

How It All Began

Nearly four thousand years ago, in the Sumerian town of Ur in the valley of the river Euphrates, lived a young man named Abraham. The people of Ur had once worshipped Allah but as time passed they forgot the true religion and started praying to idols, statues made of wood or clay and sometimes even of precious stones. Even as a small child Abraham could not understand how his people, and especially his father, could make these images with their own hands, call them gods, and then worship them. He had always refused to join his people when they paid respect to these statues. Instead he would leave the town and sit alone, thinking about the heavens and the world about him. He was sure his people were doing wrong and so alone he searched for the right way. One clear night as he sat staring at the sky he saw a beautiful shining star, so beautiful that he cried out: „This must be Allah!' He looked at it in awe for some time, until suddenly it began to fade and then it disappeared. He turned away in disappointment saying: I love not things that set. (Qur'an 6.77) On another night Abraham was again looking at the sky and he saw the rising moon, so big and bright that he felt he could almost touch it. He thought to himself: This is my Lord. (Qur'an 6.78) But it was not long before the moon set as well. Then he said, Unless my Lord guide me, I surely shall become one of the folk who are astray. (Qur'an 6.78) Abraham then saw the beauty and splendor of the sunrise and decided that the sun must be the biggest and most powerful thing in the universe. But for the third time he was wrong, for the sun set at the end of the day. It was then that he realized that Allah is the Most Powerful, the Creator of the stars, the moon, the sun, the earth and of all living things. Suddenly he felt himself totally at peace, because he knew that he had found the Truth. When he said unto his father and his folk: What do you worship? They said: We worship idols, and are ever devoted to them. He said: Do they hear you when you cry? Or do they benefit or harm you? They said: Nay, but we found our fathers acting in this manner. He said: See now that which you worship, You and your forefathers! Lo! they are (all) an enemy to me, except the Lord of the Worlds. Who created me, and He guides me, And Who feeds me and waters me. And when I sicken, then He heals me. And Who causes me to die, then gives me lift (again) And Who, I ardently hope, will forgive me my sin on the Day of judgement. (Qur'an 26.70-82)

One day, while all the townspeople were out, Abraham angrily smashed all the idols with his right hand except for one which was very large. When the people returned they were furious. They remembered the things Abraham had said about the idols. They had him brought forth before everyone and demanded, 'Is it you who did this to our gods, O Abraham?' Abraham replied, But this their chief did it. Ask them, if they are able to speak.' The people exclaimed, 'You know they do not speak.' 'Do you worship what you yourselves have carved when Allah created you and what you make?' Abraham continued, 'Do you worship instead of Allah that which cannot profit you at all, nor harm you?' (Qur'an 37.95-6)(Qur'an 21.66) Finally, Abraham warned them, Serve Allah, and keep your duty unto Him; that is better for you if you did but know. You serve instead of Allah only idols, and you only invent a lie. Lo! those whom you serve instead of Allah own no provision for you. So seek your provision from Allah, and serve Him, and give thanks unto Him, (for) unto Him you will be brought back.(Qur'an 29. 16-17) The people of Ur decided to give Abraham the worst punishment they could find: he was to be burnt to death. On the chosen day all the people gathered in the centre of the city and even the King

of Ur was there. Abraham was then placed inside a special building filled with wood. The wood was lit. Soon the fire became so strong that the people were pushed back by the flames. But Allah said: "O fire, be coolness and peace for Abraham". (Qur'an 21.69) The people waited until the fire had completely died down, and it was then that they saw Abraham still sitting there as though nothing had happened! At that moment they were utterly confused. They were not, however, moved by the miracle that had just happened before their very eyes. Still Abraham tried to persuade his own dear father, who was named Azar, not to worship powerless, un-seeing, un-hearing statues. Abraham explained that special knowledge had come to him and implored his father, 'So follow me and I will lead you on the right path. O my father! Don't serve the Devil.' But Azar would not listen. He threatened his son with stoning if he continued to reject the gods of Ur. He ordered Abraham to leave the city with these words: 'Depart from me a long while.' Abraham said, 'Peace be upon you! I shall ask my Lord's forgiveness for you. Surely He was ever gracious to me.'" (Qur'an 19.43-7)

Imagine how terrible it must have been for him to leave his home, his family and all that he knew, and set out across the wilderness into the unknown. But at the same time, how could he have remained among people who did not believe in Allah and who worshipped statues? Abraham always had a sense that Allah cared for him and he felt Allah near him as he traveled. At last, after a long hard journey, he arrived at a place by the Mediterranean Sea, not far from Egypt. There he married a noble woman by the name of Sarah and settled in the land of Palestine. Many years passed but Abraham and his wife were not blessed with any children. In the hope that there would be a child, and in keeping with tradition, Sarah suggested that Abraham should marry Hagar, her Egyptian handmaid. Soon after this took place, Hagar had a little boy named Ishmael. Some time later Allah promised Abraham another son, but this time the mother of the child would be his first wife, Sarah. This second son would be called Isaac. Allah also told Abraham that from his two sons-Ishmael and Isaac-two nations and three religions would be founded and because of this he must take Hagar and Ishmael away from Palestine to a new land. These events were an important part of Allah's plan, for the descendants of Ishmael would form a nation from which would come a great Prophet, who would guide the people in the way of Allah. This was to be Muhammad (pbuh), the Messenger of Allah (pbuh). From the descendants of Sarah's child, Isaac, would come Moses and Jesus. So it was that Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael left Palestine. They traveled for many days until finally they reached the arid valley of Bacca later to be called Mecca), which was on one of the great caravan routes. There was no water in the valley and although Hagar and Ishmael only had a small supply of water left, Abraham left them there knowing Allah would take care of them. Soon all the water was gone. The child began to grow weak from thirst. There were two hills nearby, one called Safa and the other Marwah. Hagar went up one hill and looked into the distance to see if she could find any water, but found none. So she went to the other hill and did the same. She did this seven times. Then sadly she returned to her son, and to her great surprise and joy she found a spring of water bubbling out of the earth near him. This spring, near which the mother and child settled, was later called Zamzam. The area around it became a place of rest for the caravans travelling across the desert and in time grew into the famous trading city of Mecca.

