

Hajj - The Journey of a Lifetime

الحج - رحلة العمر

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The *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, a central duty of Islam whose origins date back to the Prophet Abraham, brings together Muslims of all races and tongues for one of life's most moving spiritual experiences.

For 14 centuries, countless millions of Muslims, men and women from the four corners of the earth, have made the pilgrimage to Mecca, the birthplace of Islam. In carrying out this obligation, they fulfill one of the five “pillars” of Islam, or central religious duties of the believer.

Muslims trace the recorded origins of the divinely prescribed pilgrimage to the Prophet Abraham. According to the Quran, it was Abraham who, together with Ishmael built the Kabah, “the House of God”, the direction toward which Muslims turn in their worship five times each day. It was Abraham, too who established the rituals of the *hajj*, which recall events or practices in his life and that of Hagar and their son Ishmael.

In the chapter entitled “The Pilgrimage”, the Quran speaks of the divine command to perform the *hajj* and prophesies the permanence of this institution:

“And when We assigned for Abraham the place of the House, saying ‘Do not associate Anything with Me, and purify My House for those who go around it and for those who stand and bow and prostrate themselves in worship. And proclaim the Pilgrimage among humankind: They will come to you on foot and on every camel made lean By traveling deep, distant ravines.’” (Quran 22:26-27)

By the time the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, received the divine call, however, pagan practices had come to muddy some of the original observances of the *hajj*. The Prophet, as ordained by God, continued the Abrahamic *hajj* after restoring its rituals to their original purity.

Furthermore, Muhammad himself instructed the believers in the rituals of the *hajj*. He did this in two ways: by his own practice, or by approving the practices of his Companions. This added some complexity to the rituals, but also provided increased flexibility in carrying them out, much to the benefit of pilgrims ever since. It is lawful, for instance, to have some variation in the order in which the several rites are carried out, because the Prophet himself is recorded as having approved such actions. Thus, the rites of the *hajj* are elaborate, numerous and varied; aspects of some of them are highlighted below.

The *hajj* to Mecca is a once-in-a-lifetime obligation upon male and female adults whose health and means permit it, or, in the words of the Quran, upon “those who can make their way there.” It is not an obligation on children, though some children do accompany their parents on this journey.

Before setting out, a pilgrim should redress all wrongs, pay all debts, plan to have enough funds for his own journey and for the maintenance of his family while he is away, and prepare himself for good conduct throughout the *hajj*.

When pilgrims undertake the *hajj* journey, they follow in the footsteps of millions before them. Nowadays hundreds of thousands of believers from over 70 nations arrive in the Mecca by road, sea and air every year, completing a journey now much shorter and in some ways less arduous than it often was in the past.

Till the 19th century, traveling the long distance to Mecca usually meant being part of a caravan. There were three main caravans: the Egyptian one, which formed in Cairo; the Iraqi one, which set out from Baghdad; and the Syrian, which, after 1453, started at Istanbul, gathered pilgrims along the way, and proceeded to Mecca from Damascus.

As the *hajj* journey took months if all went well, pilgrims carried with them the provisions they needed to sustain them on their trip. The caravans were elaborately supplied with amenities and security if the persons traveling were rich, but the poor often ran out of provisions and had to interrupt their journey in order to work, save up their earnings, and then go on their way. This resulted in long journeys which, in some cases, spanned ten years or more. Travel in earlier days was filled with adventure. The roads were often unsafe due to bandit raids. The terrain the pilgrims passed through was also dangerous, and natural hazards and diseases often claimed many lives along the way. Thus, the successful return of pilgrims to their families was the occasion of joyous celebration and thanksgiving for their safe arrival.

Lured by the mystique of Mecca and Medina, many Westerners have visited these two holy cities, on which the pilgrims converge, since the 15th century. Some of them disguised themselves as Muslims; others, who had genuinely converted, came to fulfill their duty. But all seem to have been moved by their experience,

and many recorded their impressions of the journey and the rituals of the *hajj* in fascinating accounts. Many *hajj* travelogues exist, written in languages as diverse as the pilgrims themselves.

The pilgrimage takes place each year between the 8th and the 13th days of Dhul-Hijjah, the 12th month of the Muslim lunar calendar. Its first rite is the donning of the *ihram*.

The *ihram*, worn by men, is a white seamless garment made up of two pieces of cloth or toweling; one covers the body from waist down past the knees, and the other is thrown over the shoulder. This garb was worn by both Abraham and Muhammad. Women dress as they usually do. Men's heads must be uncovered; both men and women may use an umbrella.

The *ihram* is a symbol of purity and of the renunciation of evil and mundane matters. It also indicates the equality of all people in the eyes of God. When the pilgrim wears his white apparel, he or she enters into a state of purity that prohibits quarreling, committing violence to man or animal and having conjugal relations. Once he puts on his *hajj* clothes the pilgrim cannot shave, cut his nails or wear any jewelry, and he will keep his unsown garment on till he completes the pilgrimage.

