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Surah Al-Isra

The Night Journey · Makki · 111 ayat — reflections on
surah 17 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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Surah Al-Isra

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الإسراء — Al-Isra, “The Night Journey”. Surah 17 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 111 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/17/.

ONE

The surah in brief

Marking the Prophet's Night Journey, the surah sets out core moral commandments, honors the dignity of the children of Adam, and affirms the Qur'an as guidance while warning against arrogance.

Al-Isra opens with the night journey that carried the Prophet from the Sacred Mosque to the farthest mosque, glorifying the God who transcends every limit, and it moves through the history and moral responsibility of Bani Israel. Its center is a charter of personal ethics (roughly 17:22–39): worship of Allah alone, tender care of parents in their old age, giving kin and the needy their due, avoiding both miserliness and waste, shunning fornication and unjust killing, honoring the orphan's wealth, keeping promises, and refusing to speak of what one has no knowledge. It affirms that all creation glorifies its Maker, that the Qur'an is a healing and mercy yet only loss for wrongdoers, and it answers the deniers' challenge with the truth that even jinn and men together could not produce its like.

OCCASIONS OF REVELATION

Why it was revealed

These are the occasions (asbāb al-nuzūl) that the authentic collections narrate for verses of this surah. An occasion explains a verse; it does not limit its meaning.

Qur'an 17:85

Some Jews asked the Prophet about the Spirit. He stood silent while revelation came, then recited "They ask you concerning the Spirit. Say: its knowledge is with my Lord."

"When the divine inspiration had been revealed, the Prophet (ﷺ) said. "They ask you (O, Muhammad) concerning the Spirit"

'Abdullah ibn Mas'ud · Sahih al-Bukhari 4721

Qur'an 17:110

The verse was revealed while the Prophet was still hiding in Makkah. When he led his companions in prayer and recited aloud, the pagans who heard would abuse the Qur'an, its Revealer and its bearer, so he was told to recite neither loudly nor too quietly.

"This Verse was revealed while Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) was hiding himself in Mecca."

Ibn 'Abbas · Sahih al-Bukhari 4722

TWO

Its themes

- The night journey and Allah's transcendence
- A charter of personal ethics
- Honoring parents
- The Qur'an's inimitability and healing
- Accountability and humility
- All creation glorifies Allah

THREE

Key verses

Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him, and that ye be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honour.

Qur'an 17:23

Allah joins worship of Him with kindness to parents, commanding that in their old age you never say to them even 'uff' nor rebuke them. Reflect that impatience with aging parents is set right beside idolatry as a thing to guard against.

And, out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility, and say: "My Lord! bestow on them thy Mercy even as they cherished me in childhood."

Qur'an 17:24

'Lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy, and say: My Lord, have mercy on them as they raised me small.' Reflect on repaying the helplessness of your infancy with gentleness toward their helplessness in age.

And pursue not that of which thou hast no knowledge; for every act of hearing, or of seeing or of (feeling in) the heart will be enquired into (on the Day of Reckoning).

Qur'an 17:36

'Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge — the hearing, the sight, and the heart will all be questioned.'
Reflect before you repeat a claim or judge a matter: can I be held answerable for asserting this?

The seven heavens and the earth, and all beings therein, declare His glory: there is not a thing but celebrates His praise; And yet ye understand not how they declare His glory! Verily He is Oft-Forbear, Most Forgiving!

Qur'an 17:44

The seven heavens, the earth, and all within them glorify Allah — there is nothing that does not exalt Him, though you do not perceive their praise. Reflect that you move through a universe already in worship, and align yourself with it.

We send down (stage by stage) in the Qur'an that which is a healing and a mercy to those who believe: to the unjust it causes nothing but loss after loss.

