

• THE •
HAJJ



THE MUSLIM PILGRIMAGE TO
MECCA AND THE HOLY PLACES

F. E. Peters

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THE RELIGION OF ABRAHAM

THE QURAN does not explain or accept pagan ritual as such, of course, but it does offer clues. What was done at Mecca in the name of religion in the days before Islam was in part the work of a debased paganism, but it also bore some trace of what Islam's holy book calls "the religion of Abraham" (2:130), the practices that God had earlier commanded should be instituted in connection with His House in that city. The Quran says nothing, however, about the remote origins of a holy place at Mecca; it speaks only of the era of Abraham and of Ishmael there, and of the providential construction of the Ka'ba, this "sacred House" (5:100), this "ancient House" (22:29), that sat in the midst of the town. But Islamic tradition did not rest on that scriptural testimony alone. Later generations of Muslims who had access, through Jewish and Christian converts to Islam, to a vast body of stories and legends about the earliest times of God's dispensation, were able to trace the history of the Ka'ba and its sanctuary back to the very beginning of Creation, and even before.

Abraham and Ishmael in Mecca

The Quran traces the progression of God's will through the history of mankind from Adam to Abraham, with special emphasis on Noah. But Noah has no link with Mecca, and it is not until the thread of Sacred History reaches Abraham that biblical history converges with the Quran. The Quran's Abraham is called both a *muslim* and a *hanif*, terms that, in this context at least, appear to mean the opposite of an "associator," a pagan polytheist. Abraham's father and other relatives were such; and although the Quran is neither a history nor a treatise in systematic theology, we are given a fairly clear idea of the paganism from which the Patriarch had liberated himself: like the Meccans of Muhammad's day, the family of Abraham worshiped idols (Quran 21:56-65).

The Quran passes directly from Abraham's "conversion" from the paganism of his father to God's command to construct the Ka'ba. There is no mention in the sacred text of Hagar or Sarah, or of the Bible's elaborate story of the births of Ishmael and Isaac. It was left for the later tradi-

tion, which possessed more detailed and sophisticated information, to spell out the events that brought Abraham and Ishmael from the land of Palestine to distant Mecca in the Hijaz. More than one Muslim version recounts how that occurred, and the historian Tabari presents a conflation of a number of them.¹

According to . . . al-Suddi: Sarah said to Abraham, "You may take pleasure in Hagar, for I have permitted it." So he had intercourse with Hagar and she gave birth to Ishmael. Then he had intercourse with Sarah and she gave birth to Isaac. When Isaac grew up, he and Ishmael fought. Sarah became angry and jealous of Ishmael's mother. . . . She swore to cut something off her, and said to herself, "I shall cut off her nose, I shall cut off her ear—but no, that would deform her. I will circumcise her instead." So she did that, and Hagar took a piece of cloth to wipe the blood away. For that reason women have been circumcised and have taken pieces of cloth (as sanitary napkins) down to today.

Sarah said, "She will not live in the same town with me." God told Abraham to go to Mecca, where there was no House at that time. He took Hagar and her son to Mecca and put them there. . . .

According to . . . Mujahid and other scholars: When God pointed out to Abraham the place of the House and told him how to build the sanctuary, he set out to do the job and Gabriel went with him. It was said that whenever he passed a town he would ask, "Is this the town which God's command meant, O Gabriel?" And Gabriel would say: "Pass it by." At last they reached Mecca, which at that time was nothing but acacia trees, mimosa, and thorn trees, and there was a people called Amalekites outside Mecca and its surroundings. The House at that time was but a hill of red clay. Abraham said to Gabriel, "Was it here that I was ordered to leave them?" Gabriel said, "Yes." Abraham directed Hagar and Ishmael to go to al-Hijr,² and settled them down there. He commanded Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, to find shelter there. Then he said, "My Lord, I have settled some of my posterity in an uncultivable valley near Your Holy House . . . that they may be thankful" (Quran 14:37). Then he journeyed back to his family in Syria, leaving the two of them at the House.

At his expulsion from Abraham's household, Ishmael must have been about sixteen years old, certainly old enough to assist his father in the construction of the Ka'ba, as is described in the Quran and is implicit from the last line of the Tabari's narrative from Mujahid and others. Tabari's version of what next occurred is derived from Genesis 21:15-16, transferred from a Palestinian setting to a Meccan one. The object is now clearly to provide an "Abrahamic" explanation for some of the landmarks of the Meccan sanctuary and the features of the pilgrimage to it. The helpless Ishmael sounds much younger than sixteen in the tale, and some

Muslim versions of the story in fact make him a nursing infant,³ which means, of course, that Abraham will have to return on a later occasion to build the Ka'ba with him.⁴

Then Ishmael became very thirsty. His mother looked for water for him, but could not find any. She listened for sounds to help her find water for him. She heard a sound at al-Safa and went there to look around and found nothing. Then she heard a sound from the direction of al-Marwa. She went there and looked around and saw nothing. Some also say that she stood on al-Safa praying to God for water for Ishmael, and then went to al-Marwa to do the same.

