

Prayer

Both Tabataba'i (237–244) and Ali (1988: 110a–117a) give detailed description of Islamic prayer or *salaat*. They are agreed on the principles and details. There are five compulsory prayers in the day, arranged on three occasions: one prayer in the early morning before dawn, two in the afternoon, and two in the evening.

The prayers are made up of units or *rak'aat*. Each prayer must be started with a silent intention of laying that particular prayer. The prayer is preceded by the *adhan* or call to prayer if public, the *iqamat* to establish the prayer, and the *Takbiratul Ebrahim* or raising the hands beside the head and saying '*Allahu akbar*', that is, 'God is great'. These are all done standing, facing the holy city of Mecca.

One unit of prayer consists of the following a standing recitation of the first chapter of the Qur'an and one other chapter, a bowing while saying the glorification of God, and two prostrations while saying glorifications. The second unit of the prayer includes personal supplications while standing, and the second and final units contain the *tashahud* or witness while kneeling and sitting back on the heels.

The prayer is concluded by salutations of peace. Finally the prayer ends with three repetitions of '*Allahu akbar*' while seated, that is, kneeling and sitting back on the heels. Personal supplications may follow the prayer while kneeling. All supplications are made with the hands outstretched, palms up. Prostration is made upon earth directly or upon a portable piece of earth, clay, stone or other non-wearable earth substance. The early morning prayer contains two units, both afternoon prayers contain four units, and the evening prayers contain three and four units each.

In his exposition of the pillars of practice in Matthew six, Jesus does not really give details on how to pray. That was already known to his listeners. What they needed to learn was not to be hypocritical about it. Unfortunately today most of us do not even know how to pray. It is certainly true that one can lift up one's soul to God in any circumstances and at any time. But the Bible also gives some indications of appropriate times and ways of praying, and the informal lifting up of the soul to God, important as it is, does not replace these.

In Daniel 6:10 there are some indications of how to arrange formal prayer in time of crisis. It is the bare

minimum of formal prayer. After all, the man's life was threatened. He was not going to pray in ways that he did not know to be essential for fear of losing his life. `Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.'

There is a good deal of information in this text. We find out that Daniel had a regular way of praying, that is, the same way every day. He had a place in his home for prayer. He turned in a specific direction, that is toward the temple site in Jerusalem. He prayed in a certain posture which included kneeling. He carried out this formal prayer at set times during the day, three to be exact. Finally, he considered this matter of formal prayer to be so important that he risked his life to carry it out precisely, instead of leaving it off for a mere thirty days.

More formal aspects of prayer can be gained from the story already mentioned about Naaman. We have already seen his purification in the Jordan river. The story continues in 2 Kings 5: 17–18. `And Naaman said, Shall there not then, I pray thee, be given to thy servant two mules' burden of earth? for thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the Lord. In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing.'

Few people stop to question why Naaman needed two mules' burden of earth. The context makes this quite clear. He promised not to worship any god but the Lord. The ancient concept was that gods changed from place to place. There may have been a lingering thought in this man's mind that God was somehow attached to the soil of Palestine. On the other hand, considering the reference he makes to bowing, it appears that he realizes that he should bow in prayer upon earth. When he put his forehead down in prayer, it should touch earth. So he asks for earth from the place of the prophet upon which to bow in prayer. This is one more factor to add to those already discovered for Daniel.

What are the Biblical times of prayer? Psalm 55: 17 `Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice.' Here the beginning parameters for the times of prayer are set forth. As soon as it can be with certainty called evening, then one time of prayer begins. Then, as soon as the night begins to break and the coming of light can be discerned, then begins another time of prayer. Finally, when noon has arrived with certainty, that is, when the sun has clearly crossed the zenith, there begins another time of prayer.

Several prayers can be situated within these times. Psalm 119: 164 says: `Seven times a day do I praise thee, because of thy righteous judgements.' The early morning prayer is mentioned in Psalms 5:3; 65: 1; 88:13; and 119:147. Prayer at midnight is mentioned in 119:62.

But the Bible is specific about the fact that there are precise times of prayer. Psalm 32:6 says: `For this

shall every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou mayest be found.' Also Psalm 69:13 says: 'But as for me, my prayer is unto thee, O Lord, in an acceptable time.' It is obviously unacceptable, according to both Daniel and David, to neglect the proper times of prayer.

Besides the proper times for prayer there are also positions enjoined by the Bible. We have already noted the position of kneeling. The Hebrew word in fact refers to kneeling on the knees while at the same time sitting on the heels.

In the case of Naaman prostration with the forehead on the earth was implied. This position of prayer is mentioned many times in the Bible. Some examples are Genesis 17:3. 'And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him.' Joshua 5:14. 'And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship.' Jesus Christ maintained this posture of prayer as well. Matthew 26:39. 'And he went a little farther, and fell on his face, and prayed.'

Prostration appears commonly in the Psalms as well. Psalm 44:25. 'For our soul is bowed down to the dust: our belly cleaveth unto the earth.' Psalm 95:6. 'O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our maker.' Here three positions are mentioned: worshipping or prostration, bowing and kneeling. Bowing appears in many connections. Psalm 22:29. 'All they that go down to the dust shall bow before him.'

There is one more bodily position of formal prayer mentioned in Scripture. This is standing. Psalm 4:4. 'Stand in awe, and sin not.'

Psalm 26:12. 'My foot standeth in an even place: in the congregations will I bless the Lord.'

