

Pilgrimage to Mecca

By

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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 1, No.4. © World Wisdom, Inc.

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OUR first taste of the Pilgrimage had been at the very end of September 1948, when we saw the *Kiswah*, the brocaded black hangings of the Kaaba, being carried in a festive procession through the streets of Cairo. Ever since the Middle Ages, this rich silk and cotton cloth has been specially woven in Egypt. The expert weavers do no other work, for as soon as they have finished one *Kiswah* they start on the next, a new one being sent as offering to the Holy House every year. A few days after this procession we set off by boat from Suez down the Red Sea. But I did not realize until we reached Jedda that we had had the honour of travelling with the *Kiswah* itself which was on board with us.

The Pilgrimage is the fifth of the "five pillars of Islam," and it is the only one of these basic elements of the law which is not obligatory. In the words of the Qoran, "the Pilgrimage to the House is God's due from men, from him who can make thereunto his way." At the same time there is also a lesser pilgrimage to be performed. The Qoran also says: "Fulfil for God the Pilgrimage and the Visit." These are two distinct rites, and pilgrims have to decide which of them to perform first, the Pilgrimage (*al-Hajj*) or the Visit (*al-Umrah*). Unlike the Pilgrimage the Visit can be made at any time of the year, and although it is not one of the "five pillars," no visitor to Mecca, pilgrim or non-pilgrim, would miss the opportunity of performing it. This rite is a special visit to the Kaaba and it differs from those made to other holy places in that the Kaaba must be gone round not once only but seven times, and the visitant must be in a state of *ihram* (this word might be translated "consecration" or "dedicated abstinence") that is, wearing special clothes and fulfilling certain other conditions such as not using scent, not cutting the hair or nails, and not killing any wild animals or insects except such as might be dangerous. The conditions of *ihram* are the same for the Visit as for the Pilgrimage.

We decided to make the Visit first, so when the time came to consecrate ourselves, as our boat drew level with a little oasis midway between Medina and Mecca, about thirty hours after leaving Suez, we made the greater ablution, put on pilgrim's dress, prayed a special prayer and formulated the intention of entering the state of *ihram* in order to perform the Visit. The clothes are supposed to be light in colour, and in fact most pilgrims wear white. For the women no particular style of dress is required, but the whole body must be covered, except for the face and hands which must be left uncovered. For the men the conditions are much more specific: they must be bare-headed, and also bare-heeled which means wearing a special kind of sandal; and they may wear only two garments, neither of which may have a single stitch of sewing in it. One of these is girded round the waist and must be broad enough to hang below the knees. It may be kept up with a knotted cord. The other, about a yard in breadth and at least three yards long, is draped over the left shoulder so that one end hangs down in front almost to the ground. The other end is passed round the back, under the right arm leaving that arm and shoulder bare, and then thrown over the left shoulder again to hang down the back, thus balancing the other end. Some pilgrims buy a particularly long cloth for this garment so that later it can also

serve as their shroud. In any case, one is exhorted to keep death continually in mind. The whole atmosphere on board boat was suddenly changed. It is true that there is no garb on earth more noble than true Arab dress, provided it be crowned with nothing less than a turban worthy of the name. But most of our fellow passengers had been wearing nothing more distinguished than what is called "the foreign *jalabiyyah*" which might be described as a long European nightshirt, and the change from that to the simple and ennobling dress of the *ihram* was a startling and moving transformation.

The boat anchored outside Jeddah the next morning. We were travelling in a group of pilgrims who were all connected in some way with the University of Cairo or with that of Alexandria—lecturers, students and servants. The *Kiswah*, together with its body guard, naturally had to be taken on shore first, which meant, owing to other delays also, that we did not leave Jeddah until after sunset. Some two hours later, the cars drew to a standstill, and we were instructed to get out and perform the ablution, as we were about to enter the Sacred Precinct, *al-Haram*, which comprises not only the city of Mecca but also the country for a few miles all round it.