Thus the origin of the pilgrimage ritual of "running" back and forth between the two hills of Safa and Marwa on the eastern side of the Meccan sanctuary. Tabari continues:

Then she heard the sounds of beasts in the valley where she had left Ishmael. She ran to him and found him scraping the water from a spring which had burst forth from beneath his hand, and drinking from it. Ishmael's mother came to it and made it swampy. Then she drew water from it into her waterskin to keep it for Ishmael. Had she not done that, the waters of Zamzam would have gone on flowing to the surface forever. (Tabari, Annals I.278-279 = Tabari II: 72-74)

Abraham the Builder

Though the Quran knows nothing of Adam's connection with Mecca or the Ka'ba there, it is explicit on the subject of Abraham as the builder of God's House.

Remember We made the House a place of assembly for the people and a secure place; and take the station of Abraham (maqam Ibrahim) as a prayer-place (musalla); and We have made a pact with Abraham and Ishmael that they should sanctify My House for those who circumambulate it, those using it as a retreat, who bow or prostrate themselves there.

And remember Abraham said: My Lord, make this land a secure one, and feed its people with fruits, those of them who believe in God and the Last Day. . . .

And remember Abraham raised the foundations of the House, yes and Ishmael too, (saying) accept (this) from us, for indeed You are All-hearing and All-knowing. (Quran 2:125-127)

And again:

Behold, We gave to Abraham the site of the House; do not associate anything with Me (in worship)! And sanctify My House for those who

circumambulate, or those who take their stand there (qa'imun), who bow or prostrate themselves there. (Quran 22:26)

What the Muslims were told on divine authority about the ancient cult center at Mecca is summed up in those verses. It was left to later generations of Muslims to seek out additional information. And many of them did. The authority here is Zamakhshari (d. 1144 C.E.), commenting on Quran 2:127:

Then, God commanded Abraham to build it, and Gabriel showed him its location. It is said that God sent a cloud to shade him, and he was told to build on its shadow, not to exceed or diminish (its dimensions). It is said that he built it from five mountains: Mount Sinai, the Mount of Olives, Lebanon, al-Judi, and its foundation is from Hira. Gabriel brought him the Black Stone from Heaven.

It is said that Abu Qubays brought it forth,⁵ and it was taken out of the place where it had been hidden during the days of the Flood. It was a white sapphire from the Garden, but when menstruating women touched it during the pre-Islamic period, it turned black.

It is said that Abraham would build it as Ishmael would hand him the stones.

"Our Lord" (2:127) means that they both said "Our Lord" [that is, not Abraham alone], and this activity took place in the location where they erected (the House) in (its) position. Abdullah demonstrated that in his reading, the meaning of which is: "The two of them raised it up, both of them saying, 'Our Lord.'" (Zamakhshari, Tafsir, 311)

Zamakhshari does not pretend to add historical detail; he simply fleshes out the story at one or another point, as does the commentator Tabarsi (d. 1153 C.E.) on Quran 2:125. Tabarsi was by then convinced, as were all of his contemporaries, that the Quran's not entirely self-evident reference to a "station of Abraham" referred to a stone venerated in the Mecca Haram.

God made the stone underneath Abraham's feet into something like clay so that his foot sunk into it. That was a miracle. It was transmitted on the authority of Abu Ja'far al-Baqir (may peace be upon him) that he said: Three stones were sent down from the Garden: the Station of Abraham, the rock of the children of Israel, and the Black Stone, which God entrusted Abraham with as a white stone. It was whiter than paper, but became black from the sins of the children of Adam.

"Abraham raised the foundations of the House" (2:127). That is, the base of the House that was [already there] before that, from Ibn Abbas and Ata, who said: Adam was the one who built it. Then its traces were wiped out. Abraham ploughed it (in the original place to establish the foundations). That is the tradition from our Imams. But Mujahid said:

Abraham raised it up (originally) by the command of God. Al-Hasan used to say: The first to make the pilgrimage to the House was Abraham. But according to the traditions of our comrades, the first to make the pilgrimage to the House was Adam. That shows that he was [the one who built it] before Abraham. It was related on the authority of al-Baqir that he said: God placed four columns beneath the Throne. . . . He said: the angels circumambulate it. Then, He sent angels who said, "Build a House like it and with its measurements on the earth." He commanded that whoever is on the earth must circumambulate the House. (Tabarsi, Tafsir I.460, 468)

This, then, is how most later Muslims understood the proximate origin of the Ka'ba, as alluded to in the Quran: to wit, the patriarch Abraham, on a visit to his son Ishmael in Mecca, put down, on God's command, the foundation of the House on a site already hallowed by Adam.⁶

The Beginning of the Hajj

Once the building of the Ka'ba was completed, God ordered Abraham to make public proclamation of the pilgrimage to be performed there.

