



## Reflections on the Hajj

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On During these blessed days the great pilgrimage to Mecca, the Hajj, is concluding. Millions of Muslims have descended on the City of Mecca and its environs to reenact ancient rituals, most of which are associated with the prophetic patriarch, Abraham, upon him be peace.

The Hajj, which occurs at the end of the year, based on the reckoning of the lunar calendar, serves as both a culminating act, and the signal of new beginnings. It is the concluding spiritual event in an annual progression of rites which define a Muslim's life. Beginning with the fast of 'Ashura, which occurs on the tenth day of the first lunar month, Muharram, the "spiritual" calendar proceeds to Rabi' al-Awwal, the month that witnessed the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace. The reflection of that day, and the attendant celebrations undertaken by many are followed with voluntary fasting that is generally encouraged during the sacred month of Rajab. Rajab is also the month the night journey and ascension (Al-Isra wa'l Mi'raj) of the Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace, is commemorated.

Following Rajab is the month of Sha'ban, a month where voluntary fasting is greatly encouraged. The fifteenth night of Sha'ban (Layla Nisfi Sha'ban) is one of the nights of the year specifically designated for intense devotion and supplication. Sha'ban is followed by blessed Ramadan, the time of the month-long fast and nightly devotions. Ramadan gives way to Shawwal, the month to begin preparations for the Hajj, and a month when fasting six days, preferably in succession, is highly encouraged.

During Dhu'l Qa'da the preparation for the Hajj continues. Dhu'l Hijja, the actual month of the Hajj, begins with ten days that are described as the most virtuous days of the year. During these days, fasting, supplications, invocations, and other acts of worship are encouraged. The Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace, said concerning these days, "There are no days during which righteous deeds possess more virtue than [the collectivity of] these ten days."<sup>1</sup>

These ten days also contain the Day of Arafa, the ninth of Dhu'l Hijja. The virtue of this day is immense. The Prophet said regarding it, "There is no [single] day more virtuous with God than the Day of Arafa."<sup>2</sup> The virtue of that day manifests itself in the magnitude of God's

Forgiveness that is witnessed during it. In addition to the atonement of the sins of those who fast it, it is related that, "There is no day when God liberates more of His servants from the Hellfire than the day of Arafa."<sup>3</sup>

These events, and others we have not mentioned, serve as milestones for the servants as they make their way to God. The passing of each year is demarcated by the Hajj, which serves as a reminder for us that we have moved all the closer towards our destiny. This idea, that the Hajj, an event that involves an actual journey, is symbolic of a deeper spiritual journey is hinted at by God's saying: *...and take ample provision, and the best of all provisions is righteousness.* [2:197]

God is reminding us that the spiritual journey this life involves requires its own unique provision, and that the Hajj is a symbol that serves to remind us of that greater, more significant journey.

As mentioned above, the Hajj also symbolizes new beginnings. One who undertakes a successful Hajj, returns home cleansed of all previous sins, prepared to begin life anew, from a spiritual perspective. This idea is based on the saying of the Prophet, upon him be peace, "Whosoever undertakes the pilgrimage to Mecca, free from any indecent or corrupt actions, leaves behind his sins and returns to the state of purity he was in the day his mother gave birth to him."<sup>4</sup>

With the passing of the Hajj, we know that the new year will soon be upon us. That realization encourages us to stop and reflect on both our accomplishments and shortcomings during the past year. It is a good opportunity to thank God for our accomplishments, and to seek to understand the reasons which contributed to our shortcomings as part of an effort to avoid them during the coming year.

Similarly, one who is blessed with a successful Hajj realizes that he or she has undertaken one of the essential preparations for a new life: the life of the Hereafter. We are reminded by the Prophet, upon him be peace, "An accepted Hajj is better than the world and all it contains. The fitting reward for an accepted Hajj is none other than Paradise."<sup>5</sup>

It is fitting that such a powerful event as the Hajj would have an entire chapter in the Qur'an named after it. This chapter is extremely rich. However, its many lessons are seldom expounded on by English writers. I would like to

use the balance of this article to reflect on two verses from that chapter, Sura al-Hajj.

In the first, God addresses the prophet Abraham,

*Proclaim the pilgrimage to humanity, [they will respond] walking, and riding every type of beast, made lean by the lengthy journey; coming from every distant place. [22:27]*

Abraham is asked to announce to humanity that God has established a sanctified house; therefore, they should undertake a pilgrimage to visit it. This momentous announcement is one that transcended time and space. When given this command, Abraham mentioned, "How can I make this proclamation to all of humanity when my voice cannot reach them." God responded, "You make the call and I will convey it to humanity." It is related that God caused the mountains to lower themselves; Abraham's voice carried to all corners of the Earth, and was heard by everyone destined to make the pilgrimage from that day until the end of this world, as we know it.<sup>6</sup>

That call has indeed reached the ends of the Earth, for annually we witness the great assembly of the Hajj, and indeed people come from every corner of the Earth, even from the farthest corners of the United States. From Maine to California, there are Muslims who mobilize for the journey to Mecca.

