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Readers' Views

From Excerpted Letters

Dear Sir/Madam,

Here is a layman's view of what is mainly depicted in authorized version of the Quran in English. It opens with the verses 2:62 and 5:69. One gets the feeling that here is a book which highlights the universality of the message of Islam hitherto monopolized by the traditionalists. It is nicely referenced and foot-noted. Further reading of the introduction and the appendices arouses one's curiosity. Of special interest is the mathematical structure of the Quran. It is very impressive. It remains so for quite some time, then it gets mathematical. A formula emerges - anything which is divisible by 19 is God's word, authentic and correct beyond any doubt. It does not matter how the sum to be divided is arrived at. There is no formula for that. It could compose of gematrical value, number of suras/verses or a combination thereof. Very un-mathematical.

In real life, whether it be "The most important community of America," "The most important community of Mecca (6:92)" or any other ordinary community, the majority of people do not understand the intricacies of mathematics. They are far from mathematically minded....

My humble view is: what started as a great universal religion is going to end a mere cult. I am always willing to learn. I will be obliged to hear the readers' views. My letter may be published in the monthly magazine Submitters Perspective if you wish so.

I have just given my views. No offence is intended.

Yours faithfully,

M.A.Ali Shah / England

Assalamualaikum,

Alhamdulillah, that I was able to obtain Dr. Rashad Khalifa's English translation of the Quran. It provided me with some of the most important facts of Islam, that I had never imagined were extremely misguided; especially the insertion of Nabi Muhammad (S.A.W.) in our prayers, during *azan*, etc. Before, I've always questioned myself why do we have to add Nabi Muhammads (S.A.W.) name in our daily prayers. It doesn't make any sense, because when we perform our Salats, we are communicating with Allah and we must say prayers to Him, only Him. Once we are finished with our prayers, then we can say prayers for our Nabi (S.A.W.) or for our family, etc. As a Muslim and university student from another country (Malaysia), these kinds of facts would be likely to be impossible to obtain, as no one dares to accuse the teachings of Islam, that generations of Muslims had embraced, without concrete facts based on the Quran in my country....

How come the facts of the findings were never made public world wide? It would definitely change the errors. (Inshallah)

S.B.A / Malaysia

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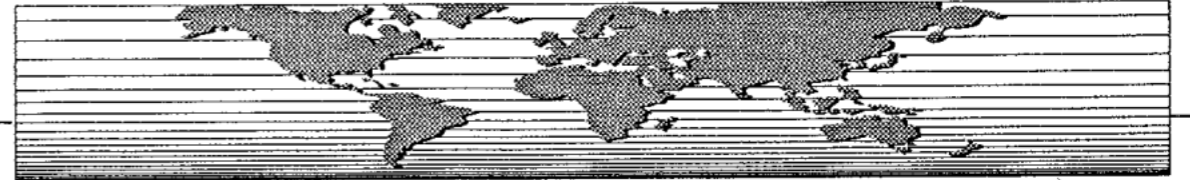
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In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

Submitters Perspective

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SALAT AND HAJJ: THE LOST LEGACY OF ABRAHAM IN THE WEST

(Part 1)

(Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part article on the Biblical view on salat and hajj, two religious practices in Islam. Here the author deals with the Western perception of these practices, the Quran's and the historical perspectives, as well as the verses from the Bible on the salat. The Biblical perspective on hajj will be discussed in the second installment of the article, God willing.)

These are some of the prophets whom God blessed. They were chosen from among the descendants of Adam, and the descendants of those whom we carried with Noah, and the descendants of Abraham and Israel, and from among those whom we guided and selected. When the revelations of the Most Gracious are recited to them, they fall prostrate, weeping. After them, He substituted generations who lost the contact prayers (salat) and pursued their lusts... (Quran 19:58-59)

● Hajj:

The pilgrimage to Mecca required of every Muslim at least once in his life

● Haji:

1. A Muslim who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

2. In the Near East, a Christian who has made a pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulcher at Jerusalem.

(The Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary)

To many in the West, the formidable sight of millions of Muslims converging upon the *Ka'ba* in Mecca to observe the hajj pilgrimage, or their bowing and prostrating in unison during the *salat* prayer, evokes the imagery of a foreign religion. Muslims who live in the West have often encountered the stares of common folk, who wonder out loud as they stumble upon them during salat, be that in the privacy of their own offices or in public places. As for the hajj pilgrimage, there is simply no parallel for it today in Judaism or Christianity.

Salat prayer and hajj pilgrimage of course are only two of 'the five pillars of Islam, as these religious practices are traditionally called. The others are the declaration of faith in the oneness of God (*shahadah*), the purification charity (*zakat*) and the fasting (*seyam*) during the month of Ramadan. Although not exactly household words (with the exclusion, perhaps, of charity), these practices nevertheless are not foreign to the Western mind set. Notwithstanding the specifics, the concepts of the oneness of God, charity and fasting still exist in Judaism and Christianity in one form or another. The declaration of the oneness of God, the exemplar of which is found in the Quran 3:18, is also found both in the Jewish and the Christian Bibles (see Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Matthew 22:37). The concept of *zakat* still exists in the Bible as almsgiving/charity

and tithing (Matthew 6:1-4, Malachi 3:7-12, Exodus 30:16). Fasting is also found in its various forms, for example see Matthew 6:16-18, Acts 13:2.

