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THE PALLADIUM OF ISLAM

It is the irony of history that the fragment of a flying meteor landing in the deserts of West Arabia should become the holy relic of a religion which has for its creed the unity of God, and which has been iconoclastic throughout its long history.

The palladium of the world of Islam is the Ka'aba, in the center of the Mosque court at Mecca. To this sacred shrine pilgrims have journeyed for thirteen hundred years. Toward this shrine every Moslem, praying, directs his gaze. Toward the meridian of the Ka'aba all faces of the dead are turned when they are laid to rest in the grave. But the Ka'aba contains no object of worship, save the famous Black Stone, embedded in the walls, about five feet above the ground, and now worn smooth by the touch and the kisses of thousands of pilgrims.

Before the Hejira, Mohammed made Jerusalem the direction of prayer, but when he was established at Medina, his change of attitude toward Arabian Paganism was shown first by the *qibla* edict (Surah 2: 136-145). In this way the old heathen cult became a part of Islam and henceforth the eyes of all the faithful were turned toward Mecca.

The Black Stone is at the eastern corner of the Ka'aba, and the pilgrims in the days of Arabian paganism, when they made their circuit, began at this point as they do today. The entrance to the Ka'aba is not in the middle wall, but close to the Black Stone. Between the Black

Stone and the door of the Ka'aba is the so-called *Multazam*, or sacred place of refuge where pilgrims press themselves against the wall, cling to the curtain and take their oaths and vows. The Black Stone is often called *the* corner-stone (*al rukn*) as though there were no other corner to the Ka'aba.

The pre-Islamic sacredness of the Ka'aba did not consist in the idols found there. The Black Stone was the actual sanctuary. The Ka'aba was only an extension of this stone and partook of its sanctity. It was therefore not a temple for idols, but itself an idol, an exaggerated holy stone.¹

All the accumulation of superstition of Arab paganism which had gathered in and around the Ka'aba was destroyed by Mohammed the Prophet, when he completed the conquest of Mecca, established his cult and made it include the pilgrimage to the old Arabian sanctuary. The interior of the Ka'aba was cleansed and its pantheon of idols destroyed, *with the exception of the Black Stone*. Not only were there images but pictures in the heathen shrine. When they began to wash off the pictures of the Prophets with *zem-zem* water, Mohammed is said to have placed his hands on the pictures of Jesus and Mary, saying, "wash out all except what is below my hands."² If this tradition is reliable, it throws considerable light on the attitude of Mohammed toward Christianity at this time. Cleansed of its idols, reinstated as "the Navel of the earth," the center of God's favor and grace to humanity, pilgrimage to Mecca and the Ka'aba became the fifth pillar in the Moslem temple of truth.

The importance of the Black Stone is evident from Moslem tradition. The table-talk of the Companions of the Prophet tells what place it occupied in early Islam. Mohammed and Omar wept before the Black Stone, therefore pilgrims are to embrace and kiss it; forgiveness

¹ Wellhausen: "*Reste Arabischen Heidentums*," pp. 74-78; while Hubert Grimme states that the Black Stone was a crude image of the head of Hobal, which was built into the eastern corner of the Ka'aba wall. He gives as his authority the geographer *Maqdisi*.—(*Mohammad*, p. 45; München, Germany, 1904.)

² Wensinck in *Encyclopædia of Islam*—article on *The Ka'aba*, p. 587.

of sins is guaranteed to all who even touch it; during the circumambulation of the Ka'aba, pilgrims are to point to it with a staff if they cannot touch it with their lips. It is specially laid down in orthodox tradition that Mohammed did not embrace or kiss any other corner of the Ka'aba. The Black Stone descended from paradise pure white and will bear witness on the day of Resurrection to those who kissed it. Mohammed offered his prayers regularly between the Black Stone and the Yemen corner of the Ka'aba.³ (The references are given in detail by Wensinck, and are to all the standard collections.) Later tradition added still greater honor to this symbol.

According to Azraki, as quoted by de Goeje, the Black Stone is "the right hand of God upon earth, stretched out to his worshippers, even as a man gives his hand to his brother." He who could not render homage to the apostle of God during his life has only to pass his hand over this Stone and he will thus render homage to God and his apostle. On the day of resurrection the Black Stone will have two eyes to see, and a tongue to speak and give testimony on behalf of those who have kissed it in the sincerity of their hearts.⁴

According to Moslem writers the Ka'aba was first constructed in heaven, where a model of it still remains, called Beit-al-Ma'mur. Adam erected the earthly Ka'aba, selecting the stones from five sacred mountains, and ten thousand angels were appointed to guard the structure. But, as we shall see and as Burckhardt remarks, they appear to have been most remiss in their duty. After the deluge Abraham reconstructed it, assisted by his son Ishmael. He looked for a suitable corner-stone and the Angel Gabriel directed him to Jebel Qubais where he found the Black Stone (*Mishkat*, book xi, chap. IV). The earliest reference to this palladium in literature is, perhaps, the statement of Maximus Tyrius who wrote in the second century: "The Arabians pay homage

³ Wensinck, "A Handbook of Early Mohammedan Tradition," pp. 220-221.