From time to time Abraham traveled from Palestine to visit his family and he saw Ishmael grow into a strong young man. It was during one of these visits that Allah commanded them to rebuild the Ka'bah-the very first place where people had worshipped Allah. They were told exactly where and how to build it. It was to be erected by the well of Zamzam and built in the shape of a cube. In its eastern corner was to be placed a black stone that had fallen to earth from heaven. An angel brought the stone to them from the nearby hill of Abu Qubays. Abraham and Ishmael worked hard to rebuild the Ka'bah and as they did so they prayed to Allah to send a Prophet from among their descendants. And when Abraham and Ishmael were raising the foundations of the House, (Abraham prayed): 'Our Lord! Receive this from us; Thou, only Thou, art the All-hearing, the All-knowing; Our Lord! And make us submissive unto Thee and of our seed a nation submissive unto Thee, and show us our ways of worship, and turn toward us. Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Relenting, the Merciful. Our Lord! And raise up in their midst a messenger from among them who shall recite unto them Thy revelations, and shall instruct them in the Scripture and in wisdom and shall make them grow. Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Mighty, Wise. (Qur'an 2.127-9) When the Ka'bah was completed, Allah commanded Abraham to call mankind to pilgrimage to His Holy House. Abraham wondered how anyone could hear his call. Allah said, 'You call and I will bring them.' This was how the pilgrimage to the Ka'bah in Mecca was established and when Muslims make the pilgrimage today they continue to answer the age-old call of Abraham.

The Children of Ishmael

Over the years Ishmael's children themselves had children. His descendants increased and formed tribes which spread out all over Arabia. One of these tribes was called Quraysh. Its people never moved away from Mecca and always lived near the Ka'bah. One of the duties of the leader of Quraysh was to look after those who came on pilgrimage to the Ka'bah. The pilgrims would come from all over Arabia and it was a great honor to provide them with food and water.

As time passed, however, the Arabs stopped worshipping Allah directly and started bringing idols back with them from the different countries they visited. These idols were placed at the Ka'bah, which was no longer regarded as the Sanctuary of Allah, as Abraham had intended it. It was, however, still respected by the Arabs. Around this time the well of Zamzam disappeared beneath the sand. Also at this time, Qusayy, one of the leaders of Quraysh, became ruler over Mecca. He held the keys of the temple and had the right to give water to the pilgrims, to feed them, to take charge of meetings, and to hand out war banners before battle. It was also in his house that Quraysh settled their affairs. After Qusayy's death, his son 'Abdu Manaf, who had become famous during his father's lifetime, took over the leadership of Quraysh. After him came his son Hashim. It is said that Hashim was the first to begin the two great caravan journeys of Quraysh, one in the summer to Syria and the north, and one in the winter to Yemen and the south. As a result, Mecca grew rich and became a large and important centre of trade. One summer Hashim went north to buy goods to sell in Yemen. On his way he stopped in Yathrib to trade in the market and there he saw a beautiful woman. She was Salma', the daughter of 'Amr ibn Zeid, who was from a much respected family. Hashim proposed marriage to her and was

accepted because he was an honorable and distinguished man.

In time, Salma' gave birth to a beautiful son and as some of his hair was white they called him Shaybah, which in Arabic means grey-haired'. Mother and son stayed in the cooler, healthier climate of Yathrib, while Hashim returned to Mecca, but he would visit them each time he took his caravan to the north. During one of these journeys, however, Hashim became ill and died. Shaybah, a handsome, intelligent boy, grew up in his uncle's house in Yathrib. He was proud of being the son of Hashim ibn 'Abdi Manaf, the head of Quraysh, guardian of the Ka'bah and protector of the pilgrims, even though he had not known his father, who had died while Shaybah was very young.

At Hashim's death his brother al-Muttalib took over his duties and responsibilities. He traveled to Yathrib to see his nephew, Shaybah, and decided that as the boy would one day inherit his father's place, the time had come for him to live in Mecca. It was hard for Salma', Shaybah's mother, to let her son go with his uncle but she finally realized that it was for the best. Al-Muttalib returned to Mecca, entering the city at noon on his camel with Shaybah behind him. When the people of Mecca saw the boy they thought he was a slave and, pointing at him, called out „Abd alMuttalib', 'Abd' being the Arabic for 'slave'. Al-Muttalib told them that Shaybah was not a slave but his nephew who had come to live with them. From that day on, however, Shaybah was always affectionately called Abd al-Muttalib. On the death of alMuttalib, who died in Yemen where he had gone to trade, 'Abd alMuttalib took his place. He became the most respected member of his family, loved and admired by all. He was, however, unlike those Arabs who had given up the teachings of Abraham.