Announce to the people the pilgrimage. They will come to you on foot and on every lean camel, coming from every deep and distant highway that they may witness the benefits and recollect the name of God in the well-known days (ayyam ma'lumat) over the sacrificial animals He has provided for them. Eat thereof and feed the poor in want. Then let them complete their rituals⁷ and perform their vows and circumambulate the Ancient House.

Such is it [that is, the pilgrimage]. Whoever honors the sacred rites of God, for him is it good in the sight of his Lord. (Quran 22:27-30)

It is clear from these and similar Quranic texts that the original pilgrimage rituals were not so much being described to Abraham as alluded to for the benefit of a Meccan audience that was already quite familiar with them.⁸ It was once again left for later commentators to fill in the details, not of the Hajj, to be sure, which was well known to all, but of Abraham and Ishmael's connection with it. The authority here is al-Azraqi (d. 834 C.E.), who, though not a Quranic commentator, was one of the earliest historians of Mecca and so an expert whose interests were somewhat different from those of Zamakhshari or Tabarsi. In this passage he describes how Abraham, at God's urging, performed that original pilgrimage ritual.

Abu al-Walid related to us . . . (from) Uthman ibn Saj: Muhammad ibn Ishaq reported to me: When Abraham the Friend of the Merciful

finished building the sacred House, Gabriel came and said: "Circle it seven times!" and he circumambulated it seven times with Ishmael, touching all the corners during each circumambulation. When they had completed seven, he and Ishmael prayed two prostrations behind the stone [maqam].

He said: Gabriel got up with them and showed him all the ritual stations: al-Safa, al-Marwa, Mina, Muzdalifa, and Arafat.

He said: When he left Mina and was brought down to (the defile called) al-Aqaba, the Devil appeared to him at Stone-Heap of the Defile (jamrat al-Aqaba). Gabriel said to him: "Pelt him!" so Abraham threw seven stones at him so that he disappeared from him. Then he appeared to him at the Middle Stone-heap (al-jamra al-wusta). Gabriel said to him: "Pelt him!" so he pelted him with seven stones so that he disappeared from him. Then he appeared to him at the "Little Stone-heap" (al-jamra al-sughra). Gabriel said to him: "Pelt him!" so he pelted him with seven stones like the little stones for throwing in a sling. So the Devil withdrew from him.

Then, Abraham finished the pilgrimage and Gabriel waited for him at the ritual stops and taught him the ritual stations up through Arafat. When they arrived there, Gabriel said to him: "Do you know your ritual stations?" Abraham answered: "Yes." He said: It is called "Arafat" because of that statement: "Do you know your ritual stations?"⁹

He said: Then Abraham was commanded to call the people to the pilgrimage. He said: Abraham said: "O Lord, my voice will not reach (them)." God answered: "You call! The reaching is My responsibility."

He said: So Abraham climbed onto the stone [maqam] and looked out from it. He became (as high as) the highest mountain. The entire earth was gathered for him on that day: the mountains and plains, the land and the sea, the humans and the jinn so that everything heard him.

He said: He stuck a finger in each ear and turned to face the south, the north, the east, and the west, and he began with the southern side. He said: "O you people! The pilgrimage to the ancient House is written as an obligation for you, so answer your Lord!" So they answered from the seven regions, and from the east and the west to the broken soil: "At Your service, O God, at Your service!"

He said: The stones were as they are today except that God desired to make the stone [maqam] a sign, so his footprint remains on the stone [maqam] to this day. . . .

He said: Everyone who has made the pilgrimage to this day was one of those who answered Abraham. Their pilgrimage (today) is a result of their response on that day. Whoever makes the pilgrimage twice has answered positively twice, three pilgrimages, answered thrice.

He said: Abraham's footprint on the stone [maqam] is a sign, which is demonstrated by the verse: "In it are clear signs [such as] the maqam Ibrahim. Whoever enters it is secure" (Quran 3:97). (Azraqi 1858: 33-34)¹⁰

As these accounts attempt to demonstrate, the complex ritual the Muslims call the Hajj or Pilgrimage can be traced back, in general and in each specific detail, to Adam and, more proximately, to Abraham, whose intent and practices Muhammad was to restore so many centuries later. For the non-Muslim, however, the Meccan rituals are striking remnants of a pagan, albeit Semitic, past in Arabia, which the Prophet of Islam permitted to survive by incorporating them into his own prescriptions. For the Muslim, it is Abraham who transforms those same rites into an authentic Muslim cultus. Abraham, the first of the submitters (*muslimum*: Quran 2:131, and elsewhere), was also the first of the generation after the Flood to perform the rites, and Muslims are simply commemorating what the Patriarch himself had done under God's guidance.¹¹