This great gathering shows us the true potential of humanity. Peace and brotherhood are possible, for we witness them during the Hajj. Black and white, rich and poor, all come together in a setting where the distinctions of race, ethnicity, as well as social and economic class are all set aside, while the primacy of the common yearning for God manifests itself. This beautiful display of humility before God is fitting, for as we have been informed by the Prophet, upon him be peace, "God does not consider your physical forms or your wealth, rather He considers your hearts and your deeds."<sup>7</sup>

Although this state of peace, where race and class are transcended, endures for only a few days and involves only two or three million people, it shows us that real brotherhood is possible. The challenge for us lies in finding the ways to extend that peace, both in terms of its duration, and in terms of the number of people it touches. One of the greatest means to do that is by reminding people of the importance of putting God first in our lives. The true spirit of religion will foster peace. However, to attain to that spirit we will need to subordinate our desire to use our religious teachings as a justification for our own mundane desires and passions.

Our passions for wealth, power, domination, and status are perhaps the greatest reasons underlying our propensity

for war. Far too often those passions are justified in the name of religion. However, true religion, regardless of its particular manifestation, would lead its possessor on a spiritual pilgrimage, a Hajj, to his or her Lord. To undertake this journey successfully, one would truly need an abundant store of piety. A true journey to God, like the Hajj, would subordinate the differences born of racial and class distinctions along with the passionate competition for hegemony that seeks to exploit those differences. A deeper understanding of the prophetic guidance will render religion a cure and not a cause of war.

Today humanity stands at a definitive crossroad. To proceed we will either uphold the loftiest principles bequeathed to us by the prophets sent by God for our guidance, principles that contain the basis for a sound human and ecological future; or we will abandon that heritage, and continue down the path to a future divorced from God, in any meaningful way. This latter path is a path that all indicators have shown will lead to our collective destruction.

An informed reader will note that what I am saying is in stark opposition to what many atheists are currently advocating. They argue that our survival involves divorcing ourselves from the "irrational fiction" of religion. Failure to do so will inevitably lead to an unbearably bloody future. I counter that religion, neither in letter nor spirit, is responsible for the slaughter of the hundreds of millions of human beings who lost their lives during the "atheistic" wars and purges of the last century.

Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, who collectively killed well over fifty million people, and the movements they led were all atheists. Similarly, the intellectual foundations of fascist thought have very little to do with traditional religion, while owing much too secular or outright atheist philosophers. Thinkers such as Nietzsche, Charles Darwin, Gustave Le Bon, Barres, George Sorels and others directly or indirectly contributed to the ideas that would lead to the megalomaniac slaughter perpetrated by Mussolini's and Hitler's regimes.<sup>8</sup> We might add that the series of wars, invasions, and military interventions undertaken by the United States throughout the latter half of the twentieth century were also not motivated by any religious considerations.

The "enlightened" and detached scientific logic and method that many atheists currently advocate to serve as the basis of our moral and ethical systems is the very logic and method that led to the creation of the hydrogen bomb, napalm, white phosphorus, "daisy cutters," and the other instruments of mass death developed and most effectively employed by the progressive sons of human reason. In light

of recent history, the increasingly loud cry that a faithless approach offers us the best chance of surmounting the daunting obstacles in the path of human progress rings hollow.

The Hajj shows us that faith-based solutions to our problems are possible. Peace is possible through God, as is brotherhood. That possibility has to be proclaimed to all people. However, it is up to us Muslims to create an attractive and viable model. To do that we must endeavor to embody the very best of our ethical system, and enter onto the road of our spiritual Hajj with the same enthusiasm, determination, and sincerity we display in undertaking our religious Hajj.

