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## The Qur'an and Jesus' Birth

Although many non-Muslims may find it strange, Jesus' birth is written about in the Qur'an in detail. This is because Islam recognizes Jesus as being one of the Prophets sent by God; in fact, he is considered one of the five greatest and most important Messengers of God, along with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Muhammad (peace be upon them all). This is the story of the birth of the prophet Jesus as told in the Qur'an.

Mary's mother was a devout woman. When she was pregnant with Mary, she prayed for her, dedicating her unborn child to the service of God. When Mary grew older, she was given into the care of Prophet Zachariah. She had a private room where she worshipped and prayed; God provided her with her needs. **"Whenever Zachariah entered the sanctuary to (see) her, he found with her food. He said: O Mary! whence comes this to you? She said: It is from God. Surely God gives to whom He pleases without measure."**

When Mary was a young woman, after she had been living in the household of Prophet Zachariah for some time, she was visited by angel Gabriel. She was afraid, but the angel greeted her, saying **"O Mary! God has chosen you and purified you, and chosen you above the women of all nations. God gives you glad tidings of a word from Him."** The angel revealed that she would give birth to a son. **"His name will be The Messiah Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honor in this world and the Hereafter and of the company of those nearest to God."** She asked how she could have a son when no man had yet touched her, and was told that God creates what he wills with just a word. Jesus, the angels told her, would be a Messenger (Prophet) to the Children of Israel who would heal the blind and the lepers and raise the dead as signs from God. He would say to the people, **"I have come to you to attest the Law which was before me, and that I may allow you part of that which has been forbidden to you. It is God Who is my Lord and your Lord. Then worship Him. This is a Way that is straight."** Mary was indeed a virgin – it is written of her, **"And remember her who guarded her chastity. We breathed into her of Our spirit, and we made her and her son a sign for all peoples."**

When her time came, she was alone in a remote place

in the Bethlehem valley, where she had gone after the miraculous conception occurred. The pain of childbirth drove her to a palm tree, where she cried out to God in her pain. So God provided her with a spring of water at the base of the tree, and told her through the voice of the angel Gabriel to shake the tree so that ripe dates would fall. She refreshed her strength with the water and dates provided for her.

After Jesus was born, Mary returned to her family with the infant. They rebuked her, saying: O Mary! What have you brought us? **"Your father was not a man who used to commit adultery, nor your mother an unchaste woman."** She responded by pointing at the baby, to indicate that they should ask him about his parentage. Her family scoffed at this, but Jesus spoke from the cradle, saying **"I am indeed a servant of God. He has given me the Scripture and made me a Prophet, and He has made me blessed wheresoever I be, and has enjoined on me prayer and charity as long as I live."**

Islam recognizes Jesus (peace be upon him) as a prophet – a messenger from God. But the Qur'an does not consider him to be God. As it is written, **"The Messiah, son of Mary, was no more than a messenger; many were the messengers that passed away before him. His mother was a woman of truth. They both used to eat food (as any other human being, while God does not eat). Look how We make the signs clear to them, yet look how they are deluded away (from the truth)."** Also, **"Surely, they have disbelieved who say: 'God is the Messiah, son of Mary.' But the Messiah said: 'O Children of Israel! Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.' Verily, whosoever set up partners (in worship) with God, then God has forbidden Paradise to him, and the Fire will be his abode, and there shall be no helpers for the unjust"**

Jesus (peace be upon him) exhorted Israel to return to the worship of God – but did not claim to be that God. His mission was to confirm the Law that had been given to Israel, to make lawful some of what had formerly been forbidden, and to remind the Children of Israel of their responsibility toward the one God – a mission so important for humanity that, like Adam, Jesus came into being by the divine will.

“Surely the likeness of Jesus is with God as the likeness of Adam; He created him from dust, then said to him, ‘Be,’ and he was.”

By: Heather Irwin

*To read about Jesus in the Qur'an, see 3:35-51, 3:59, 5:72-75, 19:1-36, 21:91, and 66:12, and many other verses of the Qur'an.*

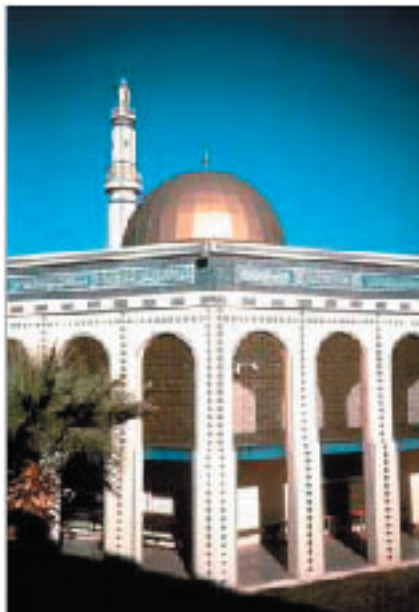
***And say to My servants (that) they speak that which is best; surely the Satan sows dissensions among them; surely the Satan is an open enemy to man***

