

Understanding Islam **Series Two: Standing before God**

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Part Five: United on pilgrimage

The largest annual gathering of human beings anywhere on earth; today attracting some 3,500,000 people. Surely one of the most cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual assemblies that we can imagine. Adult Muslim men and women of every age, from every social class, across the spectrum of education, wealth and experience. That's the Hajj; the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Makka.

As the pilgrims prepare to enter into the city of Makka, they put on their pilgrims' dress. All the men are dressed alike in two white unsewn sheets of cloth; one wrapped around the lower body and one around the upper. This pilgrim dress is called *ihram*. For women *ihram* comprises a plain simple dress (often made of the same white material) without jewellery or ornament. Putting on this *ihram* is a symbol of entering into the dedicated state of pilgrimage during which all anger of speech or deed is forbidden, to the extent of not even doing violence to a flower by plucking it, and married couples abstain from sexual relations. This *ihram* is a great leveller; all human beings, irrespective of their differences away from Makka, are elevated to their essential human dignity. Malcolm X, the 1960s African-American civil rights activist, who came from an extreme black-supremacist splinter group within Islam made the Hajj and came to the realisation that "Islam is colour blind" and that he must leave the group to which he belonged and join mainstream Sunni Islam. That is the spirit of unity that permeates the pilgrimage.

Abrahamic and Adamic roots

The Hajj not only binds together people alive today. It also emphasises a bond that goes way back before the time of Muhammad. All the main activities of the Hajj go back through Muhammad to Abraham (in Arabic, Ibrahim), Ishmael (in Arabic, Isma'il) and Hagar (in Arabic, Hajar); some even go back to Adam and Eve. Abraham, according to both Bible (Genesis 16, 17 and 21) and Qur'an, was married to Sarah but she was unable to have children. Abraham took a second wife, Hagar, an Egyptian, and together they had a son, Ishmael. Later, Sarah was also blessed with a son in her old age, Isaac. According to the Bible, Sarah wanted Hagar and Ishmael sent away and Abraham finally agreed to do this after receiving a message from God, which said that God would protect them and raise up a mighty nation from Ishmael. The events of the Hajj are connected with Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael, and are located in and around the holy city of Makka. They were given a definite shape by the Qur'an and the *sunna* of Muhammad but they uniquely tie in the faith of Islam and Muslims with the earlier tradition going back through Abraham and Ishmael to Adam and Eve.

When Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael went into the desert, they were guided by God to the site of the present-day city of Makka (sometimes written Bakka), where Abraham left them. They grew short of water. Hagar left the young Ishmael to go in search of it. She ran to the top of each of two small hills, al-Safa and al-Marwa, to look for any sign of water. Finding none, she became more frantic and ran backwards and forwards between the two hills. She returned to Ishmael, only to find that he had dug his heels into the ground and God had caused a spring of water to well-up in that place. This was named *zamzam* and flows to this day in the same place, which has now been incorporated into the Sacred Mosque in Makka.

Abraham continued to visit his family in Makka and on one of his visits he and Ishmael rebuilt the *ka'ba*, which stands to this day at the centre of Makka [Q. 2:126-127]. After they had completed the building, they walked around it giving thanks and praise to God. The original *ka'ba* is held by Muslims to be the first building on earth built for the worship of God [Q. 3:96]. A stone was brought by the angel Gabriel (Jibril) from heaven and was incorporated into a corner of the *ka'ba*. This black stone is revered by visitors to the *ka'ba* today.

The Bible and Qur'an agree that Abraham was put to the test by God. He was asked to sacrifice his son. The Bible names him as Isaac. The Qur'an is not explicit about which son was to be sacrificed. Muslim tradition has overwhelmingly understood this to be Ishmael on the grounds that, as the first-born son of Abraham, Ishmael was "the son" before Isaac was born [Q. 37:102-109]. The remarkable thing about the story in the Qur'an is that Abraham told Ishmael what he had been commanded to do and asked him what he thought about it. Ishmael willingly agreed to do whatever God had commanded. The sacrifice is a test of obedience on both their parts. When they were on their way to make the sacrifice, they were tempted by the Devil to rebel against God's command and not go through with it. They threw stones at the Devil to resist his temptation and drive him away. The three places where the tradition records that this temptation and stoning took place are marked today by three stone pillars. As Ishmael knew and was willing to be sacrificed, there was no question of his being tied or forced. He was prostrate on the floor waiting for Abraham to kill him when God told Abraham to stop. Both had proved their obedience. Instead God provided an animal for them to sacrifice.