The other verse I wish to discuss is the final one in the chapter:

*Strive in the cause of God, as you rightfully should. He has chosen you and has imposed no religious difficulties on you; [this religion] involves the way of your spiritual patriarch, Abraham. It is he (God) who has named you Muslims previously, and in this [revelation]; In order that the Messenger may be a witness for you, and you witnesses for humanity. Therefore, establish regular prayer, give charity, and hold firmly to God [through trust and reliance]. He is your protector –what an excellent protector, what an excellent helper! [22:78]*

I wish to examine a single passage from this somewhat lengthy verse, namely, God's saying: ... *[This religion] involves the way of your spiritual patriarch, Abraham.*

This passage reminds us that Islam is not a novel religion. It is based upon the monotheistic foundations established by Abraham. Therefore, the Muslim's belief and practice are rooted deeply within the rich soil of the prophetic legacy. Concerning its strict monotheism, God mentions in the Qur'an,

*We have sent to every previous nation a messenger, [who] instructed them to worship God, and to avoid false deities. [16:36]*

Similarly, all of the acts of worship undertaken by the Muslim predate the Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace, although some of the particulars relating to those acts may have been altered somewhat. For example, as we have mentioned above, Abraham established the Hajj. We read that both the ritual prayer (Salat), and the binding charity (Zakat), were undertaken by Jesus, peace upon him. God mentions in the Qur'an that amongst the words Jesus uttered when he spoke in the cradle were the following,

*And He has enjoined on me the ritual prayer and the binding charity as long as I may live. [19:31]*

The practice of fasting was also known among the earlier religious communities, although the fast of Ramadan contains unique aspects. God mentions:

*O you who believe! Fasting has been ordained for you, as it was ordained for those preceding you, in order that you become more mindful of God. [2:183]*

Therefore, the Muslim should not see her faith as something novel. Rather, she should view it as a culmination of the prophetic teachings that began with Abraham. She should also see her religious striving as a preservation of those teachings. If these teachings are lost, a great and irreplaceable part of our human heritage will be lost.

Holding on to these teachings, at a time when they are under a vicious attack, will require Abrahamic courage. During his youth Abraham had the courage to challenge the idolatry of his people. He was able to demonstrate the baseless nature of their worldview by smashing their idols (21:58, 37:93).

If, for reasons outlined above, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century could be called the "century of mega-murders," it could also be called the "century of the self." The rampant egoism and narcissism unleashed by the worship of the self has predictably led multitudes of people away from God. We read in the Qur'an,

*Do you not see the one who takes as his god his personal whims; while in that state, God causes him to stray, in spite of the knowledge [he arrogantly claims]. [45:23]*

The greatest weapon in destroying the idol of the self is good character, for good character will always lead one towards dedication to others. In this regard, Abraham also serves as an exemplary model. He is described as constituting a nation. One of the meanings of this is that he embodied all of the virtuous character traits one would normally find distributed among the members of an entire nation. For example, he epitomized courage (21:60), forbearance (11:75), loyalty to his parents (9:114), thankfulness to God (16:121), acceptance of God's commandments (37:102-109), worship (2:133), wisdom in affirming truth (6:76-81), and sacrifice for future generations (14:35).

All of these characteristics will be needed as we endeavor to deepen our servitude to God and to His creation. Largeness of spirit, magnanimity of character, and the depth of our faith, will help to provide us with the provision we need as we struggle to maintain our human dignity in the face of the forces arrayed against us. Each of us has the ability to tap into that Abrahamic potential, and we will have to struggle to find the courage to do so if we are to

make a meaningful and healthy contribution to our collective future.

There is always much more to be said whenever we endeavor to articulate our reflections on the Qur'anic message. However, for now we will limit ourselves to these few remarks and conclude by wishing you all a belated 'Id Mubarak! May God bless all of the pilgrims to return safely to their homes, and may this season return to us in the coming year and find us all in a good state physically and spiritually, a little further down the road of our Hajj.

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<sup>1</sup> Imam Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad bin Isma'il al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Sidon, Beirut: Al-Maktaba al-'Asriyya, 2005/1426), 172, no. 969.

<sup>2</sup> Imam Muhammad bin Hibban, *Sahih ibn Hibban*, Shu'ayb al-Arna'ut, ed. (Beirut: Al-Mu'assasa ar-Risala, 1997/1418), 9:164, no. 3853.

<sup>3</sup> Imam Muslim bin al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim* (Beirut: Dar 'Ihya at-Turath al-'Arabi, 2000/1420), 579-580, no. 1348.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Bukhari, 266, no. 1521

<sup>5</sup> Al-Bukhari, 304, no. 1773

<sup>6</sup> This incident is related by Imam Tabari, see Imam Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir at-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan fi Ta'wil al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1997/1418), 9:134, nos. 25,039-25,044

<sup>7</sup> Imam Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad bin Majah, *Sunan ibn Majah* (Riyadh: Dar As-Salaam, 1999/1420), 604, no. 4143

<sup>8</sup> Owing the essential intellectual poverty of Hitler's National Socialism, the influence of these thinkers on Mussolini's fascist ideology is much more traceable.