On reaching the sacred city itself we were taken straight to an old school where we were to lodge. They gave us three or four empty rooms and we each took a small floor-space and spread out our bedding. Then we set about praying what prayers were due. It must have been about midnight when our *mutawwif*¹ (one who arranges for the lodgings and tents of the pilgrims and who tells them, if they require it, what to do and say) came to take us to the Kaaba. As we went through the narrow streets we met one or two groups of pilgrims coming back—Indians, Javanese, Chinese—who chanted in greeting to us the pilgrim's invocation *labbaik Allahumma labbaik*, "here I am at Thy service, O Lord God, here at Thy service."

We entered the Great Mosque by the Gate of Peace. Only the outskirts are roofed over, leaving a large open courtyard in the middle;² from the gates there are stone-paved terraces, one below the other, until you reach the pebble-strewn courtyard, which is intersected by narrow paved paths like the radii of a circle all leading in a gentle slope down to the centre, where there is a large circular precinct paved with marble; in the middle of this is the Kaaba itself. Because of the uninterrupted stream of pilgrims, I had the illusion, and I had it afresh each time I entered the Mosque, that the marble precinct itself was actually revolving round the Kaaba.

We went straight down to the Black Stone, which is built into one of the corners of the Kaaba. It is the *sunnah*³ to begin each of the seven circuits by kissing the Stone three times, but even so late at night, in the small hours, there were so many people that I could do no more than put my hand on it and then to my lips. After the seventh circuit we stood and prayed in front of the door of the Kaaba which is a little to the right of the Black Stone. Then we withdrew to the edge of the central precinct where, enshrined like the tomb of a saint, there is a small rock which has in it the imprint of feet. This is *Maqam Ibrahim*, the Station of Abraham.⁴ It was originally beside the Kaaba but was moved a little distance away—at the order of the Caliph Umar, so I was told. It is said that while building the Kaaba Abraham⁵ was standing on this rock and Ishmael handed him a stone the weight of which caused his feet to sink into the rock. I prayed in front of the *Maqam* and asked for many blessings. Then I went to the Well of Zamzam which is just beside it and I was given a large vessel of the holy water. When I had drunk I poured what was left over my head so that it ran down over my clothes and body.

Zamzam was a Divine gift to Hagar and Ishmael after Abraham had left them at Mecca. The sacred spring is said to have gushed forth miraculously when Ishmael thrust his foot into the desert sand while his mother was searching for water nearby between Safa and Marwa. By the time that I had drunk from it I was beginning to be more and more conscious of something which every pilgrim to Mecca is bound to feel in some degree or other. Everyone of course is told of the Pilgrimage from his earliest years and he sees members of his family or of neighbouring families set off for Mecca and hears them recount their experiences when they return. But this voluntary rite, which the vast majority of Moslems are never able to perform, remains none the less a secret dimension in Islam, hidden from all those who have not actually explored it for themselves; and this dimension is the link between the present moment and the past. It is by no means only in virtue of the Pilgrimage that Islam is named "the religion of Abraham" and "the primordial religion"; but the Pilgrimage is an eloquent demonstration of what these names imply, for it is not only a journey in space to the centre towards which one has always turned one's face in prayer, but also a journey in time far back beyond the missions of Muhammad, Jesus and Moses. Consciousness of this regress in time was heightened for most of us by the feeling of a return to childhood; all except those few who have made a special study of the rites suddenly find themselves snatched from a relative mastery of their religion and placed once again in state of utter dependence on others, quite helpless in themselves and having to be told what to do and say at almost every turn. "This is not the Islam that I know" is a thought that must occur to many. But that is only incidental, whereas the return to the far past must be felt by everyone, even, and perhaps above all, by those who are familiar with the rites. Strangely archaic is the Pilgrim's invocation itself, *labbaik*, which is used at no other time and which on occasion even replaces that so characteristic feature of Islam, the greeting of Peace; and one is keenly aware that Mecca is the city of Abraham. Moreover, unlike the other pillars of the religion, the Pilgrimage rites were not newly instituted at the outset of Islam; the Qoran confirms them but they were instituted by Abraham; and for him too they were a return to the past. The return to him is thus only the starting point of the Pilgrimage, a point from which, as we shall see, it sets out into a still remoter past.

