Pilgrimage to Mecca

by Samaan bin Jabir Al Nasaib, 1987

During the seventh century a major religion called Islam emerged in the Middle East. According to Islamic faith, around A.D. 610 an Arab merchant named Muhammad heard a voice tell him that there is only one God—for which the Arabic word is Allah—and that he, Muhammad, was Allah’s messenger. Followers of Muhammad’s teachings became known as Muslims, or “followers of Islam.” After Muhammad’s death these teachings were gathered into a book called the Quran (Kaw RAN). The Quran is believed by Muslims to be the teachings of God. The Quran teaches that Muhammad is the last in the line of prophets, or people who deliver a message believed to be from God. Muslims believe that earlier prophets were Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. One of the duties that all Muslims try to fulfill at least once in their lives is to make a journey to the city of Mecca, the birthplace of Muhammad. What is this journey like? In the following selection from an oral history, a Muslim from Saudi Arabia named Samaan bin Jabir Al Nasaib describes his recent pilgrimage to Mecca. What are some of the rituals that Jabir Al Nasaib performs during his pilgrimage? How do these rituals relate to his religious beliefs?

My family traces its descent from the oldest of the tribes of this part of the world. Some say that we can trace our heritage back to Adam. Whether or not this is so, we have been landowners and sheikhs in the Wadi Najran for as long as anybody can remember. We grow corn, wheat and citrus fruit here.

I suppose the high spot of my life was performing the Hajj [hahj] in the company of my son Maana. The Hajj is the name we give to the pilgrimage that Muslims make to Mecca, to the Holy Kaaba [KAH buh], Abraham’s “House of God.” This pilgrimage is one of the “five pillars of Islam,” the other four being the belief in one God, prayer five times a day, the giving of alms and fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. What a proud and spiritually rewarding moment it was for me to make my seven rounds of the Kaaba with my son beside me!

The Hajj requires great physical stamina as well as religious zeal. The Hajijs, as pilgrims are called, must all wear a special garment consisting of two white lengths of cotton, without seams, emphasizing the equality of all men in the sight of God. We put the garment on at the start of our journey, after ritual washing and prayer.

On arrival in Mecca, after further washing and prayer, the pilgrims go directly to the Kaaba and circle it seven times in an anti-clockwise
direction. On passing the Black Stone, they should try either to kiss it or at least touch it. This stone is a meteorite and is traditionally held to be a link between the Prophet Mohammed, Abraham and Adam.

After the duties of the Kaaba, pilgrims are required to run between two hills, Al Safa and Al Marwah, which both have links with Abraham’s wife, Hagar. While doing this they are praying all the while. Pilgrims may then drink from the spring of Zam Zami, which is referred to in the Old Testament (of the Bible). Male pilgrims then have their heads shaved, or more commonly today, their hair cut.

Now follows a visit to Mount Arafat, where Mohammed gave his farewell sermon. A whole afternoon is spent in the open air, on the Plain of Arafat, standing bareheaded, glorifying God and reading the Koran.

Crowds of pilgrims spend the night under the stars at Musdalifah, and each collects seventy small pebbles. Then they make their way to Mina, the end of the journey, where there are three stone pillars. Seven of the pebbles are then cast at the pillars, an act symbolic of mankind casting out the evil from within. Then animals are sacrificed and the meat given to the poor. Before returning home, the pilgrims throw the remaining pebbles at the pillars.

The pilgrimage ends after a final symbolic cutting of hair. Some pilgrims take this opportunity of going on to Medina, where they can visit the Tomb of Mohammed, and the Prophet’s Mosque.

Back on my farm in the Wadi Najran, I often remember those privileged days I spent in Mecca.

*Today over 1 billion people—or about one in six people in the world—are Muslims. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all emerged in western Asia. Thousands of miles to the east, two other major religions also developed long ago. To learn more about these other two religions, read the documents on pages 26–27 and 30–31.*