THE PRIMITIVE SANCTUARY

Midway in the Arabian peninsula, between the Jordanian border on the north and that of Yemen on the south, forty-five miles inland from the Red Sea port of Jidda, stands the city of Mecca and, in its midst, an unusual building called simply *al-Ka'ba* or "the Cube." The flat-roofed building rises from a narrow marble base on mortared courses of a local blue-gray stone, and its dimensions are not exactly cubical: it is fifty feet high, and while its northeast wall and its southwestern mate are forty feet long, the two "side" walls are five feet shorter. It is the corners rather than the walls that are oriented toward the compass points. The northeastern face is the facade in the sense that in it is the only door of the building, about seven feet above ground level. Inside is an empty room with a marble floor and three wooden pillars supporting the roof. There are some inscriptions on the walls, hanging votive lamps, and a ladder leading up to the roof. Built into the eastern corner of the Ka'ba, about four feet above the ground, is a blackish stone of either lava or basalt, which is fractured and now held together by a silver band. The building is draped with a black brocade cloth embroidered in gold with Quranic texts; the bottom edge can be raised or lowered by a series of cords and rings.

The Ka'ba stands in the midst of an open space enclosed by porticoes. This is the Haram, the "sanctuary," and there are some other constructions in it. Facing the northeastern facade wall of the Ka'ba is a small domed building called the Station of Abraham (*maqam Ibrahim*), a title

that applies equally to the stone that it enshrines and in which human footprints are impressed. Behind this building is a colonnaded wellhead called Zamzam, and next to that a pulpit.

For hundreds of millions of Muslims the Ka'ba is the holiest building in the world, and its holiness, like that of the Zamzam and the Station of Abraham and, indeed, of the entire sequence of pilgrimage rituals that surround them and the environs of Mecca, derives, as we have already seen, from their connection with Abraham, the biblical patriarch. It is to this shrine complex that we now turn.

The Haram

Mecca the *haram*, the holy place, appears to antedate Mecca the city. The later Muslim authorities credit establishment of the latter to Qusayy, who, if he is a historical personage, must be dated in the late fourth or early fifth century C.E.¹² That there was a shrine before a settlement in that inhospitable valley we assume simply from the circumstances of the place: Mecca possessed none of the normal inducements to settlement, none, certainly, that would give the place a history or even a long tradition of contested possession. A holy place, on the other hand, requires little beyond the sanctity of the site, a sanctity connected with a spring, a tree, or a mountain. Only its sanctity, however obscure the origins of that holiness, explains the existence of Mecca, and only a shrine linked to other considerations—social, economic, or political—explains the eventual presence of a city there.

It was the Zamzam, then, or perhaps the two high places called Safa and Marwa,¹³ that established the sanctity of the site of Mecca, though how long before Qusayy we cannot say. Our sources, as we have seen, trace the sanctity of the Meccan Haram exclusively to the Ka'ba, the edifice built at God's express command by Abraham and Ishmael. In the face of this unyielding unanimity in the literary sources, there are two ways to approach the shrine at Mecca: to compare the evidence of ancient Semitic cult centers that seem similar to the arrangement in Mecca; and to examine more contemporary evidence in the expectation that some of the older practices survived the advent of Islam. What we know of early practice comes chiefly from literary sources like Ibn al-Kalbi (d. 821 C.E.), and such information will be noted in due course. As for archeological evidence, it is sparse indeed, particularly from Arabia, where excavation is still in its very early stage and the sparse results are speculative in the extreme.¹⁴

At least for the time being, then, we are left with the Muslim literary authorities. More promising than archaeological tidbits are other examples of the shrine phenomenon, some from ancient sources and some reflecting more contemporary practice in Arabia, which can be used to

understand and interpret the often random information supplied by the early Muslim authors.

Before Islam, Arab law was what it continued to be in many places even after Islam, namely, customary law, a set of procedures that governed the behavior of one member of a tribe toward all other members of the same tribe. This "internal" law was neither divinely prescribed nor supernaturally guaranteed but was rather constituted by a type of *mos majorum*, defined by constant usage within the tribe and reinforced by the tribe's willingness to impose sanctions on its own members.

No such system prevailed among the tribes, however, and the Arab version of international law had to appeal to other, more universal grounds. We are less certain of how this larger order operated, under what aegis tribe met tribe and conducted social and economic business or resolved differences in an atmosphere of security. We can find no divinely revealed or guaranteed law and order prevailing among tribes, yet the religious component seems more apparent on this international scale than it does within tribes. The tribes came together in sacred months, on sacred terrain, and often under the (temporary) tutelage of what are clearly religious figures.

There was and is more than one holy domain at Mecca. At the heart of the present city, and of the settlement for as long as we have records, there is a holy building, the Ka'ba, which is venerated by a series of ritual acts but which is apparently no more taboo than the space that surrounds it: entry is not restricted, for example, as it was in the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem.¹⁵ The Ka'ba is in turn surrounded by two larger areas, both defined in the manner of a *temenos* and both marked by prohibited and privileged behavior within them. The one immediately surrounding the Ka'ba is called the "sacred shrine" (*al-masjid al-haram*) and was regarded in Muslim times as a mosque. A third and far larger area, the true *haram* and called simply by that name, extends well beyond the settled area of Mecca city and is defined by stone boundary markers (*ansab al-haram*).¹⁶ This is the sacred territory prohibited to non-Muslims throughout its history.