We left the mosque by the Gate of Safa in order to visit Safa⁶ itself which is a rocky mound about two minutes' walk away. From Safa we went to Marwa, a similar rocky eminence about a quarter of a mile distant, and then back again to Safa going between the two seven times, mostly walking but always breaking into a run between two points where the land was lowest. As we went back again to Safa we met, coming back to Marwa, those who had been going to Marwa when we were going to Safa, and at each course we would pass almost the same pilgrims moving in the opposite direction. It was like a strange and marvellous dream; many of the white-robed figures that we met face to face might have stepped out of the pages of the Old Testament. One might have expected them to say: *La ilaha illa 'Llah, Ibrahim Rasulu 'Llah* (There is no god but God, Abraham is the Messenger of God). It was especially remarkable to see the Arabs themselves, as they are to be seen at no other time, with nothing to hide their hair which most of them wear long. No doubt many if not most of these were from remote Arabian villages into which the modern world had not penetrated. There were patriarchal old men with flowing white hair and beards, and men of middle age, and also no lack of young men, some of them scarcely more than boys. Among the Arabs one takes majesty of bearing for granted, but I was none the less struck and deeply touched by the wonderful dignity and grave

solemnity of the young; and as they drew nearer one realized that they stood not only for the beauty of youth but also for the beauty of a proud and noble race and the beauty of an uncontaminated theocratic civilization. This threefold beauty shone from their faces to such a degree that I felt that I was seeing the full flower of youth for the first time in my life; and at that most holy season and place, and in that unearthly hour, they inevitably made one think of the immortal youths, *wildan mukhalladûn*, that the Qoran mentions as the cup-bearers of Paradise.

At last we completed our seventh course, which ended at Marwa. Then those of us who were performing the Visit had some hairs cut from our heads, as an alternative to having our heads shaved, and the rite was completed. Those who were already on the Pilgrimage kept their state of *ihram* and did not have their hair cut until the first day of the Feast. Then after the Feast Days were over they put on their pilgrim's dress again, went outside the sacred precinct, formulated the intention of making the Visit, came back to Mecca and performed this rite also.

We stayed in Mecca for the next five days. Every morning at day-break we were woken by the call to the dawn prayer, which we prayed in the Great Mosque. One of the most beautiful things in the world, and one of the great glories of Islam, is the call to the prayer. But the beauty of this, as of so much else, is ruined by the use of microphones which that very year they had installed at Mecca for the first time. However, most fortunately, they were not always able to make them work; and without them, as I heard it once or twice, the call was indescribably moving. The chief muezzin calls from one minaret and he is answered by six other muezzins calling simultaneously from six other minarets. The Arabs of the Hijaz have in general rather high-pitched piercing voices; a good Arab voice when raised is so thrilling and penetrating that it scarcely seems human. I shall never forget how they chanted, at the end of the call to this particular prayer the words *as-salatu khairun min an-naum*, "Prayer is better than sleep." My wife remarked: "Those are the voices of jinn, not of men!"

I usually went to the Mosque about an hour before the noon prayer, but the most pleasant time to be there was between the mid-afternoon and sunset prayers. Then there was no need to sit at the edge of the Mosque under cover of the roof, as after mid-afternoon the Western side of the open courtyard was mostly in the shade. I used to take my prayer mat and spread it out on the pebble stones as far away from the people as I could. In front of me, full in the light of the sun, was the Kaaba, robed in the thick black *Kiswah*, into which is woven a pattern of the supreme Name *Allah* and the *Shahadah*, *La ilaha illâ `Llah* (there is no god but God) repeated like countless affirmations, black upon black, while upon its coronal band are embroidered, in gold and silver and green, verses from the Qoran. So powerful a manifestation is it of the Divine Majesty and Immutability and Reality that all else beside it seems unsubstantial. About it, in its concentrated immobility, the endless ever-changing stream of pilgrims was flowing, and above them the sacred pigeons were flying, and above these the swallows were darting to and fro, and far above these a few kites were wheeling slowly in the calm air. On the top of the Eastern hill I could see the little white mosque that is named after Bilal,⁷ which caught the light of the sun until it set. Sometimes—it happened once, I remember, during one of the prayers, as we rose from the obeisance while the seven *muballighûn*⁸ were chanting their response to the imam—all the pigeons would suddenly fly up into the air as with one impulse so

that there was felt the presence of myriads of wings, and they would wheel round and round the Kaaba, all coming to rest again as suddenly as they had taken flight.

