

## THE PILGRIMAGE TO MAKKAH

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Islām considers itself to be the very last religion to be revealed to mankind before the Day of Judgment, and the Prophet Muḥammad to be the very last of the long line of Prophets and Messengers beginning with Ādam. Hence, in many ways, Islām sums up in itself and in its Prophet many of the qualities and attitudes of previous revelations, just as the Prophet is a kind of synthesis of the long line of prophets stretching back in time to Ādam. The pure monotheistic message of Islām — the Oneness of the Divinity — is but the last reaffirmation of what previous divine messages had said before they had been clouded over by forgetfulness and worldliness. Within the Semitic cycle of monotheism, Islām pictures itself as reaffirming the Abrahamic message, which had been delimited, in Judaism, through the concept of the Chosen People and, in Christianity, through the teachings in Trinitarianism. The resulting ethnocentrism of Judaism impeded the expansion of the monotheistic ideas on the Divinity from reaching those who were outside the pale of the Chosen People. The Christocentrism of Christianity, in clouding over the absoluteness of God by emphasizing the divinity of the Christ, comprised the transcendent nature of the Absolute, and through its Trinitarian teachings, made the Oneness of ultimate reality suspect. By insisting on the pure monotheism of Abraham as in itself a message of salvation, without regard to any Chosen People or to any divine incarnation, Islām intended to reaffirm the primordial religion of mankind and to restore to the Divinity its character of salvific absoluteness in itself.

Nowhere is this Abrahamic connection of Islām more evident than in the Pilgrimage (*al ḥajj*), the fifth and final pillar of the Religion, which is binding on those adults who can perform it toward the end of their lives.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah celebrates in its multiple rituals a whole series of events connected with the mission of Abraham, his wife Hājar (or Hagar), and their offspring Ishmael (Isma'īl). If we stop to examine the different elements in the Pilgrimage that have to do with Abraham and his family, we realize, more and more, that the claim of Islām to be a reaffirmation of the Abrahamic way is based, not merely on the sacred words of the Qur'ān, which count for much already, but also on an ancient, sacred oral tradition that the memories of the nomadic Arabs kept alive in pre-Islāmic times along with their own observance of the rituals surrounding the Ka'bah and the Pilgrimage to that ancient sanctuary. Let us remember, in passing, that Judaism and Christianity are connected to Abraham through Isaac, while Islām is connected to him through Ishmael. Indeed, the northern Arabs consider him their progenitor, and the Prophet, like the other Arabs in his day, had an ancestral line that took him back to Ishmael. That lineage was accompanied by a mass of traditions and stories surrounding the Ka'bah that the pre-Islāmic Arabs, the so-called pagan Arabs, transmitted as part of their historical and religious connections to that ancient edifice.

The Islāmic tradition would have it that the prototype of the Ka'bah is not earthly but celestial in nature. As a matter of fact, there are a number of otherworldly Ka'bahs, each one the center of its place of existence, just as the Ka'bah at Makkah is the center of the earth. The ultimate prototype of the Ka'bah, as Ibn al 'Arabī and other Muslim sages put it, is the Divine Throne (*al 'Arsh*), around which the angelic hosts revolve with a circumambulation that is in itself the model of the circumambulation of the earthly Ka'bah by the believers in Makkah. The Ka'bah in Makkah is accordingly a symbol of the Divine Throne, which is both the Origin and Center of the universe. Now, the Ka'bah in certain cosmogonic myths of some Muslims is the origin of earthly existence in time, being a kind of first crystallization of matter; and it is the center of the earth, its navel, since it is situated on the axis connecting it to the Divine Throne.

According to certain ancient traditions, Ādam was the first to raise the foundations of the Ka'bah, which then fell into disrepair after the Deluge. But in his time, the sacred sanctuary was in the form of a tent made out of a brilliant jewel-like substance, and the Black Stone, which was then a seat for him, was a white jewel-like substance, turning black only later on, when the sins of those touching it began to leave their imprint on its color. This myth, as we can discern, seeks to convey something of the freshness of primordial mankind in its approach to the spiritual life: the luminosity of the ancient sanctuary and its famous stone both bespeak a time when passion and ignorance had not yet transformed mankind and its temples into opaque and darker

substances. Later on, the hearts of men would be like stones, and so would their temples, like the Ka'bah.

That is one ancient story on the origins of the Ka'bah. Another one tells us that Abraham and his son Ishmael either repaired the Ka'bah or else constructed it for the first time.\* You will recall that Abraham took his spouse Hagar and their son Ishmael to Arabia and left them there. Hagar's racing seven times between the hills of Şafā and Marwah is commemorated as one of the elements of the Pilgrimage, the *Sa'y* ("the running"), when the pilgrims reduplicate her efforts in search of water for her young son Ishmael. The well of Zamzam, the water of which still flows for the use of all pilgrims, was the celestial response to Hagar. One account has it that Gabriel's heel uncovered the well just in time to save Ishmael. Both Ishmael and his mother Hagar lie buried only some feet away from one of the corners of the Ka'bah. Within the sanctuary are a number of buildings and spots that tradition points to as being places where Abraham himself stood during the building of the Ka'bah, his footprints still visible in the soft stone, or where he and Ishmael mixed the mortar for the building.