***Qur'an 17:53***

## American Mosques

More than 1,200 mosques and Islamic centers have existed in this country, according to a survey conducted in the latter part of the 1990s, but fewer than 100 were actually designed as mosques. The survey revealed that most Islamic congregations in the United States began in buildings that had been constructed for other purposes -- fire stations, theaters, warehouses, and shops.

The situation changed, however, after 1965 when the first large-scale influx of Muslims from various countries came to the United States. Mosques then began to be built for the sole purpose of ministering to the Muslim community as houses of worship and community centers. The great variety of religious diversity and ethnicity among American Muslims today is reflected in the variety of building design and organization.



The photographer and chronicler of mosque architecture, Dr. Omar Khalidi, a senior research scholar at the Aga Khan Program in Islamic Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, explains the three types of mosque architecture that now flourish in the United States.

“First, there are mosques that embody a traditional design transplanted from one -- or several -- Islamic lands,” Dr.

Khalidi points out. “Second, there are those that represent a reinterpretation of tradition, sometimes combined with elements of American architecture. Third are the designs that are entirely innovative, like those of the Islamic Society of North America’s headquarters in Plainfield, Indiana.”

Most of the mosques in all three categories also function as classrooms, libraries, conference centers, bookshops, kitchens, and social halls, even as residential apartments.

Another important consideration in mosque architecture is the space for women to worship. In America, women generally are an integral part of mosque activities and play a very active role in the Muslim community. In a typical American Muslim family, the entire family turns out for worship, necessitating separate space for women, usually at a mezzanine level.

In many instances, mosque architecture in North America reflects the prevailing building designs of the area. “Over time a standard design will evolve which will be a happy blend between nostalgia and innovation,” Dr. Khalidi predicts. “The new emerging mosques in the West are a far cry from just domes and minarets.

*Taken from the site that is produced and maintained by the U.S. Dept. of State’s Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov)*

## THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

Every action which is done with the awareness that it fulfills the will of God is considered an act of worship in Islam. Nevertheless, the specific acts of worship, termed the pillars of Islam, provide the framework of spiritual life.

The 'Five Pillars' of Islam are the foundation of Muslim life:

- 1- Testimony of Faith.
- 2- Establishment of the daily prayers.
- 3- Zakat (Obligatory Charity).
- 4- Fasting the Month of Ramadan.
- 5- The pilgrimage to Mecca for those who are able.

This month, we discuss the Pilgrimage and its spiritual value.

### The Pilgrimage

In many verses, the Qur'an alludes to life being a journey toward the Creator. **"Truly! To God we belong and truly, to Him we shall return."** Qur'an 2:156 **"And to God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And all matters go back (for decision) to God."** Qur'an 3:109

Also the believers say: **"We hear, and we obey. (We seek) Your Forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the return (of all)."** Qur'an 2:285

A scholar from the second generation of Muslims was asked, "What will it be like to go before God?" He answered, "For some it will be like a reunion with a long lost loved one. For others it will be like a runaway slave being dragged back to his master."

As it is stated in the Qur'an, life is a journey toward the Creator. Pilgrimage is also a reminder that life is a journey. During the Pilgrimage, you disentangle yourself from the routine of life and forego the comforts and familiarity of home. You expose yourself to uncertainty, inconvenience – maybe even danger - in search of a spiritual gain.

The pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the Hajj, is an obligation once in a life time and only for those who are physically and financially able to do so. Nevertheless, over two million people go to Mecca each year from every corner of the globe providing a unique opportunity for those of different nations to meet one another on their spiritual journey.

The annual Hajj begins in the twelfth month of the Islamic year (which is lunar, not solar, and that is why Hajj and Ramadan fall sometimes in the summer, sometimes in the winter). Pilgrims wear simple clothes that is the same for every one so that all stand equal before God.