On the morning of the fifth day after our arrival, two days before the Feast, those of us who had made the Visit went into ihram again, this time for the Pilgrimage. The first rite to be done, the *tawaf al-qudûm* (the circumambulation of arrival) is like the opening of the Visit, that is, seven circuits round the Kaaba. This is followed by seven courses between Safa and Marwah. Strictly speaking, if you make the Visit on arrival in Mecca as we did, you are excused these initial rites. Those of our companions who had chosen to make the Pilgrimage first had performed them while we were making the Visit. The Mosque was already much less crowded as many of the pilgrims had already left Mecca, and more were leaving every hour. The new *Kiswah* was spread out on the ground, waiting to replace the old one.

We waited all day for the cars to come and take us to Mina where we were to spend the night. After sunset one car came and took as many as it would hold. I decided to wait till it came again and I went with one of our companions to pray the night prayer in the Mosque. For the first time I was able to pray in the front, so that my head almost touched the Kaaba at each prostration. I was a little to the left of the Black Stone. After the prayer we made seven more circuits which is a rite that may be performed at any time, and which is, according to the Imam Malik, (whose rite I follow) the proper way of greeting the Great Mosque instead of the two prayer cycles with which one greets other mosques. However it was still impossible to kiss the Black Stone without a struggle, which I could not bring myself to make, and I left the Mosque with a feeling of regret that I had never been able—and probably never would be able—to put my lips where the lips of the Prophet had been. But later that night, while we were sitting in our lodging still in wait for the car, we heard that the Mosque was practically empty, so we went, I and one or two others, and greeted it once more, and this time at each of the seven circuits, without any difficulty, I was able to kiss the Black Stone three times.

At last the car came and took us to Mina, a small barren valley mostly surrounded by rocky hills. It is within the Sacred Precinct, about six miles to the East of Mecca, I think, between it and Mount Arafat which is outside the Precinct. The whole valley was full of tents; we had six pitched close together in a little encampment, but there was no need of a tent except as shelter from the sun, and that night I lay out in the open. The air of the wilderness was wonderfully refreshing after the heat of Mecca (though, as we discovered later, Mina was much the hotter of the two by day). I woke up the next morning to see a beautiful yellow light breaking over the eastern hills; the camels were already setting off for Arafat and they passed quite close to where I lay in a seemingly endless chain. I would gladly have given up my place in the car for a seat on one of them.

We spent that day in a large tent on Arafat; in the late afternoon when the great heat had cooled a little, we walked to one of the higher parts of the Mount, which is called *Jabal ar-Rahmah*, the Mount of Mercy. This is the zenith of the Pilgrimage, for if Mecca is the City of Abraham, Arafat is sacred to Adam, and the pilgrims go to the Mount of Mercy to be alone with God and to renew, each one for himself, the forgiveness and mercy which God gave to Adam after the Fall. Thus, unlike other places outside the Sacred Precinct, Arafat may be said in a sense to transcend the Precinct, being above it rather than below it, in that it is holy with the holiness of primordial nature which cannot admit of any circumscription.

It is a condition of the Pilgrimage to spend part of the day and part of the night on Arafat: the noon and mid-afternoon prayers are prayed there at noon in a shortened form, one immediately after the other. The pilgrims wait on the Mount for about twenty minutes after sunset but they do not pray the sunset prayer until they reach a place called Muzdalifah which is just within the Sacred Precinct, between Arafat and Mina, on the lower slopes of the hill called *al-Mash`ar al-Haram*,⁹ ("The Holy Monument"). Here they pray the sunset and night prayers together, and then each one must gather forty-nine small pebbles with which to stone Satan at Mina on the three following days. At Muzdalifah there is a mosque with a large open courtyard, marking the place where the Prophet used to spend the night. No tents are pitched; the first-comers from Arafat fill the mosque; the others (ourselves amongst them) simply settle down for the night in the open as near to the mosque as they can. It was strangely moving to look about and see on all sides, by the light of the moon and one or two lamps here and there, thousands of white-robed figures, some praying, others sitting motionless on the ground, and others searching wearily in the sand for their pebbles. Next to us were a group of Sufis from Morocco; they were singing softly, in two voices, a most beautiful hymn to the Glory of God and their song seemed to express the union of that holy time with that holy place.