The climax of the Hajj comes on the Plain of Arafat, some twelve kilometres outside Makka, where Muhammad preached his Farewell Sermon. This site is associated with Adam and Eve; by tradition it was here that they were reconciled with God after being sent down to the earth from the garden.

This is the sequence of events that is re-enacted and commemorated at the annual pilgrimage of the Hajj. The fact that the Hajj is part of a tradition that goes back through Muhammad, through Abraham, to be linked to Adam and Eve demonstrates that Islam is part of the Abrahamic family of faiths, of which Muhammad is held by Muslims to be the Last and the Seal of the Prophets [Q. 33:40]. During the centuries

between the times of Abraham and Muhammad, some sense of the pilgrimage remained in the consciousness of the Arabs.

The rites of the Hajj

The Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam [Q. 22:25-30] and takes place only once each year on five days in the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar, called Dhu 'l-Hijja. Every adult Muslim should make the Hajj once in his or her lifetime, provided that they have the money and health so to do [Q. 3:97]. Having enough money means being able to afford to travel for the Hajj without compromising the wellbeing of one's family. Many millions of Muslims are too poor and will never be in a position to make the journey. Many can only afford it when they are older and their families can fend for themselves. Some of those who die before they can perform the Hajj have children who are able to perform it later in their name.

On the first day of the Hajj, pilgrims walk around the *ka'ba* seven times in an anticlockwise direction, praising God; this is called the *tawaf*. The *ka'ba* is generally covered by a black cloth on which verses from the Qur'an have been embroidered with gold thread. This is raised during the Hajj to reveal the stone walls beneath. When they pass the black stone, it is recommended that pilgrims kiss it, but due to the large numbers, most pilgrims salute it by raising their right hands as was the practice of Muhammad. Beside the *ka'ba*, another stone marks the Station of Abraham, where tradition has it that Abraham used to pray. If possible, pilgrims will try to pray at this special place.

Next, pilgrims walk or jog seven times between the two small hills of al-Safa and al-Marwa, as Hagar did, seeking the providence of God; this is called *sa'y*. Then they can drink the water of *zamzam* and fill bottles to take home. For those pilgrims who can arrive in Makka earlier, they can perform these two rites in advance and then resume their Hajj with all the other pilgrims. At other times in the year, people can make a visit to Makka and perform only these two rites. This minor pilgrimage is known as *umra*.

On the second day, the Hajj reaches its climax when everyone travels together to the Plain of Arafat. Most of the pilgrims walk but some travel by bus. Here they will spend the afternoon in prayer to God seeking mercy and forgiveness. Rising above the plain is a small hill, "the Mount of Mercy," from which Muhammad preached his Farewell Sermon, during the Hajj a few months before his death. The clothes that the male pilgrims are wearing will become their burial clothes. During the afternoon, the pilgrims anticipate the Day of Judgement, when all human beings will appear before God to give an account of their lives and actions. The association of this site with the reconciliation of Adam and Eve and also with the Day of Judgement in a way draws together the beginning and the end of the human saga. The pilgrims stand in prayer for a long time. It is an intensely powerful period of humility before God during which many pilgrims describe having a profound experience of peace, forgiveness and being intimately in the presence of God.

The theme is forgiveness, so we need to explore this from God's perspective and from the human side. Islamic law makes a distinction between sins that damage our individual relationship with God, sins against oneself, and sins that damage both our relationship with God and other human beings. Failure to pray the *salat* is a sin that damages our relationship with God for which each individual is accountable on the Day of Judgement. Taking forbidden substances is a sin against oneself. Theft is not only a sin against God but also against the people from whom the goods were stolen. People have to put right their sins against other human beings before they can access fully the forgiveness of God. This means that pilgrims will spend the months before the Hajj putting right their offences against other people. They will have sought human forgiveness and made up for the damage that they have caused to others before going to the Plain of Arafat.

When we look at forgiveness from God's perspective, two sayings of God given to Muhammad to share with us (*Hadith qudsi*) give us guidance. In one, God says "My mercy overcomes my wrath." In the other, God says "If you have sinned such that your sins reach to the skies and then you ask for forgiveness, I would forgive you." From this we can see that God has declared that mercy and forgiveness are always available for the repentant sinner. The only thing that can stop that forgiveness reaching me is me myself [Q. 39:53].

