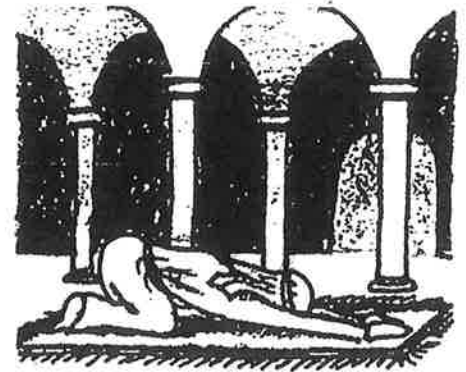


The Adventures of a Moslem Boy



Ali woke with a start as a camel's roar broke the early morning stillness. Soon he would have to rise and wash in preparation for sunrise prayers. As he lay on his soft mat, he thought about the events of the past few weeks.

Ali's adventures began the day his grandfather called him in from play. His grandfather was raising him following the death of his parents. Grandfather wanted to tell him that the two of them were going on a journey to the holy Moslem city of Mecca. Ali knew from his studies of the Koran, the Moslem holy book, that every follower of Islam was required to make a pilgrimage, or journey, to Mecca at least once in his life. Ali's grandfather had saved money all his life in order to have enough for the journey. He wanted to go now before he was too old to travel the long distance. The pilgrimage would be made during the Moslem month of Haj, the month when journeys to Mecca were traditionally made. After days of preparation, Ali, his grandfather, and an old servant named Abdul left their small northern Arabian town with several camels loaded with supplies for their journey.

Ali was fascinated by the sights and sounds and smells of the strange cities and towns along the way. But his favorite time of day followed evening prayers when Grandfather and Abdul sat by the campfire telling stories about the prophet Mohammed. Mohammed had brought the word of Allah (God) to the people of the world. Mohammed lived a long time ago (in the late 500's A.D.) in the Saudi Arabian city of Mecca. Like Ali himself, Mohammed was an orphan who was raised by his grandfather. Mohammed had a very hard life as a boy and his experiences gave him a special desire to help the poor and defenseless when he grew up.

When Mohammed was 25, he married a wealthy widow and took over the job of running her businesses. Although he became a highly respected member of his community, he often felt the need to escape the pressures of everyday life. Sometimes he would go into the hills which surrounded Mecca in order to meditate. One night while meditating, he fell asleep in a cave and was visited in a dream by the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel brought messages from God to Mohammed. These messages eventually became the basis for the Koran.

Allah (God) wanted Mohammed to teach people not to pray to idols because there was only one God. When Mohammed tried to persuade his fellow Meccans to give up their idol worship, he was laughed at and his life was threatened. In the year 622, Mohammed and his family fled to the nearby city of Medina. This journey became known as the "Hegira" and all Moslems date their calendar from this event in 622. The people of Medina accepted the teachings of Mohammed. His followers became known as "Moslems" which in Arabic means "those who submit to God". Eventually, Mohammed raised an army and returned to defeat the Meccans. Mecca and Medina became holy Moslem cities.

Ali thought Mohammed had led a very exciting life and he looked forward with great eagerness to seeing the city of the Prophet's birth.

Ali and the two older men traveled for nearly ten days before reaching Mecca. When they finally arrived in the city, Ali was amazed at the crowds of people. Never in his nine years of life had he seen so many people of different skin colors and nationalities. His grandfather explained that in the Moslem religion, all people are equal whether they are rich or poor or black or white. Therefore, Islam attracts followers from nearly every country in the world.

The first place Ali wanted to visit in Mecca was the Kaaba which contained the famous Black Rock. In ancient times, the Kaaba was a temple that held idols. When Mohammed conquered Mecca, he turned the Kaaba into a mosque, a place for Moslems to worship. The Black Rock is a meteorite which pilgrims touch and kiss for good fortune.

Ali and his two companions walked around the Kaaba seven times, then kissed the Black Rock as tradition demanded. Following prayers in the Kaaba, the three pilgrims decided to camp outside of Mecca for the night. The next morning Ali joined his grandfather and Abdul in the ritual of morning prayers. Ali knew that the Koran required that every Moslem pray five times a day: at dawn, at noon, in the afternoon, after sunset, and following nightfall. Before praying, the worshipper must wash his hands, face, arms, and feet. The desert traveler is allowed to use sand instead of water for cleansing. All Moslems face Mecca when they pray.

Ali finished washing, then joined his grandfather and Abdul. They bowed from the waist in the direction of Mecca, then knelt with their faces to the ground as they repeated prayers from the Koran. After prayers, the three pilgrims ate, then traveled for about three hours until they came to the town of Mina. In Mina, Ali took part in an ancient ceremony called "stoning the devil". He and other pilgrims threw pebbles at pillars of stone which represented the devil. Ali's grandfather told him that according to legend the pebbles that are thrown are returned to their place of origin by angels from Allah.

Ali and the older men left Mina and traveled another thirteen miles to the holy hill of Arafat. There on the hillside, standing amidst hundreds of tents belonging to other pilgrims, Ali listened to a sermon that lasted nearly three hours.

The haj (pilgrimage) ended with a visit to the beautiful Mosque of Mohammed in the city of Medina. At the Festival of Sacrifice, Abdul killed a sheep which had been brought along on the journey for this purpose. The meat was donated to a poor family. Ali and his grandfather wore new clothes and gave each other presents. They spent a few days visiting with other pilgrims before starting their journey home. Ali was very proud of the fact that he now could use the title of "hajji" which means "one who has made the pilgrimage".

On the journey home, the pilgrims decided to spend a Friday in a small village northeast of Medina. Friday is the Moslem holy day just as Sunday is a special day of worship for Christians. Ali and the two adults wanted to visit the local mosque for noon prayers.

Ali noticed that the mosque in this town was very similar to the mosque in his own community. On top of the domed roof was the minaret, or tower, where a man known as the "muezzin" called worshippers to prayer. At the entrance to the courtyard of the mosque, Ali covered his head and took off his shoes as a sign of respect for Allah. Moslems were washing at the courtyard fountain before entering the mosque to pray. Once inside the mosque, Ali noticed the beautiful carpets and colorful geometric designs decorating the walls. One wall contained a niche facing Mecca. There was a pulpit for the preacher and a lectern which held the Koran. There were no statues or pictures of Mohammed on the walls because these would be regarded as idols. As Ali looked around, he thought "mosque" was a good name for this house of worship because the word means "place of kneeling" in the Arabic language.

The prayer leader is known as the "Imam". Any Moslem man can become an Imam. While praying and listening to the sermon, Ali joined the men standing behind the Imam. The Moslem women stood behind the men.

Following the visit to the mosque, Ali, his grandfather, and Abdul spent the rest of the day restocking their supplies for the long homeward journey. They left on the final part of their trip the next day.

Ali spent much of the rest of the journey studying the Koran. He was trying to memorize the entire holy book which contains 114 chapters or "surahs". The surahs range in length from 4 to 286 verses. Once Ali was able to recite all these surahs from memory, his grandfather would have a huge celebration in his honor. The memorization of the Koran is an event as important in a Moslem's life as his birth or marriage.