The Ka'ba

The Quran's interest in the history of the Ka'ba, "the House," as the sacred book often calls it, extends no further than Abraham and Ishmael's role in its construction. But God's Book gave it a central place in the new Islamic cult, both as the continuing center of certain rituals, such as the circumambulation long practiced in Mecca, and as the *qibla*, or focal point, to which every Muslim would turn in the new liturgical prayers prescribed by Islam. With that incentive, Muslims turned to reconstruct-

ing out of their own memories, and out of the stuff of legend, a history of "the House." The task was neither simple nor direct: between Abraham's original construction and the building remembered by the earliest Muslims were a series of possessions at the hands of various pagans who had occupied Mecca. Consequently, there was a strong likelihood that the building had been modified to one degree or another.¹⁷

In a chapter entitled "The Building of the Ka'ba by the Quraysh in the Age of Barbarism," the Meccan historian al-Azraqi (d. 834 C.E.) collected some of the traditions still extant on the early appearance of the House before its substantial reconstruction during the early manhood of Muhammad.

Some men from Quraysh sat in the sanctuary . . . and were remembering the building of the Ka'ba and they described how it was before that time. It was built of dried [unmortared] stones and not with clay or mud. Its door was on ground level and it had no roof or ceiling. The curtain (kiswa) was hung on its wall on one side and was tied to the top of the center of the wall. On the right as one entered the Ka'ba there was a pit where gifts of money and goods for the Ka'ba were deposited. In this pit sat a snake to guard it, which God had sent at the time of the (tribe of) Jurhum. . . . The horns of the ram that Abraham had slaughtered (in place of Isaac or Ishmael) were hanging on the wall facing the entrance. The were ornaments hanging in it which had been given as gifts. (Azraqi 1858: 106)

Tabari tells a story from Ibn Ishaq that casts a little more light on the earlier building:

The reason for their [the Quraysh's] demolition of the Ka'ba (early in the seventh century C.E.) was that at this time it consisted of loose stones rising to somewhat above a man's height, and they wished to make it higher and roof it over since some men, Quraysh and others, had stolen the treasure of the Ka'ba, which was kept in a well in its interior. (Tabari, Annals 1.1130 = Tabari VI: 51)

By this account the Ka'ba does not appear to be a house at all but rather some kind of enclosure built around a pit or dry well, an enclosure that was, however, draped with a cloth curtain (*kiswa*) in a manner to give it the appearance of a tent. Some Arab authors in fact called the early Ka'ba by the same name used to describe the Israelites' tent or tabernacle in the desert.¹⁸ It is unlikely, however, that such a rude enclosure would be called, as the Meccan edifice was for as long as we have a historical tradition, "the cube," for that is indeed what *ka'ba* means. A tentlike structure makes more sense, and it has been plausibly suggested that the later cubi-

form stone building, the ancestor of the one that stands in Mecca today, succeeded a square or quadrangular tent and so was distinguished from the round tents of the inhabitants of the settlement.¹⁹ The sequence would not be very different, then, from the Israelite one: the Ark of the desert wanderings continued to be housed in a tent even after its transfer to urban Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:17); and when it was finally housed in a stone building, that "holy of holies" was likewise a *ka'ba*, twenty cubits in length and width and height (1 Kings 6:20).

Nor was Mecca's the only such building in Arabia. An early Muslim historian of the antiquities, Hisham ibn al-Kalbi, reported the presence of other *ka'bas* in and around the peninsula:

The Banu al-Harith ibn Ka'b had in Najran a ka'ba which they venerated. It is the one mentioned by al-A'sha in one of his poems. It has been claimed that it was not a ka'ba for worship, but merely a hall for people mentioned by a poet. In my opinion this is very likely the case since I have not heard of the Banu al-Harith ever mentioning it in their poetry.

The Iyad had another ka'ba in Sindad, (which is located) in a region between Kufa and Basra (in Iraq). It is mentioned by al-Aswad ibn Ya'fur in one of his poems. I have, however, heard that this house was not a place of worship. Rather it was just a famous building and it was for that reason that al-Aswad mentioned it.