However, salat and hajj are generally viewed in another light. To many in the West, these two practices are the most visible and telling 'differences' that set Islam apart from their Judeo-Christian heritage and traditions.

But are they really? Are salat or hajj truly practices unique to the Muslims? Or, are they actually ancient universal practices common to Judaism, Christianity as well as Islam, the religions of Abraham's descendants?

The Quranic Perspective

The Quran is very clear on the fact that Abraham was the founder of Islam (Submission). He called himself a muslim (submitter), and asked God to teach him the rites and practices of the religion. God taught him how to work righteousness, and to observe salat prayer and zakat charity (2:128, 22:78, 21:73). Abraham, together with his son Ismail, founded the ancient shrine known as the *Ka'ba* in today's Mecca (2:127). The Quran continues:

continued on the next page

Salat and Hajj *continued*

We appointed Abraham to establish the shrine, "You shall not idolize any other god beside Me, and purify My shrine for those who visit it, those who live near it, and those who bow and prostrate. And proclaim that the people shall observe the hajj pilgrimage..." (22:26-27).

It is curious that the concept of hajj pilgrimage is no longer known in the Western Judeo-Christian traditions, although as pointed out by the definitions quoted at the beginning of this article, a pilgrimage with a similar name is still practiced by the Eastern Christians. We shall see in the second installment of this article what the Bible has to say on this subject.

The Quranic verses at the head of this article tell us that generations who came after Abraham and Israel lost the practice of salat. The mention of Israel (a.k.a. Jacob, Abraham's grandson from Isaac) here is significant. It is those who received his heritage (the people of Judco-Christian traditions) who generally consider the salat as a 'foreign' practice. This is in contrast to their prophets and messengers of old who, according to the Quran (e.g. 20:14, 19:31, 3:43) practiced salat as a regular form of worship, as salat is also a commandment upon all children of Israel (2:43, 83, 5:12). We shall see later that this notion is supported by the Bible as well.

The Quran also mentions salat in connection with the idol worshipers. By definition, idol worshipers also believe God, but they ascribe partners and associates with Him. There are six verses in the Quran asking the idol worshipers this rhetorical question and showing, despite their belief in God, how they still deviate and go astray:

If you ask them, "Who created the heavens and the earth?" they will say, "God." Say, "Why then do you set up idols beside God?"... (39:38)

It is a significant Quranic fact that the idol worshiping enemies of Prophet Muhammad, who invented Allaah, Al-'Uzza and Manaah as 'the three daughters' for God, also practiced the salat:

Their salat prayers at the Sacred Shrine were no more than a mockery and a means of repelling the people... (8:35)

History Or His Story?

Although the Quran's position on the origin of Islamic religious practices is clear, average Muslims are ironically unaware of this. For example, many Muslims erroneously believe that salat originated during the prophet Muhammad's night journey (*Isra' and Mi'raj*). During the process, he went back and forth to God (with the prophet Moses' urging) to have the number of daily salat reduced from the original 50 to five! The available records from the vast Islamic heritage show that this is but one of the many versions of what happened that night, according to narration.

A more plausible version (because it agrees with the Quran) has it that the prophet Muhammad stayed in his cousin's house, Umm Hanni—the daughter of his uncle Abu Talib, during the night in question. It continues that after the night prayer (*salat al-isha*), the prophet went to bed. The following morning, after praying the dawn (*salat al-fajr*) together with everyone in the house, the prophet told the story of the incredible journey he went through that night (A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, a translation of Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*, Oxford University Press, 1967, p.184. Ibn Ishaq was an 8th century AD historian /85-151 H, who lived well before the hadith were codified). This version is more likely, not only because it does not have the exaggerated tone of the others, but it also contains an important observation which agrees with the Quran. Namely, that the daily prayer (salat) was a well known practice among the people even before prophet Muhammad's night journey.

The Muslim masses over the centuries have been indoctrinated with the hearsay and exaggerations of medieval story tellers. These are full of drama but short on facts. Needless to say, the most reliable source from a Muslim's perspective is the word of God in the Quran. Historical records also support the Quranic assertions that the concept of one God, as well as the salat, hajj, fasting and charity practices of Abraham were apparently preserved by his descendants from Ismail. This could have been one of the reasons, and certainly God planned everything, that the Final Testament—the Quran—was sent down to complete the religion of

Abraham through Muhammad of Arabia, who came from Ismail's line.

What about the older scriptures? What insights can they provide us regarding this subject? It turns out that even a quick study of the Bible is able to reveal some astonishing facts.