After the dawn prayer we set off for our tents at Mina. There are three rocks in the valley which represent Satan. On the first day of the Feast, before noon, everyone has to throw seven pebbles at a certain one of them, and on the second and third days, between noon and sunset, seven pebbles at each of them. The increasing difficulty and hardship of performing this rite (the rocks are small and the pilgrims this year were about 700,000 in number) is no doubt in proportion to the increasing power of Satan over mankind. I confess that at one moment I almost turned back in despair.

After throwing our pebbles on the first day we had rams sacrificed and had some hairs cut from our heads as after the Sacred Visit; then we were free to change our clothes, cover our heads, and go to the Kaaba, as is ordained in the Qoran.¹⁰ Some of the pilgrims did so, coming back again to Mina the same night; but most of us did not leave Mina until we had thrown the last of our pebbles, that is, until the afternoon of the third day, and then we moved our quarters back to Mecca and brought our Pilgrimage to an end with the seven final circuits. The new *Kiswah* in all its splendour was now hanging on the Kaaba.

On the morning of the day we were to leave Mecca we all made the seven circuits of farewell to the Kaaba and duly left the Mosque by the Gate of Farewell. But as it happened this was not to be my last visit. I now come to something of a digression about a rather personal incident which only after some hesitation I have decided to put down in writing. May all who read it be indulgent!

Not having enough money to buy rich presents, and at the same time not wishing to return from the Pilgrimage quite empty-handed, I had taken one or two small stones from the Mount of Mercy. Then after the Pilgrimage it had occurred to me to enrich each of these by the addition of a pebble from the courtyard of the Holy Mosque. The idea had come to me when I was sitting on my prayer-mat in the courtyard, surrounded by pebbles, so I had then and there picked out a few of these and taken them back to our lodging. But just before leaving Mecca, as we were gathering together our belongings, I suddenly remembered that although it is perfectly licit to take a stone from Arafat, that is, from outside the Sacred Precinct, it is sacrilege to remove any natural object from within the Precinct itself. At first I did not know what to do; clearly no one could take pleasure in a

gift which was the fruit of a violation of the sanctuary; on the other hand, how could I replace the pebbles seeing that after the rite of farewell one was not supposed to turn back? Then it occurred to me that since our lodging was well within the Sacred Precinct, the pebbles could be left there, so I put them down in a corner of the room where I had slept. But before leaving, when I took a last look round to see if I had left anything behind, my eyes fell on the pebbles and it was as if they had spoken to me, saying: "We are stones, yet even stones are beings, and we were once glorious of our kind, in our hope that on the Day of Judgment we should be found lying among the pebbles of the Holy Mosque. But now, through you, this glory has been taken from us. Be merciful to us, even as you yourself hope for Mercy!" I took them in my hand once more, and notwithstanding my already made farewell—which I pray may not be effaced from the Book of Record—I went back to the Mosque. We were expecting to leave at any moment; there was no time to repeat the farewell. I laid the pebbles on the ground, putting them nearer to the Kaaba than they had been before with the words *Bismi`Llahi`r-Rahmani`r-Rahim* (in the name of the All-Merciful God) and after making a gesture of reverence with my hand I turned away.

I will not describe our two-day journey by car to Medina. It was inevitably treated as something to be got through as quickly as possible. But before cars came to raise clouds of dust and disturb the silences of the desert between the two sacred Cities the eleven-day camel journey must have been a wonderful experience, with rest during the heat of noon at some little oasis and travel during the cool of the early morning and the evening and part of the night. Night especially must have been wonderful in that strange country of sand and thorn trees and chains of low rocky hills, lit by the waning moon of *Dhu'l-Hijjah* (the Pilgrimage Month)—a country whose very barrenness seems an inseparable part of its sanctity.