A certain man of the Junayna named Abd al-Dar ibn Hudayb once said to his people, "Come, let us build a house, to be located in a spot in their territory called al-Hawra, with which we might rival the Ka'ba (at Mecca), and so attract to ourselves many of the bedouin." They deemed his suggestion very grave and refused his request. (Ibn al-Kalbi 1952: 38-39)

As Ibn al-Kalbi somewhat reluctantly testifies, in Mecca we are in the presence of a not unusual type of Arabian, or perhaps even Semitic, temple building. The Meccan exemplar is unusual only in that it housed no deity. Unhappily, all the evidence is literary: we have no preserved examples save the Meccan one of what might reasonably be called a *ka'ba*. We cannot say, then, how typical the obviously crude Meccan structure was. But whether typical or not, its primitive and makeshift architecture comes as no surprise: not only was it situated in a wadi, and so vulnerable to the normal destructive consequences; but the Meccan Ka'ba was also built to serve people who were originally nomads and who had, even by the late sixth century, so little skill at construction that they required the assistance of a foreign carpenter to put a timber roof on the edifice. But for all that, it was a temple and had all the primary characteristics of such: a quadrangular cella oriented to the cardinal compass points,²⁰ a sacred

rock and sacred spring, a characteristic *haram* with the usual privileges of the right of asylum, and so on.²¹

In most ancient temples, in obvious contrast to later synagogues, churches, and mosques, whatever ritual was required was practiced outside the building, generally in the form of sacrifice upon an altar. The inner parts of the building might be entered; but because they were regarded as the domicile of the god, entry was denied to the profane, those who stood "before the shrine." Indeed, at that other Semitic temple in Jerusalem, access to the *ka'ba*, the cube-shaped Holy of Holies, was severely limited to the high priest, and then under strictly controlled circumstances. Although it is true that the primary liturgy connected with the Mecca building, the ritual circumambulation, was performed outside, there is almost no trace, either before or under Islam, of the notion that the interior of the *Ka'ba* was in any way more sacred than the surrounding *Haram*. Access to it was controlled, as we shall have many occasions to see, but exclusively, it would appear, on the grounds of political privilege. People, including Muhammad himself, prayed both inside and outside the *Ka'ba*²² and visited it whenever the privilege was granted to them. The *Ka'ba* was not, then, a more sacred *haram* within the larger *Haram* that surrounded it. The truly profane non-Muslims were kept out of Mecca, or even Arabia at times, and no Muslim might approach the *precincts* of Mecca as a pilgrim without having previously entered, like a Jerusalem high priest, a state of ritual purity.

The Black Stone

Built into the southeast corner of the *Ka'ba*, about four feet from the ground, is the Black Stone. According to Muslim tradition, this had been a part, though not a structural part, of the building from the beginning, that is to say, from Adam's original construction of the House of God. But the tradition also remembered that the stone had come from Abu Qubays, a mountain overlooking Mecca.²³ The two strands of tradition were harmonized in an account whereby the stone was concealed on Abu Qubays during the era of the Flood, when Adam's original *Ka'ba* was destroyed, and then restored to Abraham for inclusion in his version of the *Ka'ba*.²⁴

But the harmonization was not perfect. Other traditions recollected that the Black Stone, or at least its inclusion in the *Ka'ba*, was of much more recent origin. Ibn Sa'd says that the Quraysh brought it down from Abu Qubays only four years before Muhammad's first revelation.²⁵ In another account, from al-Fakihi, it is traced back to the Quraysh's first reconstruction of the building, possibly at the time of Qusayy.²⁶

Was the Black Stone part of the construction of the Ka'ba from the beginning? The sources are obviously uncertain on the question, and so too are we, though the probability seems high that it was. On one account, the gathering of local idols into the Meccan sanctuary goes back to the time of the pre-Quraysh ruler Amr ibn Luhayy;²⁷ and as a sacred stone from Abu Qubays, the Black Stone too would have been part of Amr's religious *synoikism*.²⁸ But if, as seems equally likely, the stone was originally one of the portable betyls of the early settlers at Mecca, its incorporation into the structure of the Ka'ba, like the depiction of similar stones on the walls of temples at Mada'in Salih and elsewhere, would signal the decision of nomads to make a fixed settlement.²⁹

The *Hijr*

Opposite the northwestern face of the Ka'ba is an area of special sanctity defined by a low semicircular wall (*hatim*). The area is called the *hijr*, and Muslim tradition identifies it as the burial place of Ishmael and Hagar.³⁰ Not much is said of it in pre-Islamic times. The area first becomes prominent when Ibn al-Zubayr, a seventh-century Muslim ruler of Mecca, incorporated it into the Ka'ba by connecting the *hatim* to the building. His work was shortly undone, and the *hatim* was left a free-standing wall, as it is today. There are few plausible explanations of why there should be a wall there in the first place. It has been suggested, for example, that a low wall, and so the *hijr* enclosure, once surrounded the Ka'ba on all sides and marked the area within which the idols were worshiped through sacrifice,³¹ or, more enticingly but less convincingly, that the *hatim* represents the remains of the apse of a Christian church oriented toward Jerusalem, which, it will be seen, was the direction in which once Muhammad prayed while he was still at Mecca.³²