The actual institution of the Pilgrimage goes back to Abraham's time, the only things introduced by the pre-Islāmic Arab pagans being the idols, which were to be found in the Ka'bah itself. Apart from destroying the idols — all 360 of them — and prohibiting the circumambulation of the Ka'bah naked, the Prophet merely purified the Pilgrimage rituals of their paganistic veneer and restored them to their Abrahamic state. There is no adequate reason why one should doubt the antiquity of the rituals connected with the Pilgrimage nor their relations to Abraham and Ishmael. When the Arabs appeared on the world scene in the seventh century, their language was the newest of the Semitic tongues, as far as historical events relating to Islām were concerned, but it was also the most archaic of all the Semitic languages, closer to the mother-Semitic than the rest. They could not have preserved intact their archaic language over the centuries while forgetting their attachments to the Ka'bah. The memory of the Arabs, which served them as the repository of their oral literature and tribal histories, was not about to forget such decisive figures as Abraham and Ishmael, who play cyclical roles in the existence of the Arab nomads. If this is so, the the Ka'bah is the most ancient sanctuary still in use at the present day, and the Pilgrimage to Makkah the most ancient ritual still in operation. The Qur'ān says: Lo! the first Sanctuary appointed for mankind was that at Makkah, a blessed place, a guidance to the

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\* This is not just "another ancient story" on a par with the first. It is a report by the Qur'ān (2: 125-28) — Ed.

peoples; wherein are plain memorials (of Allah's guidance); the place where Abraham stood up to pray; and whosoever entereth it is safe. And pilgrimage to the House is a duty unto Allah for mankind, for him who can find a way thither" (3:96-97).

In the symbolism of the Pilgrimage, there is a kind of meeting with the Divinity that is an anticipation of the Day of Judgement, and the fact that pilgrims tend to go on the Pilgrimage towards the end of their lives and even consider dying in Makkah as a benediction — all this points to a kind of judgmental nature to this pillar of Islām. The unsewn pilgrim's dress, consisting of two plain pieces of white cloth, and the ascetical restrictions imposed upon all those who enter the sacred precincts indicate a state of confrontation with the Divine Presence that obliterates all the social hierarchies of the profane world: external distinctions disappear, the equality of all immortal souls face-to-face with their Creator is what now appears. And since, in that Divine Presence, the taking of lives, through hunting or uprooting of plants that have also a life of their own, and engaging in sensual pleasures would be out of the question, the Law prohibits all of that by way of keeping the believers within a framework of receptivity towards celestial graces.

The Ka'bah itself, as the center of the Islāmic world and the converging point for all the daily ritual prayers, is really the heart of Islām. Ibn al-'Arabī compares the Ka'bah to the heart of the believer and the circumambulating pilgrims to his thoughts: just as there are good and bad pilgrims who circumambulate the Ka'bah, there are good and bad thoughts that circumambulate the heart. While the Ka'bah may be nothing but stone, it does act as a kind of sacred enclosure for the divine Presence: the pilgrim who sees it for the first time covered with the black cloth is invariably moved to his depths. It is a visible symbol of the Origin of all things, the Center of the universe. The circumambulation of the Ka'bah, both upon beginning the Pilgrimage and departing from Makkah, is a dual confrontation with that Presence but under different mental conditions: in the beginning, there are the hopes that the pilgrim's attitudes will be found acceptable; in the end, the pious Muslim goes away at peace with himself.

The sacred nature of the Ka'bah is clearly indicated by the attitudes prescribed by the Law towards the Black Stone imbedded in the eastern corner of the edifice. While making his circumambulations around the Ancient House, the pilgrim should kiss or at least touch the Black Stone. This would have no meaning if the stone were devoid of symbolism. Traditionally, it is looked upon as "the right hand of Allah in the world," so that the pilgrim, in kissing or touching the stone, renews his pact with the Lord of the Ka'bah more or less in the same fashion as a man renews a pact with his fellowman through a handclasp.

But there is also the Multazam, which is that part of the wall between the Ka'bah and the door leading into the inner part: here, against this wall, the pilgrims press their breasts while praying, which they would not do if the wall were simply a mass of stones with no ultimate signification.