Salat Is Not Just A Prayer

The salat can best be described as 'the contact prayer' (the root word *silah* means to make contact). Strictly speaking, it is not the same concept of prayer that people in the West understand when they say, "Oh, we pray to God all the time," usually upon learning that Muslims 'pray five times a day.' This is supplication, the act of asking God for whatever needs one has at the moment. Indeed, people who believe in the Creator, including Muslims, do this all the time. But salat is a daily ritual of making regular contact with God, facing a certain direction, using an ancient formula which begins with washing to purify oneself, and includes the specific acts of bowing, kneeling and prostration to symbolize total submission to Him.

Biblical Perspective: Washing

Both the Old and the New Testaments mention many specific aspects of the contact prayer. For example, the act of washing to purify oneself before facing God in prayer is mentioned in Exodus 30:17-21, 40:30-32, Psalm 26:6 and James 4:8, among others.

(Moses, Aaron and his sons) washed their hands and feet whenever they entered the Tent of Meeting or approaching the altar, as the Lord commanded Moses... (Exodus 40:32)

The New Testament mentions Jesus' symbolic washing of his disciples' feet, whereupon Peter objected and said he wanted Jesus to wash 'not just his feet, but his hands and his head as well.' Jesus answered that a person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean (John 13:9-10), which brings to mind the Quranic rule on washing. Baptism with water, another practice in Christianity (see for example 1 Peter 3:21) may have something in common with this ancient Jewish practice. The

continued on the next page

Salat and Hajj *continued*

practice of wiping the hands and face with water as one enters a Catholic church today is also worth mentioning.

Posture Of Humility In Prayers

References to kneeling and prostration to express one's humbleness before the Almighty abound in the Bible, practiced by such notables as Abraham, Moses and Aaron, Joshua, Elijah, Solomon and Jesus (Genesis 17:3, Numbers 20:6, Joshua 5:14, 1 Kings 18:42, 1 Kings 8:54, Matthew 26:36-39, Acts 20:30).

Moses and Aaron fell facedown at the Tent of Meeting... (Numbers 20:6)

(The people) fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!" ...Elijah bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees... (1 Kings 18:39,42)

(Jesus) fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, ..." (Matthew 26:39)

Prostration in prayer is still practiced by some members of the Russian Orthodox Church, and some Catholics still maintain kneeling in prayer. In contrast, Baptists and other Christian denominations have abandoned kneeling, and the Jewish liturgy has eliminated it altogether. The only exception perhaps is the Samaritan Jew, whose prayer is similar to the Muslim's salat, but for the language.

Regular Prayer Time And The Qiblah

The concepts of regular daily prayer times and the direction (*qiblah*) faced during prayer still exist in the Bible as well. Acts 10:2 mentions a God-fearing person by the name of Cornelius at the time of Jesus, who prays regularly. In Acts 10:30 he is described performing his usual afternoon prayer. The afternoon prayer, as well as the noon prayer, also are described elsewhere:

One day Peter and John (two of Jesus' apostles) were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. (Acts 3:1)

About noon the following day as they are approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray (Acts 10:9)

The Old Testament, which is derived from the Jewish Bible, also mentions several interesting facts about salat. In his prayer of dedication of the Temple that he built for God in Jerusalem (see 1 Kings 8:22-53), Solomon stated several times that servants of God, the people of Israel and foreigners, pray toward the city He has chosen (i.e. Jerusalem) and the temple he has built there for God's Name; thus the concept of *qiblah*. In Daniel 6:10 we read about Daniel, one of the Jewish prophets during the time of exile in Babylon, who used to pray three times a day, facing the direction of Jerusalem. In so doing, he was following the examples of Solomon and his father David. The Psalms give a clear example of the three daily prayer times practiced by David:

Listen to my prayer, O God.... As for me, I call upon God, and the Lord saves me. Evening, morning and noon, I cry out in distress and He hears my voice... (Psalms 55:1,16-17)

The above list of Biblical verses is certainly not exhaustive, yet it is astonishingly clear that the act of salat still exists both in the Jewish and the Christian scriptures. From this perspective, it is hard to imagine people from Judeo-Christian backgrounds who do not view the Muslim's practice of salat as their own heritage that has been 'lost' over time.

A final note on this subject: In her book *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet*, Harper, 1992, pp. 148 and 163, Armstrong mentioned—without quoting sources—that the Arabs during the time of Muhammad also practiced three daily salat prayers similar to the Jews, i.e. morning, noon and evening. In Quran 11:114, three salat prayers are described at "both ends of the day, and at night." However, the Quran also lists all five daily prayer times, from dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset/evening to the night, see 24:58, 17:78, 2:238. In addition, the Friday congregational prayer is decreed in 62:9 in place of the Sabbath observance of the previous communities.

Gatut S. Adisoma, Ph.D.

[Part 2 of the series is to follow in the next issue of Submitters Perspective, God willing.]

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