The word *hijr* itself means "inviolable" or "taboo," and it occurs once in that sense in the Quran (6:137-139), in reference not to the area near the Ka'ba but to animals and crops earmarked as belonging to the gods, a sense that supports the contention that the *hijr*, whatever its original extent, may have served as a pen for the animals destined for sacrifice to the idols around the Ka'ba.³³ Whether it was so used in Muhammad's own lifetime seems doubtful, however, at least on the evidence of the Muslim authorities. As the *hijr* is portrayed in Muhammad's day, it was a place of common assembly where political matters were discussed, or people prayed, or, as it appears, slept.³⁴

We may be misreading the evidence, however. The sleepers in the *hijr* are generally dreamers, and their dreams have a divine purport: Abd al-Muttalib was inspired to discover the Zamzam while sleeping there, the

mother of the Prophet had a vision of her son's greatness, and Muhammad was visited by Gabriel there before beginning his celebrated Night Journey—all commonplace examples of inspiration in the course of an incubation, that is, sleeping in a sacred place.³⁵ The latter example is particularly striking in light of the fact that Jacob's dream of the ladder reaching to heaven (Genesis 28:11-19) took place at the "House of God" and the "gate of heaven," a spot that the Jewish tradition identified as the place where Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac—or Ishmael, as the Muslims sometimes had it—and where the Temple was later located. Ishmael too, the Muslims claimed, had been promised by God that a gate into heaven would be opened for him in the *hijr*.³⁶

Another Stone: The *Maqam Ibrahim*

The Black Stone was not the only venerated stone in the Meccan sanctuary. In Islamic times visitors were shown one bearing the footprint of Abraham himself and called the "station" or "standing place" of Abraham (*maqam Ibrahim*). The latter expression occurs twice in the Quran. The mention at 3:97 is connected with a place called Bakka, apparently the site of the House³⁷ and the place in which are God's manifest signs, including the Station of Abraham, an allusion that suggests a place within the Haram. In 2:125 the believers are urged to "take the *maqam Ibrahim* as a place of prayer (*musalla*)," or, more literally, "take some place from the *maqam Ibrahim* as a place of prayer," a mode of expression that suggested to some commentators that the "station of Abraham" might refer to the entire sanctuary or even the entire area of the pilgrimage.³⁸ In the end, however, the consensus settled upon the free-standing stone also located within the sanctuary.

As with much else connected with the sanctuary, there was no great assurance on why this particular stone was called the Station of Abraham.³⁹ Although it made easy sense to suggest that Abraham stood upon it while building the Ka'ba, a far more likely explanation traces it back to Abraham's place of prayer. Indeed, there is an explicit reference in Genesis 19:17 to just such a place: "Abraham rose early and went to the place where he had stood (*maqom*) in the presence of the Lord." The Talmud cites this passage (BT Berakhot 6b) when it recommends that each believer should have a personal *maqom* for prayer.⁴⁰

Whatever was being referred to in the Quranic verse, there was a stone in the Haram at Mecca, measuring roughly two feet by three feet; and as we shall see, it had a history in the Islamic era. Part of that history was the discovery (or rediscovery) in 870 C.E. that there was writing on the stone. The occasion was a refurbishing of the stone—it had earlier become cracked and the parts pinioned together—and there was a very good wit-

ness present, the subsequent historian of the city, al-Fakihi, who recorded the events of that occasion in his *Chronicle of Mecca*.

When the stone was brought on the 1st of I Rabi^c to the government house . . . people examined it closely. And I looked on with them.

Fakihi noted a variety of lines and geometric shapes on the stone and an inscription:

There is an inscription on the stone in Hebrew, but some say it is in Himyari script. It is the inscription which the Quraysh found in the Age of Barbarism. I copied the inscription from the maqam on the order of (the governor) Ali ibn al-Hasan with my own hand. I copied it (exactly) as I saw it inscribed on the stone and I spared no effort. And this is what I copied.

The Fakihi manuscript reproduces three lines of the inscription. The rest was unclear to him, and he did not copy it. He inquired among other scholars as to the meaning of the lines, and Abu Zakariyya al-Maghribi, an expert in Egyptian hieroglyphics, translated it for him: "I am God, there is no deity except Me" (first line) "a king who is unattainable" (second line) "Isbaut" (third line). Abu-l-Hasan al-Faridi quoted from the *Tafsir* of Sunayd a passage for the elucidation of the meaning of the transliterated but untranslated *Isbaut* as corresponding to *al-Samad*, "the Eternal," in Arabic.⁴¹ Al-Fakihi then records a tradition traced back to Ibn Abbas stating that there is an inscription on the *maqam* saying: "This is the House of God, He put it on the quadrangles of His throne, its sustenance will come from this and that, its people will be the first to suspend its sanctity."⁴²

The Zamzam

Close by the Ka'ba is a well from whose depths water can be drawn for the benefit of the pilgrims who cherish the well-attested blessings that come to those who drink it. If pilgrims are drawn to it, so too are historians, who see in the source called Zamzam a plausible explanation of why there was a sanctuary in the wadi of Mecca in the first place. In the nineteenth century Julius Wellhausen pronounced the Zamzam "the only spring of Mecca and so likely the origin of the holy place as well as the city," and other authorities have generally been inclined to agree.⁴³ There are problems, however. Other wells quenched Mecca,⁴⁴ as Ibn Ishaq reveals when speaking of the Zamzam.