Of course, pilgrimage is a feature of many or most religions. One of the things that make Hajj unique is that this pilgrimage or spiritual journey is made to the first house ever built for the worship of one God. God says in the Qur'an:

**"The first house of worship appointed for mankind was that at Mecca, a blessed place, a guidance to the peoples."**

Qur'an 3:96

**"And (remember) when Abraham and (his son) Ishmael were raising the foundations of the House (the Ka'bah at Mecca)"** Qur'an 2:127

The fact that Abraham built the Ka'bah (the greatest Islamic mosque) means that it is quite ancient, but the second verse above implies that Abraham and Ishmael raised the House on foundations that were already there, which would make it even older. The physical environment of Mecca is devoid of anything that people naturally take delight in. It is a forbidding landscape of searing desert and black mountains that remind one of the surface of the moon. So the motive for coming there has to be spiritual, not worldly.

The rites of the Hajj, as was stated, are of Abrahamic origin, and include going around the Ka'bah seven times, and going seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwa as did Hagar (Abraham's wife) during her search for water. The pilgrims later stand together on the wide plains of Arafat (a large expanse of desert outside Mecca) and join in prayer for God's forgiveness.

Many of the actions commemorated in the Hajj, as said before, are based on actions done by Abraham, his son Ishmael, and his wife Hagar. Their actions were expressions of the readiness to sacrifice everything for the pleasure of God. Thus Hajj affirms the continuity of God's religion, the religion of the prophets, and reminds the participants that the willingness to sacrifice is a key feature of a believer's personality. Hajj also becomes a form of training in patience and endurance. For the pilgrimage to be accepted a person must refrain from arguments and fighting. When more than two million people are crowded together there is bound to be jostling and long waits to use toilets, bathe, etc. It is a marvel that so many people gather every year without the brawls and rampages so common in rock festivals and other types of gatherings. The reward for performing Hajj properly and refraining from arguments, fights and lewd behavior is that the

pilgrim will return home as free of sin as the day his mother gave birth to him. Muslims do not believe in original sin or inherited sin, so that means all his sins will be forgiven, as long as Hajj is done as it's supposed to spiritually and physically, and this forgiveness is something that no body can tell until the judgement day.

Another difference between Hajj and other pilgrimages is that no other gathering is so universal. As stated in the beginning, virtually all of the world's races, ethnic groups and languages are represented. People literally come from every continent on earth, except, perhaps, Antarctica. God told Abraham, **"And proclaim to mankind the Hajj . They will come to you on foot and on every lean camel, they will come from every deep and distant (wide) mountain highway (to perform Hajj ). That they may witness things that are of benefit to them "** Qur'an 22:27-28. They come together in a

spiritual environment that emphasizes their common humanity. The huge assembly of people on the plain of Arafat reminds the pilgrims that all humanity will be assembled on a featureless plain on the Day of Judgment. The close of the Hajj is marked by a festival, the Eid al Adha, which is celebrated with prayers and the exchange of gifts in Muslim communities everywhere.

For this year, Eid al Adha will occur on 21<sup>th</sup> of January.

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### Video Review: *Inside Mecca* (2003)

The documentary *Inside Mecca*, produced by National Geographic, takes the viewer on a journey through the holiest city of Islam. *Inside Mecca* follows three Muslims from different parts of the world as they go on Hajj, the sacred pilgrimage to Mecca.

The hajj is the pilgrimage required once during the lifetime of every Muslim able to complete the journey. Approximately two thousand believers from around the world converge upon Mecca during the annual week set apart for the pilgrimage. For Muslims, this is the journey of a lifetime. Non-Muslims have rarely been given the opportunity to watch the rituals of the hajj, as entrance to the holy city is permitted only to Muslims. This documentary takes the viewer to the heart of Mecca and through the ancient rituals of hajj along with the three pilgrims, one of whom is an American convert to Islam.

The hajj is a spiritually and personally challenging test of faith. This was certainly true for the three Muslims the documentary highlights. Each of the three has individual challenges to overcome, in addition to the common physical challenges of the journey.

Woven into the experiences of these three pilgrims is an explanation of the historical and spiritual significance of the rituals of hajj, most of which reflect back on the life of the patriarch Abraham and his two sons. This documentary does an excellent job of making the ancient rituals comprehensible, connecting them to the traditions of the Christianity and Judaism, the other two major faiths descended from the lineage of Abraham.

*Inside Mecca* is a beautifully produced picture of the hajj pilgrimage, which is known throughout the world but little understood outside the Muslim community. It is an

intriguing, amusing, and emotionally moving picture – well worth checking out.

"*Inside Mecca*" will be available on DVD through Alden Library.

**By: Heather Irwin**

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<http://www.ohiou.edu/~muslimst>

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