A pilgrim who is already in Mecca starts his *hajj* from the moment he puts on the *ihram*. Some pilgrims coming from a distance may have entered Mecca earlier with their *ihram* on and may still be wearing it. The donning of the *ihram* is accompanied by the primary invocation of the *hajj*, the *talbiyah*:

“Here I am, O God, at Thy Command! Here I am at Thy Command! Thou art without associate; Here I am at Thy Command! Thine are praise and grace and dominion! Thou art without associate.”

The thunderous, melodious chants of the *talbiyah* ring out not only in Mecca but also at other nearby sacred locations connected with the *hajj*.

On the first day of the *hajj*, pilgrims sweep out of Mecca toward Mina, a small uninhabited village east of the city. As their throngs spread through Mina, the pilgrims generally spend their time meditating and praying, as the Prophet did on his pilgrimage.

During the second day, the 9th of Dhu al-Hijjah, pilgrims leave Mina for the plain of Arafat where they rest. This is the central rite of the *hajj*. As they congregate there, the pilgrims' stance and gathering reminds them of the Day of Judgment. Some of them gather at the Mount of Mercy, where the Prophet delivered his unforgettable Farewell Sermon, enunciating far-reaching religious, economic, social and political reforms. These are emotionally charged hours, which the pilgrims spend in worship and supplication. Many shed tears as they ask God to forgive them. On this sacred spot, they reach the culmination of their religious lives as they feel the presence and closeness of a merciful God.

The first Englishwoman to perform the *hajj*, Lady Evelyn Cobbold, described in 1934 the feelings pilgrims experience at Arafat.

“It would require a master pen to describe the scene, poignant in its intensity, of that great concourse of humanity of which I was one small unit, completely lost to their surroundings in a fervor of religious enthusiasm. Many of the pilgrims had tears streaming down their cheeks; others raised their faces to the starlit sky that had witnessed this drama so often in the past centuries. The shining eyes, the passionate appeals, the pitiful hands outstretched in prayer moved me in a way that nothing had ever done before, and I felt caught up in a strong wave of spiritual exaltation. I was one with the rest of the pilgrims in a sublime act of complete surrender to the Supreme Will which is Islam.”

She goes on to describe the closeness pilgrims feel to the Prophet while standing in Arafat:

“...as I stand beside the granite pillar, I feel I am on Sacred ground. I see with my mind’s eye the Prophet delivering that last address, over thirteen hundred years ago, to the weeping multitudes. I visualize the many preachers who have spoken to countless millions who have assembled on the vast plain below; for this is the culminating scene of the Great Pilgrimage.”

The Prophet is reported to have asked God to pardon the sins of pilgrims who gathered at Arafat, and was granted his wish. Thus, the hopeful pilgrims prepare to leave this plain joyfully, feeling reborn without sin and intending to turn over a new leaf.

Just after sunset, the mass of pilgrims proceeds to Muzdalifah, an open plain about halfway between Arafat and Mina. There they first pray and then collect a fixed number of chickpea-sized pebbles to use on the following days.

Before daybreak on the third day, pilgrims move en masse from Muzdalifah to Mina. There they cast at white pillars the pebbles they have previously collected, a practice associated with the Prophet Abraham. As pilgrims throw seven pebbles at each of these pillars, they remember the story of Satan’s attempt to persuade Abraham to disregard God’s command to sacrifice his son.

Throwing the pebbles is symbolic of humans’ attempt to cast away evil and vice, not once but seven times - the number seven symbolizing infinity.

Following the casting of the pebbles, most pilgrims sacrifice a goat, sheep or some other animal. They give the meat to the poor after, in some cases, keeping a small portion for themselves.

This rite is associated with Abraham’s readiness to sacrifice his son in accordance with God’s wish. It symbolizes the Muslim’s willingness to part with what is precious to him, and reminds us of the spirit of Islam, in which submission to God’s will plays a leading role. This act also reminds the pilgrim to share worldly

goods with those who are less fortunate, and serves as an offer of thanksgiving to God.

As the pilgrims have, at this stage, finished a major part of the *hajj*, they are now allowed to shed their *ihram* and put on everyday clothes. On this day Muslims around the world share the happiness the pilgrims feel and join them by performing identical, individual sacrifices in a worldwide celebration of 'Eid al-Adha, "the Festival of Sacrifice." Men either shave their heads or clip their hair, and women cut off a symbolic lock, to mark their partial deconsecration. This is done as a symbol of humility. All proscriptions, save the one of conjugal relations, are now lifted.

Still sojourning in Mina, pilgrims visit Mecca to perform another essential rite of the *hajj*: the *tawaf*, the seven-fold circling of the Kaaba, with a prayer recited during each circuit. Their circumambulation of the Kaaba, the symbol of God's oneness, implies that all human activity must have God at its center. It also symbolizes the unity of God and man.

