ibadis about the mosque that is the farthest in the Hijaz, rather than in Jerusalem. According to this approach, the farthest mosque is in Ji’rane instead of *bayt al-maqdis* in Jerusalem, because it is mentioned in the narrations that the Prophet wore the pilgrimage garment (*ihram*) there (Yilmaz 2016, pp. 33–50). The Ibadis do not engage in such discussions (except for Muharrami’s indirect dealing with some of them), which we can call a modern or Orientalist reading of *sîrah*. As it is known, there was no specific mosque in Jerusalem during the Prophet’s heavenly journey (*isrâ* and *mi'râj*). The famous Indian scholar Muhammad Hamidullah, therefore, understands the expression *masjid al-aqsa* as a spiritual rather than physical place. We certainly do not see such an argument on the subject in the Ibadis’ writings. Similarly, we do not see the narration and discussions developed in some Shi’ite-leaning sources (as in the history of Yaqubi), such as the building of *masjid al-aqsa* to replace the Ka’ba (holy shrine) by the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik b Marwan to prevent Muslims from going on pilgrimage to Mecca, in contemporary Ibadi works (Yilmaz 2016, pp. 33–50). In summary, the Ibadis do not have a single approach to the *mi'râj* event, as they do to the notion of the return of Jesus, *nuzul Isa*. It is known that all Ibadis exhibit consensus on the issue of *ru'yat Allah*. However, the *mi'râj* incident, in which rich and different perspectives can be seen, is one of the best examples of Ibadi pluralism in *sîrah* and exegetical traditions. It is also a fact that some Ibadis from Oman, unlike the Ibadis of North Africa, reject the *mi'râj* narrations altogether, while others accept *mi'râj* in a general framework without going into detail.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> From the notion of destiny to Imamate, every single dogmatic issue is also discussed in *sîrah* context (See Al Salimi 2009, pp. 475–514).
- <sup>2</sup> Hud also mentions different aspects of *isrâ* and *mi'râj* in different parts of his exegesis. In order not to distract from the subject, we only focus on verse 17:1 and the verses of Surah Najm.
- <sup>3</sup> Similar to Hud, Ibn Abi Zamînîn’s exegetical work is also a shortened version of Yahya’s exegesis.
- <sup>4</sup> Hud mentions verse 4:10—“Indeed, those who unjustly consume orphans’ wealth [in fact] consume nothing but fire into their bellies. And they will be burned in a blazing Hell!”—which is known to have been revealed in the Madinan period.
- <sup>5</sup> According to Hud’s narration, the sequence of these events was Prophet Muhammad’s journey somewhere between Prophet Adam in the first stage and prophets Jesus and John in the second stage. However, many narrations in major sources deal with these scenes in later stages. Hud seems to follow the order in Yahya b. Sallam’s narration.
- <sup>6</sup> The original statement by Moses is: *wa-hadha akram ala Allah minni* (al-Hawwârî 2005). Hud also mentions the anecdote in which Moses cried because Prophet Muhammad’s ummah would outnumber Moses’ community (al-Hawwârî 2005).

- 7 Hud gives a lot of information about *sidrat al-muntaha*. We won't dwell on this too much since it's outside the scope of our topic.
- 8 74:31—"... none knows the forces of your Lord except He ..."
- 9 53:18—"He certainly saw of the greatest signs of his Lord".
- 10 Atfayyish, *Himyan al-Zad*, Muscat: Wuzarat al-Turath al-Qawmi wa al-Thaqafa 1991, IX(2).6–81.
- 11 It is useful to remember the linguistic analyses he made about the word *laylan* as an indefinite article (*nakra*) in verse 17:1 and the comparison of *rûya-ru'yat* and *qurbâ-qurbat* (Atfayyish 1991).
- 12 For example, in the narration, the expression *yahwi bihi* is used while describing *Buraq's* departure and Atfayyish says it is a metaphor for going fast. Similarly, he uses the metaphorical expression (*majaz al-mursal*) while describing the punishment scene about those who take interest and usury (Atfayyish 1991).
- 13 Atfayyish rarely uses the word *mi'râj* in his commentary titled *Taysir al-Tafsir* (See Atfayyish 2018, Taysir: VIII.118–22). In Surah Najm, on the other hand, he uses the word *mi'râj* only in the first verse in a different context (Atfayyish 1991). However, he took care not to use the word *mi'râj* in the sections about the heavenly journey of the Prophet.