⁴ De Goeje: "Memoire sur les Carmathes du Bahrain et les Fatimides," Leiden, 1886, p. 102.

to I know not what god, which they represent by a quadrangular stone."

Tradition says that the Black Stone was originally white, and there are many fables giving the reason for its present color. The true explanation is found in Azraki (de Goeje, p. 101): "*la couleur noire est une suite des nombreux incendies du temple, particulièrement de celui qui eut lieu du temps d'Abdallah ibn Zobair en 64 A.H., et qui eut encore pour le monument sacré d'autres effets funestes.*" This reference to the burning of the Ka'aba brings us to the chequered history of the Black Stone in the annals of Islam.

Abu Tahir, the head of the fanatic Carmathian sect, built his own shrine at Lahsa in Eastern Arabia, in 316 A. H., and set out to pillage Mecca in January, 317 (930 A. D.). His army of fanatics entered the city at the time of the pilgrimage, butchered many of the inhabitants, mocked their solemn worship, defiled the Ka'aba, and after a reign of terror, they carried away the spoil, including the Black Stone. He celebrated his victory in a famous poem mocking the very Lord of the Ka'aba.⁵

The Black Stone was kept by the Carmathians for a period of nearly twenty-two years and was then restored on payment of a large ransom (de Goeje, p. 146). Some say that the Stone was again broken at this time and was restored to its place piece-meal, being held together by a silver band, but this tradition is contradicted by Azraki, who gives details how the Ka'aba took fire in the days of Abdallah Zobair and at that time the Black Stone broke into three fragments which Ibn Zobair joined with a silver band.

In 413 A. H. the mad Sultân of Egypt, El Hâkim, sent an emissary to Mecca with instructions to destroy the Stone. His object is supposed to have been the diversion of the Pilgrimage to Cairo. The emissary, armed with a bar of iron, entered the Haram in the guise of a

⁵ The Arabic text is given by Ibrahim Rafa'at Pasha in his "*Mira'at al Haramain*," Cairo, 1925. This is the best recent description of Mecca and beautifully illustrated.

dervish. Striking the stone with his iron bar, he cried "How long will you worship this stone? Till when will you continue to worship this stone and Muhammad?" He managed to chip three small pieces from the Stone before he was seized by the outraged *hâjjis*, and torn to pieces.⁶

"The Stone today," says Rutter, "exhibits a broken-up appearance. In several places the heads of silver nails are visible on its surface, and it is completely surrounded by a ring of brown cement which holds it rigidly in the silver mounting. The latter is extremely massive, and is oval in outline. Its vertical diameter is nearly two feet, and its horizontal diameter two and a half feet. The outward face of the Stone is worn down to such an extent, or is set so deeply in the metal mountings, that when he kisses it the pilgrim's face is completely hidden in the orifice."⁷ Ibrahim Rafa'at Pasha confirms what we have stated above, adding the interesting fact that the Caliph Harun Rashid renewed the silver band which holds together the fragments of the Black Stone in 189 A. H. This would prove that the Stone was already broken long before the Carmathians took Mecca.

The famous tradition related of Omar, the second Caliph, in regard to the Black Stone is as follows: "Verily I saw Omar, (may God be gracious to him) when he kissed the Black Stone, saying: 'Truly I know that thou art only a stone, unable to profit or hurt anyone, and if I had not seen the apostle of God (upon him be prayers and peace), kiss thee, I would not have kissed thee myself.'" Omar's hesitation must have found response in the hearts of many stern unitarians all down the centuries. Is it not taught in Moslem theology, that *shirk-ul-'ibadat* is one of the forms of polytheism? The association of anything or anyone with Allah is unpardonable and this association (*shirk*) includes, according to the Wahhabi teaching, "the perambulation of the shrines of the saints,

⁶ Rutter: "The Holy Cities of Arabia," p. 222.

⁷ Rutter: "The Holy Cities of Arabia," pp. 221-222. The pictures given as frontispiece are from Burekhardt and from Ibrahim Rafa'at Pasha.

bowing down, standing with arms folded, praying at a shrine, kissing any part of a shrine, or rubbing the mouth against any part of a shrine. All this is associating some irrelevant thing or person in worship due to God alone." Yet, in spite of this doctrine, the Black Stone retained and retains its place of honor. Who injures it touches the apple of the eye of Islam, even under Wahhabi rule.