Thomas Abercrombie, a convert to Islam and a writer and photographer for National Geographic Magazine, performed the *hajj* in the 1970's and described the sense of unity and harmony pilgrims feel during the circling:

"Seven times we circled the shrine repeating the ritual devotions in Arabic: 'Lord God, from such a distant land I have come unto Thee.... Grant me shelter under Thy throne.' Caught up in the whirling scene, lifted by the poetry of the prayers, we orbited God's house in accord with the atoms, in harmony with the planets."

While making their circuits pilgrims may kiss or touch the Black Stone. This oval stone, first mounted in a silver frame late in the seventh century, has a special place in the hearts of Muslims as, according to some hadeeth, it is the sole remnant of the original structure built by Abraham and Ishmael. But perhaps the single

most important reason for kissing the stone is that the Prophet did so.

No devotional significance whatsoever is attached to the stone, for it is not, nor has ever been, an object of worship. The second caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, made this crystal clear when, on kissing the stone himself in emulation of the Prophet, he proclaimed:

“I know that you are but a stone, incapable of doing good or harm. Had I not seen the Messenger of God kiss you - may God’s blessing and peace be upon him - I would not kiss you.”

After completing the *tawaf*, pilgrims pray, preferably at the Station of Abraham, the site where Abraham stood while he built the Kaaba. Then they drink of the water of Zamzam.

Another, and sometimes final, rite is the *sa’y*, or “exerting.” This is a reenactment of a memorable episode in the life of Hagar, who was taken into what the Quran calls the “uncultivable valley” of Mecca, with her infant son Ishmael, to settle there.

The *sa’y* commemorates Hagar’s frantic search for water to quench Ishmael’s thirst. She ran back and forth seven times between two rocky hillocks, *al-Safa* and *al-Marwah*, until she found the sacred water known as Zamzam. This water, which sprang forth miraculously under Ishmael’s tiny feet, is springs from the same well from which pilgrims drink today

These rites performed, the pilgrims are completely deconsecrated: They may resume all normal activities. They now return to Mina, where they stay up to the 12th or 13th day of Dhu al-Hijjah. There they throw their remaining pebbles at each of the pillars in the manner practiced or approved by the Prophet. They then take leave of the friends they have made during the *Hajj*. Before leaving Mecca, however, pilgrims make a final *tawaf* round the Kaaba to bid farewell to the Holy City.

Usually pilgrims either precede or follow the *hajj*, “the greater pilgrimage,” with the *umrah*, “the lesser pilgrimage,” which is sanctioned by the Quran and was performed by the Prophet. The *umrah*, unlike the *hajj*, takes place only in Mecca itself and can be performed at any time of the year. The *ihram*, *talbiyah* and the restrictions required by the state of consecration are equally essential in the *umrah*, which also shares three other rituals with the *hajj*: the *tawaf*, *sa’y* and shaving or clipping the hair. The observance of the *umrah* by pilgrims and visitors symbolizes veneration for the unique sanctity of Mecca.

Before or after going to Mecca, pilgrims also avail themselves of the opportunity provided by the *hajj* or the *umrah* to visit the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina, the second holiest city in Islam. Here, the Prophet lies buried in a simple grave. The visit to Medina is not obligatory, as it is not part of the *hajj* or *umrah*, but the city - which welcomed Muhammad when he migrated there from Mecca - is rich in moving memories and historical sites that are evocative of him as a Prophet and statesman.

In this city, loved by Muslims for centuries, people still feel the effect of the Prophet’s life. Muhammad Asad, an Austrian Jew who converted to Islam in 1926 and made five pilgrimages between 1927 and 1932, comments on this aspect of the city:

“Even after thirteen centuries [the Prophet’s] spiritual presence is almost as alive here as it was then. It was only because of him that the scattered group of villages once called Yathrib became a city and has been loved by all Muslims down to this day as no city anywhere else in the world has ever been loved. It has not even a name of its own: for more than thirteen hundred years it has been called *Madinat an-Nabi*, ‘the City of the Prophet.’ For more than thirteen hundred years, so much love has converged here that all shapes and movements have acquired a kind of family resemblance, and all differences of appearance find a tonal transition into a common harmony.”

As pilgrims of diverse races and tongues return to their homes, they carry with them cherished memories of Abraham, Ishmael, Hagar, and Muhammad. They will always remember that universal concourse, where poor and rich, black and white, young and old, met on equal footing.

They return with a sense of awe and serenity: awe for their experience at Arafat, when they felt closest to God as they stood on the site where the Prophet delivered his sermon during his first and last pilgrimage; serenity for having shed their sins on that plain, and being thus relieved of such a heavy burden. They also return with a better understanding of the conditions of their brothers in Islam. Thus is born a spirit of caring for others and an understanding of their own rich heritage that will last throughout their lives.

The pilgrims go back radiant with hope and joy, for they have fulfilled God's ancient injunction to humankind to undertake the pilgrimage. Above all, they return with a prayer on their lips: May it please God, they pray, to find their *hajj* acceptable, and may what the Prophet said be true of their own individual journey:

“There is no reward for a pious pilgrimage but Paradise.” (*Al-Tirmidhi*)