Zamzam utterly eclipsed the other wells from which the pilgrims used to get their water, and the people went to it because it was in the sacred

enclosure and because its water was superior to any other; and also because it was the well of Ishmael, son of Abraham. Because of it the Banu Abd Manaf behaved boastfully towards the Quraysh and the other Arabs. (Ibn Ishaq 1955: 65)

The Zamzam was not, then, unique; it was simply superior, and the basis of that superiority—leaving aside the debated question of the quality of its water—was that its origin went back to Abrahamic days, when, as we have seen, it was miraculously discovered and saved the life of Ishmael. Zamzam, it was argued, was thus mentioned in the Bible, particularly if one accepted its identification with the miraculous life-saving spring mentioned in Genesis 21:19.⁴⁵

The Zamzam was said to have been hidden by the pagan Jurhum who succeeded Ishmael, and it remained unknown and unused down to the days of Abd al-Muttalib, Muhammad's grandfather. Abd al-Muttalib was a descendent of Abd Manaf, the son to whom Qusayy, that founder of Quraysh—and Meccan—fortunes, handed on as a hereditary trust the office of *siqaya*, the privilege of supplying water to the Meccan pilgrims. On the face of it, this possibly lucrative honor could have had nothing to do with the Zamzam, because the well was unknown to Qusayy and every member of Abd Manaf down to Abd al-Muttalib. Did the Zamzam replace the other wells of Mecca at some point, perhaps at some very late date in the history of the city, when the Abrahamic story began to circulate? There are grounds for thinking so, not the least of which is the lack of any essential connection between the Zamzam and its water and the pre- or post-Islamic Hajj.⁴⁶

Safa and Marwa

Somewhat to the east of the Ka'ba were two low hills, which have since disappeared under the leveling topography of modern Mecca. The one on the south was called Safa and that on the north Marwa, and there occurred between them one of the ritual acts connected with the religious life of Mecca. It was, in fact, another form of circumambulation, a circling back and forth between the two places, part of which had to be conducted at a run, whence its later name, "the running" (*sa'y*). The practice was later incorporated into the Umra and the Hajj, though obviously not without some objection, as is manifest from the Quran's reference to it:

Indeed, Safa and Marwa are among the indications of God. So for those who make the Hajj to the House or the Umra, there is no sin in circumambulating them. (Quran 2:158)

This is as much as the Quran says. But the Muslim tradition offers two explanations for the practice, one "pagan" and one "Abrahamic." As we have already seen, the latter simply identifies Hagar's frantic search for water for the infant Ishmael with the ritual running between the hills before her providential discovery of the Zamzam. What is obviously an older and more primitive explanation has to do with two humans named Asaf and Na'ila, members of the Jurhum:

(The Quraysh) adopted Asaf (or Isaf) and Na'ila by the place of Zamzam, sacrificing beside them. They were (originally) a man and a woman of Jurhum . . . who copulated in the Ka'ba so God transformed them into two stones. . . . But God alone knows whether this is the truth. (Ibn Ishaq 1955: 37)

Despite Ibn Ishaq's explicit misgivings, the colorful story became current in the Muslim authors and has been the point of departure for a wide variety of attempts to explain the reality, if any, behind the story and its connection with the "running" ritual.⁴⁷ The names, which have to do with stones, appear to be Aramaic rather than Arabic and so have suggested foreign origins. What were transparently sacred stones, or perhaps stone idols—the Jurhum story may reflect an etiological myth or be a distant echo of some form of ritual prostitution at the Ka'ba or nearby⁴⁸—were originally worshiped atop the "high places" of Safa and Marwa and then brought down somewhere in the vicinity of the Ka'ba by Qusayy himself. The circumambulation ritual continued to be performed at the two hills, but thereafter sacrifices were offered at the new sites of the idols.⁴⁹

ARABIAN PAGANISM

The Muslim Arab authorities were not at all certain who of the early Arab intruders, the Jurhum or the Khuza'a, was first or chiefly responsible for turning Ishmael's holy place into a pagan city. More, their version of the degradation of the Meccan cultus has to do principally with the cult of idols, though we are assured by somewhat wider evidence that who was being worshiped in Arabia, and how and why, were much broader questions than our eighth- and ninth-century sources were willing to allow. The inhabitants of Arabia assuredly had a religious tradition before Islam, and although we are not particularly well informed about it, that tradition appears to have been quite complex. And this is what we would expect to discover in societies that were splintered into tribes and clans of widely varying sizes, some of them sedentary and some of them nomadic,