I had wept several times during the Pilgrimage, and I wept once again when, going over the top of a rise in the land, we suddenly saw, lying in front of us, the City of Muhammad, a little city of palms and domes, amongst which all eyes came to rest on the green dome of the Mosque of the Prophet.

It was Friday morning; we went straight to our lodging, made ready for the prayer, and then went to the Mosque. But I did not have much joy of this visit as I was in some pain with a poisoned foot which had gradually got worse on the journey. After the prayer I went back to our room, and lay there for the next three days—almost the whole of our stay in Medina, as we left the following Tuesday. I saw neither Mount Uhud, with the graves of the first martyrs,¹¹ nor the many other holy places visited by my fellow pilgrims such as the first mosque of Islam with its two prayer-niches, one oriented towards Jerusalem^s and the other towards Mecca, and the tomb of Fâtimah, the Prophet's daughter, to whom he promised that only the Virgin Mary would rank higher than her amongst the women of Paradise. I deeply regretted being unable to visit this shrine. But at least I was in a pleasant, quiet room not far from the Great Sanctuary, and I was alone as much as I could wish.

On the night before we left, my foot was a little better and I went down to the Mosque, about three hours after the night prayer, when most of the Pilgrims had retired. The Sanctuary is not only the tomb of the Prophet but his whole house (which is enclosed like a large sepulchre) and also the space between it and the pulpit of the Mosque, *ar-Raudat ash-Sharifah* (the Noble Garden), so called because the Prophet said of it: "The space

between my house and my pulpit is a garden of the gardens of Paradise." I sat here for about two hours. If I may be forgiven for trying to describe the indescribable and always remembering that the Spirit may manifest one aspect to one person and another to another, I would say that in the City of Abraham the *Barakah* (Blessing, Spiritual Influence) had seemed like wine. At times one had almost the impression that one's body was dissolving, as though a process the opposite of creation were taking place. Here on the other hand, beside this most holy tomb, the stress seemed to be on sobriety, the serene, transcendent sobriety of a profound and luminous peace.

Before leaving the Mosque I went back to the South door of the Sanctuary which, if it were opened, would lead straight into the apartment of `A'ishah¹² where the Prophet is entombed. I invoked Blessings and Peace upon him, and prayed for many things that are near to our hearts, as I had done at the Kaaba and at the Station of Abraham and at the foot of the Mount of Mercy. So overcome was I at being in his presence that I forgot to greet my great namesake and the great 'Umar who lie beside him; but I greeted them both the next day, when I went to bid farewell just before we left for Jedda.

Abu Bakr Sirâj ad-Din, November 1948¹³

¹ The word means literally "circumambulation-guide."

² Since this was written many changes have been made, and the Mosque is considerably less open than it was.

³ Recommended but not obligatory practice of the Prophet.

⁴ Qoran, II, 125.

⁵ In Islam it is a lack of spiritual courtesy (*adab*) to speak of a Prophet by his bare name. The original version reads "our liege-lord Abraham (our liege-lord Ishmael, etc.)—Peace be on him!" But we have reluctantly decided to conform in this respect to European custom, so as to avoid unnecessary strangeness.

⁶ Qoran, II, 158.

⁷ An Ethiopian slave who became one of the Prophet's closest Companions and who was the first muezzin of Islam.

⁸ They who respond in a loud voice to those words of the imam (prayer leader) which indicate a change of posture in the prayer, so that people at the back can hear. In other mosques there is usually only one muballigh

⁹ Qoran 11 198.

¹⁰ Qoran XXII, 29.

¹¹In Islam the word *shahid* generally translated by "martyr," is used above all of those killed in Holy War. At the outset of Islam, when the Prophet was still in Mecca, prayers were made facing towards Jerusalem. It was only after the first mosque was established, soon after the Prophets' migration to Medina, that he was ordered to change the orientation

¹² The Prophet's favourite wife who, by consent of the other wives, tended him in the brief illness of which he died.

¹³ Although written nearly twenty years ago, this is now published for the first time (Ed.).