Qur'an 17:82

'We send down of the Qur'an that which is healing and mercy for the believers' — and only loss for the wrongdoers. Turn to it as a remedy, and reflect that whether it heals or harms depends on the heart that meets it.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Sūrat al-Isrā' belongs to the middle-to-late Makkan period, a stretch when the young community was under mounting pressure and the Prophet ﷺ needed both consolation and a clear restatement of the message. Its more traditional name among the early Muslims was Banī Isrā'īl, "The Children of Israel," because after the opening scene it turns almost at once to the fortunes of that earlier nation as a mirror for the Arabs of Makkah. The name al-Isrā', "The Night Journey," comes from the very first verse, which speaks of God carrying His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque in Jerusalem.

That single opening āyah sets the whole tone. It does not narrate the ascension through the heavens; it fixes on the earthly leg of the journey and frames it as a demonstration — "that We might show him some of Our signs." The surah as a whole is preoccupied with signs, with sight and insight, and with the honour God confers on those He chooses. Its mood is majestic and morally serious. It moves between soaring affirmations of God's transcendence and very concrete instructions about how a human being should live, so that the reader feels the distance between the Lord of the heavens and the ordinary duties of a son toward his parents or a person toward his own tongue and hands.

Classical scholars note that the surah opens with *tasbīḥ* — "Glory be to Him" — and closes with *taḥmīd* and *takbīr*, praise of the God who has taken no son and needs no helper. Between those bookends of pure glorification sits a sustained argument that the same God who is utterly beyond creation is also the One who guides, commands, warns, and honours. Ibn 'Āshūr reads the surah as building the case that revelation and moral law flow from God's oneness, and that rejecting the Prophet ﷺ is of a piece with the older rebellions of nations before.

How the surah unfolds

The surah begins with the Night Journey and immediately pivots to Mūsā and the Scripture given to the Children of Israel (17:2), "a guidance for the Children of Israel," so that the reader understands the new revelation as the continuation of an old covenant. It then delivers a compressed prophecy of that nation's two great episodes of corruption and the humbling that followed each (17:4–8), a warning held up to the Quraysh: what happened to a favoured people who grew arrogant can happen again. The lesson is sealed with a hinge verse — "Indeed, this Qur'ān guides to that which is most upright" (17:9) — which turns the whole discourse toward the present revelation.

From there the surah reflects on human nature: how people pray for good yet call down evil in haste (17:11), how the day and night are signs, and how every person's record is fastened to their own neck (17:13–14). This flows into one of the most concentrated ethical passages in the Qur'ān, a decalogue-like sequence of commands (17:22–39) that opens and closes with the worship of God alone. In between come kindness to parents

in their old age, the rights of kin and the poor and the traveller, the prohibition of miserliness and of wastefulness, the ban on killing children out of fear of poverty, the gravity of zinā, the sanctity of life, the trust owed to orphans, honesty in weight and measure, and the warning not to pursue what one has no knowledge of. Ibn Kathir and others treat these verses as the moral heart of the surah — a portable law code for the individual conscience.

The middle of the surah returns to argument with the deniers of the Hereafter and the objectors to the Prophet ﷺ. It answers their demand for miracles by pointing out that earlier nations who received the signs they asked for were destroyed when they rejected them (17:59). It recounts the refusal of Iblīs to bow to Adam and his vow to mislead the children of Adam (17:61–65), exposing the unseen adversary behind human heedlessness. It reminds the reader how quickly people turn to God at sea and forget Him on land (17:67). And it affirms the dignity God has placed in the human being: "We have certainly honoured the children of Adam" (17:70).

As it closes, the surah steadies the Prophet ﷺ against the pressure to compromise (17:73–75), consoles him over the schemes to drive him out, and prescribes the pillars of steadfastness — the prayer at its appointed times and the recitation of the Qur'ān at dawn (17:78–79), including the promise of the praised station, al-maqām al-maḥmūd. It declares that when truth comes falsehood vanishes (17:81), that the Qur'ān is healing and mercy for the believers, that the human being was given only a little knowledge (17:85), and that if humans and jinn combined they could not produce its like

(17:88). It ends by refusing the parade of miracles the deniers demand and returning to the pure praise of the God who has no son and no partner (17:111).

