



THE ORIGINAL ISLAMIC HAJJ TO JERUSALEM

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The Islamic claim to historicity is well known, but its true history is hidden in countless individual details, each of which requires individual investigation, as has been shown by Inārah's researches. For Islam, the so-called "five pillars" (*arkān al-Islām* or *arkān ad-dīn* "the pillars of faith") constitute the actual fundamental rituals of Islam, which are considered obligatory by the faithful and form the basis of Muslim life (cf. the so-called *Gabriel Hadith*). These are:

1. The *Shahāda*, the creed of Islam ("There is no god but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God");
2. *Ṣalāt*, daily ritual prayer towards Mecca (location of the Ka'ba), the qibla, which is to be performed at fixed times (*awqāt*) five times a day and which is also the supreme duty of all Muslims;
3. The *Zakāt*, the obligatory giving of a certain portion of one's possessions to the needy and other specified groups of people;
4. The *Ṣaum*, the fast between dawn and sunset during the month of Ramaḍān;
5. The *Hajj*, the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca during the month of *dhu l-ḥiġġah*.

Something about the history of Islam's development is made clear by the observation that none of these rites can basically be considered exclusively Islamic, which is confirmed by the fact that all these terms are borrowed from Aramaic (which in turn took the last four from Hebrew).

Thus, we have made a small step forward in deciphering the Islam's path of development, namely the significant role of Aramaic (Syriac)-speaking Eastern Christianity, of which some groups, among other things, rejected the divinity of Christ, and which must be regarded as the actual substrate of Islam.

But here we are largely in the Late Antique Near East, east of the Euphrates, i.e., in Mesopotamia, far away from Mecca in the endless desert of the Ḥijāz, where according to later Islamic tradition the birthplace of a "Muḥammad," and thus of Islam, is said to be located. After all, the second and fifth pillars of Islam listed above seemingly refer to this city. In the *Qur'an* itself, however, the word Mecca (*Makka*) is explicitly mentioned only once, in *Sura* 48:24: "And He it is Who hath withheld men's hands from you, and hath withheld your hands from them, in the valley of Mecca, after He had made you victors over them. Allah is Seer of what ye do."

It is often asserted, usually accompanied by claims to otherwise unknown phonetic changes, that the

mention of Bakka in 3:96 also refers to this city: "Indeed, the first House (*inna awwala baytin*) established for mankind is surely the one at Bakka, blessed, and a guidance for (all creatures in)."

And according to most commentators, 14:37 is supposed to describe this location in more detail: "Our Lord! Lo! I have settled some of my posterity in an uncultivable valley near unto Thy holy House (*'inda baytika l-muḥarami*), our Lord! that they may establish proper worship; so incline some hearts of men that they may yearn toward them, and provide Thou them with fruits in order that they may be thankful."

The precise relationship of Mecca to Bakka remains unclear, and linking them together requires a leap of faith, especially since Mecca itself is only attested very late and then only in Islamic sources which are otherwise uncorrelated. The *Qur'an* only speaks of an unspecified valley.

Bakka, on the other hand, according to the *Qur'an*, is home to "the first house," which in our opinion was not founded for the people, but by the people (*lilnnāsi* - *li*- then here as the so-called Lamed auctoris). If "the first house" means (the) temple, i.e., the supposed earthly dwelling place of God, which would then also be the "holy house," it is conceivable that 14:37 actually refers to this, which could mean a valley known as Bakka.

Islamic orthopraxy, being itself relatively late, offers no support in this regard. Islamic tradition itself notes that the original direction of prayer was not towards Mecca, but northwards or towards Syria (*aš-šam*); Muhammad is said to have changed this only in Madīna, after the Jews there refused to convert. But in the Islamic sources, the creation of legends is widespread and, as usual, quite contradictory with many subsequent attempts at harmonisation.

Thus, Mecca as the (original) point of reference for Islamic prayer is clearly an invention of later tradition – it should be mentioned in passing here that *qibla* in the sense of "direction of prayer," in the *Qur'an* only 2:142- 145, can probably be interpreted more meaningfully as *Kabbalah* in the older Jewish sense of this term, namely as "(previously) revealed scriptures" (esp. the Hebrew Bible, excluding the Torah).

As for the pilgrimage (to Mecca; cf. the Hebrew term *ḥag*, which is used in the biblical context for the three Jewish pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot and from which Hajj ultimately derives), this is attested in the verse subsequent to the mention of Bakka, i.e. 3:97: "... And pilgrimage to

the House (*ḥiğḡu l-bayti*), is a duty unto Allah for mankind, for him who can find a way thither..."

The Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca consists of various elements: on 8 *Dhu l-Hiğḡah* in Mecca after entering the consecrated state of *ihram*, the first *Ṭawāf* (the sevenfold circumambulation of the Ka'ba) is performed; this is followed by the *Sa'i*, the run between the hills Safa and Marwa (*aṣ-Ṣafā wal-Marwa*); after this pilgrims drink from the Zamzam well, after which they go to the plains of Mount 'Arafāt to keep watch; then they spend a night on the plains of Muzdalifa, and a symbolic stoning of the devil is performed by lapidating three pillars. Afterwards, the pilgrims shave their heads, perform a sacrificial ritual and celebrate the three-day festival *ʿidu l- aḏḥā*.

Julius Wellhausen postulated that the original Hajj was a ritual that only included the stations in the 'Arafāt plain, in Muzdalifa and in Mina, but had nothing to do with the Meccan sanctuary of the Ka'ba (*Reste arabischen Heidentums*, Berlin, 1897, 79-84). We will then leave the former out of consideration here; in the *Qur'an*, the Ka'ba (Arab. "Parthenon," that is a shrine originally dedicated to the virgin mother of Dushara/Dionysus/ Bacchus) is mentioned only twice, 5:95 and 97 ("Allah has made the Ka'ba, the inviolable House, a place of prayer for mankind (*l-ka'bata l-bayta l-ḥarāma qiyāman lilnnāsi*"), as well as the sacred month and the sacrificial animals and the animals with the neck ornaments.

This is so that you may know that Allah knows what is in the heavens and what is on earth, and that Allah knows all things"), whereby the reference to a specific place is not given. According to today's understanding of the Meccan part of the rite, only Safa and Marwa (*aṣ-ṣafā wal-marwa*) can be located near Mecca, the course between these two hills being given by 2:158: "Lo! (the mountains) As-Safa and Al-Marwah are among the indications of Allah. It is therefore no sin for him who is on pilgrimage to the House (of Allah) or visiteth it, to go around them (as the pagan custom is). And he who doeth good of his own accord, (for him) lo! Allah is Responsive, Aware." Again, there is no direct reference to Mecca here.

The conclusion so far, briefly summarised:

Mecca is mentioned once in the *Qur'an* (48:24), but not in relation to the Hajj. Another verse (3:96) mentions a "first house" located at Bakka, which is possibly also mentioned in 14:37 (does the one and only Allah inhabit more than one house?). A pilgrimage to the "house" is suggested in 3:97.

The run between Safa and Marwa (*aṣ-ṣafā wal-marwa*), which forms part of the Islamic Hajj, is

conditionally prescribed in 2:158. From this patchwork of Qur'anic verses, the Islamic pilgrimage in and around Mecca emerged at some point, when cannot be ascertained hitherto. In the Semitic languages, the noun *bayt* "house" can also be used in the sense of a temple dedicated to a deity, often in a genitive compound ("in the house of the Lord," *bə-bêṭ-Yahweh*, e.g. Psalm 134:1).

In biblical tradition, this term in the cultic sense actually always refers to the Jerusalem Temple; its use for an unknown, historically at best insignificant sanctuary far away in the Ḥijāz seems strange.

With regard to Jerusalem, however, in the *Jewish Antiquities* Flavius Josephus' account of Alexander the Great at Jerusalem, where he is said to have sacrificed to Yahweh in the Temple according to the instructions of the High Priest (here, since our interest remains purely geographical, the historicity of the event is insignificant), we read XI.329 (ed. Whiston): "And when he understood that he was not far from the city, he went out in procession, with the priests and the multitude of the citizens. The procession was venerable, and the manner of it different from that of other nations. It reached to a place called Sapha, which name, translated into Greek, signifies a 'prospect' (σκοπόν), for you have thence a prospect both of Jerusalem and of the temple (τά τε γὰρ ἱεροσόλυμα καὶ τὸν ναὸν συνέβαινεν ἐκεῖθεν ἀφορᾶσθαι)."

This place is none other than Mount Scopus in Jerusalem (today the main site of the Hebrew University), one of the highest places in that city (cf. one of the Arabic names: *ġabal al-mašārif*). The Hebrew name *har haṣ-šōfīm* "Watchman's Mountain" confirms Josephus' indication. In postbiblical Hebrew, a *šōf* is a pilgrim who has seen Jerusalem, cf. another Arabic name *ġabal almašhad* "Witness Mountain" (cf. above on the 'first pillar'). This mountain in Arabic rendering is then none other than *aṣ-ṣafā*.