- 14 For detailed information about this notion, see (Sertkaya 2022, p. 15).
- 15 Atfayyish states *Buraq* is neither male nor female, it was not born and does not give birth. He describes its saddle and bridle being made from precious ores. Before Prophet Muhammad, Atfayyish says Prophet Ibrahim got on *Buraq* and went to Hijaz (Atfayyish 1991).
- 16 For example, Atfayyish gives information about the door through which the Prophet entered *bayt al-maqdis*, and the number of rows formed by the prophets and messengers behind Prophet Muhammad while leading the prayers there. Atfayyish even mentions Isaac standing in line to Abraham's left (Atfayyish 1991).
- 17 Atfayyish also deals with some other topics, such as *sab'an min al-mathani* (seven most repeated verses) and fasting in Ramadan (Atfayyish 1991).
- 18 Ibrahim b. Umar Bayyud, *Fi Rihabi al-Qur'an*, Ghardaya-Algeria: Jam'iyyat al-Turath 2012. We do not have approximately half of Bayyud's commentary (from *Sûrat al-Baqara* to *Sûrat al-Isrâ* until the verse 70), so there is not much about the exegesis of 17:1. See details about this tafsir in (Albayrak 2020).
- 19 For detailed information on these scholars, see Nasir (2006), pp. 200, 206, 241–42.
- 20 Most probably, the subject of *ru'yat Allah* is mentioned in the context of *mi'râj*, therefore it may not have been included. Secondly, early Omani scholars did not deal with the issue of *mi'râj* in their works. Out of respect for his people from Oman, he did not mention *mi'râj*.
- 21 Ibn Abi Nabhan gives an interesting example. Sufis make a comparison by stating a person who mentions and remembers the name of Allah day and night will witness amazing (worldly and celestial) things every seven days and up to 40 earthly with serious asceticism, *zuhd*. If mystics witness such scenes with their hearts, what will the prophets see, even Prophet Muhammad whose eyes sleep, but whose heart does not sleep? He does not ignore the Prophetic experience in the state of being awake (*yaqazatan*) by saying what the Prophet sees. However, he firmly rejects the physical *mi'râj* journey to the heavens (p. 357?).
- 22 Nasir b. Abi Nabhan, *Kitabu al-Tawhid* (manuscript), in the private library of Muhammed b. Ahmad al-Busaidi, Muscat no: 1858, pp. 198–99.
- 23 Muhaqqiq Khalili repeats the points mentioned by Sheikh ibn Abi Nabhan in his famous book called *Tamhid Qawaid al-Iman*. See al-Khalili (2011), 1.196–200.
- 24 We have not found his full name and title. He should not be conflated with Mansur al-Umani, who belonged to the Kharusi tribe and whose full name was Mansur b. Nasir al-Farisi (d. 1976). Mansur b. Nasir's famous work is the poetic creed text titled *al-Aqd al-Farid fi Khalis al-Tawhid* (See Muhammad Salih Nasir, *Mu'jam A'lam al-Ibadiyya*, 455; Mansur al-Umani n.d.).
- 25 It can also be a nickname.
- 26 See details in (Albayrak 2000), p. 137.
- 27 For the evaluation of these individuals, see Sertkaya (2022, p. 3).
- 28 Because they (Salih and Hud) are not mentioned in Biblical texts, Western scholars call them Arabian prophets.
- 29 Ahmad Khalili, similar to Sheikh al-Ghaythi, who originally comes from Zanzibar, follows the North African Ibadi understanding. This is a side issue, but one should be aware that Zanzibari scholars who have strong attachments with Oman hold similar views about certain issue with North African Ibadis. One reason may be, unlike Omani Ibadis, North African Ibadis live heavily among Malikis and Zanzibari Ibadis live among Shafi'ites (Sunnis).
- 30 Interviews with Sheikh Khalili are available in the Maktaba Shamela Ibadi CD program and on YouTube. See al-Khalili, Ahmad b. Hamad -Sa'id b. Mabruk al-Qannubi, *Sual Ahl al-Dhikr (Halaqat mazidah)/Barnamaj 'su'al ahl al-dhikr'*, Oman Television (Maktaba Shamela Ibadi CD Program), 2004, <https://youtu.be/Fbd6O6FttUg>; <https://youtu.be/pkvi35JzDDI>; <https://youtu.be/LJq1LRKdDpQ> (accessed on 1 August 2022).



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