The major themes, in depth

The first great theme is the unity and transcendence of God as the source of moral order. The surah frames the entire ethical decalogue between two statements of *tawḥīd* — "do not set up with God another deity" (17:22) and, after the commands, "do not set up with God another deity" again (17:39). This is deliberate. Al-Saʿdī observes that every duty toward parents, neighbours, orphans, and the vulnerable is rooted in and sealed by the worship of the One. Morality is not a free-standing code; it is the practical shape that submission to God takes in a human life. To honour one's aging mother, to refrain from a whispered "uff" of impatience (17:23), is presented as an act of the same devotion that forbids idolatry.

A second theme is the accountability of the individual soul. "Every human being's record We have fastened to his own neck" (17:13), and on the Day of Resurrection each will be handed a book and told, "Read your record; sufficient is yourself against you this Day as accountant" (17:14). No one bears another's burden (17:15), and no nation is destroyed until a messenger has been sent — God does not punish without warning. This turns the surah's historical warnings inward: the fate of the Children of Israel is not a story about others but a template for personal reckoning.

A third theme is the honouring of the human being alongside a clear-eyed view of human weakness. God has carried the children of Adam on land and sea, provided them good things, and favoured them over much of creation (17:70) — a verse the scholars cite as a foundation for human dignity. Yet the same surah portrays humanity as hasty (17:11), despairing when touched by hardship and exultant when given ease (17:83), and forgetful of God the moment danger passes (17:67). The honour is real, but it is a trust to be lived up to, not a possession to be presumed upon. Iblīs's vow to seize the children of Adam "except a few" (17:62) names the struggle that this dignity must survive.

A fourth theme is the Qur'ān itself as guidance, healing, and inimitable sign. Against every demand for a spectacular miracle, the surah keeps returning the reader to the recitation in hand. It "guides to that which is most upright" (17:9), it is "healing and mercy for the believers" (17:82), and the famous challenge of taḥaddī is stated here in its widest form: were all humans and jinn to unite, they could not bring the like of it (17:88). The Prophet ﷺ is instructed to hold to the night vigil and the dawn recitation as his strength — the surah answers the craving for signs by pointing to the sign already given and to the discipline of worship that keeps a heart anchored to it.

Points of reflection

Al-Isrā' asks the reader to see worship and ethics as one fabric. It is easy to imagine faith as a matter of belief and ritual, and manners as a separate social skill; the surah refuses that split. The measure of one's tawḥīd is partly how one speaks to an

aging parent, whether one gives the relative and the traveller their due, whether one shrinks from both stinginess and waste, and whether one refuses to say about anything, "I know," when one does not (17:36). To live by this surah is to let the oneness of God reorganise the smallest daily choices.

It also teaches a sober humility before knowledge. "You have been given of knowledge only a little" (17:85) is a corrective to arrogance in every age — the more one learns, the more one should feel the vastness of what remains hidden. Paired with the command not to follow what one has no certainty about (17:36), it forms a discipline of intellectual honesty: speak within the limits of what you actually know, and leave the rest to the One whose knowledge has no edge.

Finally, the surah calls the believer to steadfastness anchored in prayer. When the world pressures the Prophet ﷺ to bend even a little (17:73–74), the remedy prescribed is not argument but the standing prayer at its times and the recitation at dawn (17:78–79). The reader is invited to make the same choice: to meet pressure and doubt not with panic but with the appointed acts of devotion that keep a soul upright, trusting that "truth has come and falsehood has departed; indeed falsehood is ever bound to depart" (17:81).

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Treat your parents' old age as sacred; never let even a sigh of impatience escape you.
2. Speak and judge only within what you truly know — your senses will testify.
3. Balance your spending between stinginess and waste, as the surah commands.
4. Meet the Qur'an as a healing, and let its mercy reach you by softening your heart to it.

Where this reading draws from. Ibn Kathir, al-Sa'di, al-Qurtubi, al-Tabari. A summary is not a tafsir: for the verse-by-verse treatment go to the works themselves, or to the close studies at deen2u.com/tadabbur/.