In the biblical tradition (cf. 2 Chronicles 3:1; the Targum to *Song of Songs* 4:6 etc.) the Temple Mount (*har hab-báyit*) is Mount Moriah (*har ham-moriyyāh*; where according to Genesis 22:2 the sacrifice of Isaac almost took place), i.e. in Arabic, Marwa. On the basis of these explanations, we have in Jerusalem the "house" (*scil.* of God – *báy(i)t*), undoubtedly in the monotheistic understanding "blessed and a guidance for the worlds" (Q3,96), on the Temple Mount, that is Moriah/Marwa as well as the second mountain Scopus/*har haṣ-šōfīm/aṣṣafā*. All that remains is Bakka (3:96) and a "barren valley" (or *wadi* 14:37) near to the "house of God" (*bi-wādin ġayri ḡī zar'in 'inda baytika l-muḥarrami*).

A valley named Bakka, however, is mentioned in the Bible, Psalm 84:7: "5 Blessed are those who dwell

in your house (*bēṭākā*); in whose heart are the ways of them. 6 Who passing through the valley of Baca (*bə-‘ämāq hab-bākkā* – lit. “Valley of Weeping”) make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools. 7 They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God. 8 O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer: give ear, O God of Jacob. Selah. 9 Behold, O God our shield, and look upon the face of thine anointed.”

To all appearances, in this conception rendered here by the Psalmist, the valley of ‘weeping’ or Bakka (from the root *bkw*, also the origin of Bacchus, see above) is not far from Jerusalem. In the Targum of this psalm verse, the valley of tears/‘*ämāq hab-bākkā* is rendered “valley of Gehenna”, also the Talmudic understanding, because those damned to hell are said to wail and shed copious tears due to their infernal fate (*Eruvin* 19a). The Gehenna Valley, where child burnt offerings were once made to Yahweh (Joshua 15:8; 18:16; Jeremiah 19:2) was close to Jerusalem.

The historical site of the pre-exilic Moloch sacrifices (apparently the present-day *wādī ar-rababī*) was not, however, the same as that of Late Antique biblical exegesis, which called it the Kidron Valley (Hebrew *naḥal qidron* “the valley of darkness;” its upper course, significantly, in Arabic is *wādī annār* “the valley of fire”) or the Jehoshaphat Valley, according to Joel 3:1-3/4:1-3: “For behold, in those days and in that time, when I shall bring again the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for my people, and for mine heritage Israel: whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land. And they have cast lots for my people, and have given the child for the harlot, and sold the girl for wine, that they might drink.”

This infernal valley is by definition barren and, moreover, adjacent to the Temple Mount (*‘inda baytika l-muḥaramī*), vividly illustrating the contrast between ‘high’ and ‘low’, ‘light’ and ‘bright’, ‘redeemed’ and ‘damned’. This Judeo-Christian exegetical tradition is carried on without exception by the Islamic tradition, the valley is here called *wādī al-ğahannam* “Hell Valley,” suspended over which at the end of times during the Last Judgement, will be *aṣ-ṣirāṭ* (“way, path, road,” here rather “bridge”) connecting the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives, which in Islamic eschatology must be crossed by the deceased to reach Paradise.

This eschatological gangplank is said to be as thin as a hair, and underneath it is the abyss to hell: those who have no trust in God will falter and waver and thereupon fall thither, those however who trust God and are forgiven their transgressions shall cross unhindered. Wellhausen's insightful suggestion to

separate the Meccan parts of the Hajj rite from those taking place *extra muros* is thus seemingly accurate – the proto-Islamic pilgrimage clearly went to Jerusalem, which is actually hardly surprising. Here are located the “House (of God),” the barren valley of Bakka, as well as *aş-şafā* and *al-marwa*.

Not only is their geographical location in (post)biblical tradition assured, they also fulfil a significant function in sacramental economy that is entirely absent in Mecca. In later Islamic tradition, some Umayyad caliphs were accused of having diverted the Hajj from Mecca to Jerusalem – in the 7th century, however, one cannot yet speak of “Islam” in the proper sense – here we are probably dealing with a later memory of a past time in which pilgrimages were still made to Jerusalem, which was then considered heretical after the complete transfer of the sacred geography of the rite to Mecca.

What we have then is a memory of a time in which the Hajj was to Jerusalem, which naturally later was seen as heretical. Thus, it is clear that the roots and motifs that define the Hajj stem entirely from biblical tradition; only much later were they recast so as to fit in with emerging innovative Islamic orthopraxy.

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The [featured image](#) shows, "Vallée de la bekaa, liban," by Anne Baudequin.