The rituals of the Pilgrimage proper last for only some five days, beginning on the eighth day of the month of Dhū al Ḥijjah and ending on the thirteenth, though some pilgrims leave before then. The main rituals have to do with the circumambulation of the Ka'bah, the running to and fro between Ṣafā and Marwah, the standing on the plain of 'Arafāt, the lapidation of the emblems of Satan, the sacrifice of animals — all of this taking place between Makkah and 'Arafāt, with the intervening places of Muzdalifah and Minā having their own importance also.

Of those rituals, one of the most impressive is the standing on the plain of 'Arafāt from shortly after midday to sunset. This is clearly like the assembly of all mankind on the day of Judgment, the solar orb in the clear sky above the Makkan region representing the Divine Presence in the midst of all creatures.\* Also of interest, in this connection, is that, after leaving 'Arafāt on the month of Dhū al Ḥijjah and staying overnight at Muzdalifah, the movement to Minā on the tenth must take place before the sun rises. That the sun sets over 'Arafāt and that the pilgrims must move on to Minā before it rises again shows that Islām blocks all attempts to divinize the solar orb, while recognizing its relative importance as a means for determining the time wherein to perform the prescribed rituals.

The ritual slaughtering of animals is of course in commemoration of Abraham's substitution of an animal for his son Isaac, though some Islāmic traditions insist that it was Ishmael who was originally meant to be sacrificed and not Isaac.\*\* That sacrifice, which takes place on the tenth of Dhū al Ḥijjah, is simultaneously celebrated all over the Islāmic world, as we know. That it should come after the standing on the plain of 'Arafāt seems only logical: it is that standing that restores to man his quality of Khalīfah, or vice-gerent of God on earth. In his capacity as Khalīfah, he is the central or axial being in this world, the animus having only a peripheral and subordinate nature. Their sacrifices at the hands of man is a liberation; the ritual slaughter gives to the sacrifice, we should not forget the associated ritual, namely the lapidation of the

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\* It must be remembered that for Muslims absolutely nothing in creation "represents" God. — Ed.

\*\* No Muslim accepts the sacrifice as being that of Isaac (Ishāq). The Semitic tradition ascribed to Abraham concerns the eldest, first or unique son. — Ed.

Devil, represented by the three stone pillars at Minā. Tradition would have it that the Devil appeared here to Abraham, who drove him away by throwing stones at him; and in some accounts his lapidation of the Devil is in conjunction with his sacrifice of Ishmael. It is in commemoration of that Abrahamic stoning that the pilgrims, armed with stones to be thrown in groups of seven, perform the lapidation of the pillars before and after the sacrifice. The sacrifice, the stoning, the clipping of the hair and nails all take place on the tenth of Dh ūal Ḥijjah. The three following days, which include additional lapidations, are really days of rejoicing. There then follows the farewell circumambulation of the Ka'bah and the Pilgrimage ends.

It goes without saying that the different steps of the Pilgrimage have their inner spiritual signification; and no doubt the Muslim sages, such as al Ghazzālī and Ibn al 'Arabī, and many others, in pondering the hidden meaning in the external acts have revealed the profound nature of the Pilgrimage as a whole. Certainly, the egalitarianism of Islām and the unity of the Muslim World, not to say the levelling influence of its message on all races and ethnic groups, are all manifested in the Pilgrimage. But these are all purely external matters. Nor did the Prophet institute the Pilgrimage as merely a commemoration of the events surrounding Abraham, Ishmael, and Hagar. The Pilgrimage must be seen in the light of the whole question of salvation (*najāt*) at the hour of death and entry into Paradise: either the Pilgrimage has some relationship to the salvific message of Islām or else it is merely a series of external acts. That it does have such a relationship is shown by the ritual character of its various parts: blessings or benedictions accrue to the person whose intention and attitudes on the Pilgrimage have been right. How far one goes in this direction depends on his inner purification. Abū Yazīd al Bisṭāmī, speaking of this inner progression, said: "On my first pilgrimage I saw only the temple; the second time, I saw both the temple and the Lord of the Temple; and the third time I saw the Lord only." It is obvious that an awareness of the Divine Presence during the Pilgrimage is a prerequisite for its successful completion, whereas the forgetfulness of it makes for a mere physical performance without grace. Al Hujwīrī says that "Anyone who is absent from God at Makkah is in the same position as if he were absent from God in his own house, and anyone who is present with God in his own house is in the same position as if he were present with God at Makkah." Behind those statements is a truth that could be expressed in this fashion: the Pilgrimage to Makkah is but the external reflection of the inner Pilgrimage to one's own heart, which is the Ka'bah of one's being. One can be prevented from performing the external Pilgrimage, but the Pilgrimage to the inner Ka'bah is always possible and is indeed the true

Pilgrimage, when all is said and done. That is why one of the Ṣūfīs put things this way: “I wonder at those who seek His temple in this world: why do they not seek contemplation of Him in their hearts? The temple they sometimes attain and sometimes miss, but contemplation they might enjoy always.”