A Hejaz newspaper dated July 11th, 1932, gives an account of one Abd es-Sattar ibn 'Abd el-Ghaffar el-Afghani, arrested because he had broken and stolen a fragment of the Black Stone in the sanctuary at Mecca. He also took a piece of the cover of the Ka'aba and two fragments of silver from the stairway leading to the well of Zemzem. Prosecuted by an assembly presided over by the chief judge (*ra'is al-qudāt*), he was questioned by two Afghani interpreters, confessed his guilt, and was condemned to death. The sentence was carried out on the 8th of July. Later news from Mecca is that the stolen fragment of the Black Stone was returned with great solemnity to its place on the 31st of August. Ibn Saoud, representing the dignitaries of Mecca, offered a prayer at the *Maqam Ibrahim*. He then entered the sanctuary and replaced the fragment of the Black Stone with perfumed cement and amber. All the chief officials of Mecca were present, and a special prayer was offered in the Ka'aba itself at the close of the solemn ceremony.⁸

This incident is typical of the fact that the attitude of Islam toward its palladium has not changed. There is no god but Allah, yet the center for his worship and favor is the Ka'aba with its Black Stone.

We have had a discussion in our Quarterly whether Islam may be called a Christian heresy. Some have raised the question whether it is not more truly a Jewish heresy. Again it seems to be an open question, whether in a true sense Islam may not be classed with pagan cults, as long as its central shrine is the Black Stone at Mecca.

"There have been few incidents more disastrous in their

⁸ *Oriente Moderno*, Revista Mensile, Roma, Sept., 1932. pp. 457-458.

consequences to the human race," says Major Osborne, "than this decree of Muhammad, changing the *qibla* from Jerusalem to Mecca. Had he remained true to this earlier and better faith, the Arabs would have entered the religious community of the nations as peace-makers, not as enemies and destroyers. . . . By the change of the *qibla*, Islam was placed in direct antagonism to Judaism and Christianity. It became a rival faith, possessing an independent center of existence. . . . The keystone of that creed is a black pebble in a heathen temple. All the ordinances of his faith, all the history of it, are so grouped round and connected with this stone, that were the odor of sanctity dispelled which surrounds it, the whole religion would inevitably perish. The farther and the faster men progress elsewhere, the more hopeless becomes the position of the Moslem. He can only hate the knowledge which would gently lead him to the light. Chained to a black stone in a barren wilderness, the heart and reason of the Mohammedan world would seem to have taken the similitude of the objects they reverence; and the refreshing dews and genial sunshines which fertilize all else, seek in vain for anything to quicken there." ⁹

Dr. C. Snouck Hurgronje closes his monograph *Het Mekkaansche Feest* ¹⁰ with these words: "Should it ever happen (although it is very doubtful) that Sprenger's hope will be fulfilled and the Moslem community give rise to a Tübingen school of criticism, then surely the feast at Mecca will first of all be cancelled as of the list of things which do not belong to the essence of Islam."

The change of the *qibla* as recorded in Moslem tradition is one of the major tragedies in the life of the Prophet. It took place about sixteen months after the Hejira. Disappointed at the slight success of his preaching among the Jews at Yathrib, Mohammed turned more and more to the old Arabian tradition, and the Ka'aba at Mecca was brought into prominence. The Koran text

⁹ "Islam under the Arabs," p. 58.

¹⁰ *Verspreide Geschriften*, Vol. I, p. 124 (Leipzig).

(2: 136) says "the fools among the people will say, what has induced them to abandon their former *qibla*?" Then follows the passage establishing the new *qibla*. According to one tradition, the revelation quoted was communicated during Mohammed's morning prayer in the Mosque at Quba, near Medina. The whole matter of the change in the direction of prayer and the introduction of the old pagan Hajj as one of the pillars of Islam, is however an obscure chapter in Moslem history. Tabari states that scornful remarks made by the Jews regarding Mohammed's dependence on their religion was one of the causes of his revolt. Wensinck says "here we have a glimmering of the real truth of the matter, namely the connection with Mohammed's new politico-religious attitude."¹¹

So we ask our Moslem friends to remember the story of the little Mosque near Medina, still in use today, with its two *qiblas*, one toward Jerusalem, the other toward Mecca, and we invite them to return to the old *qibla* and face the facts of history that found their center in Jerusalem—the supernatural manifestation of the one true God in revelation, incarnation, atonement, and resurrection. When the Samaritan woman raised the question, *Where* men ought to worship, Christ's answer was: "Ye worship that which ye know not: we worship that which we know; for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth: for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

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¹¹ Encyclopædia of Islam—article by Wensinck on *Kibla*.