Four things are necessary for a sinner to open themselves to the mercy of God. First, the sin must be acknowledged and responsibility accepted. "I did it, it was wrong, and it was my fault." Second, they must stop the sinful practice. If I make my living by exploiting other people, I can't expect God to forgive me if I am going to carry on doing the same thing in the future. Third, change the circumstances that led you to that sin. "The company that I work for is always asking me to do things that I know are wrong." Then change your job. Fourth, make up for the harm caused by your actions. Give back what you have stolen. Repair the damage by doing voluntary work in society.

Who knows if the sinner has done these four things? Only God and the person concerned. And God cannot be fooled! This is a key point in understanding Islam; there are no priests with special powers, no sacraments, no-one to tell you that you are forgiven. The relationship with God is direct and personal. Each one must believe in their own heart.

The assembly on the Plain of Arafat only takes place once each year during the Hajj. It is sadly true that most Muslims on earth today will never make the Hajj because they are too poor. God would be an unjust tyrant if this was the only way for someone to receive God's mercy and forgiveness. Rather, God's mercy can be reached at every second and in every place. A Muslim who becomes aware of sin will immediately seek to confess it to God, put it right and ask for forgiveness. What happens once in a lifetime on the Plain of Arafat symbolises in clear terms what is constantly available to any human being who will turn to God and seek forgiveness.

After the standing on the Plain of Arafat, the pilgrims make only a short journey in the direction of Makka then sleep the night in the open. They gather small stones here and then walk to Mina **on the third day** to throw them at the pillars representing the places where the Devil tempted Abraham and Ishmael. They symbolically “drive away” Satan and all his temptations from their lives. “If only we could remain always in this state of *taqwa!*”

The third day of the Hajj is also 'Id al-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice, when the sacrifice of Abraham and Ishmael is remembered. Those on Hajj sacrifice a sheep, goat or camel. Nowadays, many pilgrims pay for an animal to be slaughtered humanely. There are modern slaughter-houses and an army of skilled men to ensure that the job is done properly with the least possible suffering to the animals. Some of the meat will be canned or frozen so that it can be given to the poor later. The men then have their heads shaved or trim their hair [Q. 2:196].

This is the only element of the Hajj that is celebrated by all Muslims around the world. An animal is killed and the meat divided into three parts: one for our family, one to be shared with neighbours and the third to be given to the poor. Festival prayers are said in an open-air gathering or in the main mosques of the town. A celebration meal is shared and there are presents, visits, sports and fun, like all festivals. In countries where there is no shortage of food, money is sent to places where people are hungry. This will be used to buy an animal and have it killed. The meat will then be given to those in need. The word *qurban*, meaning sacrifice, is often used for this meat. Both on the Hajj and in the wider world, this festival is the most important in the Muslim year.

On the fourth and fifth days of Hajj, pilgrims return again to stone the pillars representing the Devil. They can now change into their normal clothes. The pilgrims return to Makka to again circle the *ka'ba* praising God. There is a final “farewell” circling of the *ka'ba*, which completes the pilgrimage. They now have the right to add al-Hajj, for men, or al-Hajjah, for women, in front of their names. The Hajj is over but the experience remains with people ever after.

The pilgrimage, travelling and being in the heat of the Arabian desert is gruelling. Not surprisingly, with so many people, often elderly, gathered in Makka from around the world, some die during the Hajj. To die in this way is considered a great blessing and to be buried in Makka or Madina is a great privilege. Some pilgrims return over the years to repeat the experience but most do it once only.

After they have completed their Hajj (or *umra*) most Muslims will go on to make a *ziyara* or visitation of the Prophet's grave in Madina. Here they will pray to God and ask the Prophet to add his prayers to theirs. Many will go on to visit the tombs in the graveyards in Madina, especially those of Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, Hasan, his grandson, and those of his other wives, family members and companions. Based on a Hadith, many try to remain eight days in Madina and pray the *salat* that occur on

those days in the Prophet's Mosque. By so doing they hope for Muhammad's intercession on the Day of Judgement. Traditionally pilgrims on their way home went via Jerusalem and Hebron to visit sites associated with Muhammad and the biblical prophets, especially Abraham and his family.