Prayer in congregation, that is as we have seen, standing, bowing, kneeling, and prostrating together, is enjoined in other passages as well. Psalm 22:22. 'In the midst of the congregation will I praise thee.' Psalm 35:18. 'I will give thanks in the great congregation.'

Lifting up of hands palms out at the side of the head at some time during the prayer is also enjoined. Psalm 28:2. 'Hear the voice of my supplications, when I cry unto thee, when I lift up my hands toward thy holy oracle.' Psalm 63:4. 'Thus will I bless thee while I live: I will lift up my hands in thy name.'

These verses also reveal that one should cry out the name of the Lord when lifting up the hands. The text of this cry is found in Psalm 35:27. 'Let them shout for joy, and be glad, that favor my righteous cause: yea, let them say continually, Let the Lord be magnified.' This Hebrew expression, *Yigdal Adonaf*, or 'let the Lord be magnified', is '*Allahu Akbar*' in Arabic. This cry is enjoined in many verses: Psalms 18:5,6; 30:8; 34:3; and 55:16.

Remembrance of the name of God is enjoined in many places. Psalm 6:5. 'For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?' Psalm 34:1. 'I will bless the Lord at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth.' Psalm 63:6. 'When I remember thee upon my bed.'

Remembrance of the name of God is also associated with stretching out the hands in front of oneself. Psalm 88:9. 'Lord, I have called daily upon thee, I have stretched out my hands unto thee.' Psalm 44:20,21. 'If we have forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hands to a strange god: Shall not God search this out?'

From the prayer of Daniel we saw that a particular direction of prayer is mandatory. The prophet prayed toward the temple site in Jerusalem. The ark was moved to Jerusalem by David, who conquered the city. Before that time the place of prayer was elsewhere. At the time of Jesus the place of prayer was still Jerusalem, but he prophesied that it would be changed. John 4:21. 'Woman, believe me, the hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.'

The direction of prayer is mentioned often in the Psalms. Psalm 5:7. 'But as for me, I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy; and in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple.' See also Psalms 16:8.

The formal physical aspects of prayer can be summarized: standing, raising the hands to the sides of the head with palms out, crying 'the Lord be magnified', bowing, kneeling, and prostrating, as well as making supplication with hands outstretched. There is a particular direction in which to turn. There are particular times to pray in the evening, morning and afternoon. All of these are Bible teachings and the ways in which the people of the Bible from earliest times down to the followers of Jesus Christ prayed. The fact that these practices have largely disappeared from among Christians and Jews does not in any way diminish their Biblicality.

Jesus gives some pointers in Matthew six on what to pray for. The list he gives is often called the Lord's Prayer, but we know that this was not meant as a prayer text as such, since it is not standardized in the Gospels, but appears in variants. The Psalms were the prayer hymns of the ancient Israelites as well as the early Christians, and a comparison of the words of Islamic prayer with Psalm portions will show them virtually identical.

Here are the basic words of Islamic prayer, mostly from the first chapter of the Qur'an with Biblical references which show similar expressions. *Allahu akbar!* The Lord be magnified! (Ps.35:27; 48: 1; 147:5). I begin in the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful. (Ps. 148:8). All praise is God's (Ps.9: 1) Lord of the Worlds (Ps.90:2; 10:16). The Beneficent, the Merciful (Ps.25:6). The Master of the Day of Judgement (Ps.50:6). Thee alone do we worship, of Thee alone do we seek help (Ps.30:8). Guide us on the right path (Ps.27: 11; 25:4). The path of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy bounties (Ps.31:19). Not the path of those on whom fell Thy wrath nor of those gone astray (Ps.28:3). Glory to God in the highest and praise to Him! (Luke 2:14).

Sacrifice is reaffirmed by the holy example of Noah in Genesis 8:20. The construction of an altar, that is, place of sacrifice and prayer appears here for the first time, as a holy example.

The question of whether prostration should be on earth substance alone or whether it may be on other

material must begin with direct divine command. The only Bible text of that category which seems to be of relevance is Exodus 20:24–26 `An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee. And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it. Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon.'

The word `altar' in the original Hebrew text does not imply an edifice, but a place of sacrifice and prayer. The command is to provide a place of sacrifice of earth material, such as clay or stone as mentioned in verse twenty-five. If stone is used, it should not be cut with a tool, which constitutes pollution. Thus the motive of the command is to provide an unpolluted place of sacrifice and prayer. The command does not imply a command to sacrifice, rather, it merely recognizes sacrifice as a valid part of acts of worship. Prostration as such is only implied on the basis of general usage throughout the Bible.

The intent of prohibiting steps in Exodus 20:26 does not deal with steps as such, but with the danger of polluting the place of sacrifice and prayer. The content of the command is to protect the place from pollution. The command implies that contact with excretions from the private parts pollutes the place of sacrifice and thus makes the prayer invalid.

The command states no particular size for the place of sacrifice and prayer. When the practice is prayer without the sacrifice of an animal, the earthen place of sacrifice can be made small and movable, so that care for pollution of it can be reduced. The command would thus mean that such an earth altar becomes potentially polluted if the private parts are uncovered above it. Such an earth altar must be purified or replaced as a precaution. Smallness of size and movability reduces the likelihood of pollution.

All of the other texts relating to prostration on earth are human witnesses. None of them claim to be the quoted words of God. We shall examine here those passages which mention specifically that the prostration is on earth. Other texts, which we shall not examine, mention prostration without specifying on what material prostration is made. There is no mention of prostration on any other material but earth.

The first mention of prostration on earth in the Bible is in Genesis 24:52. The story of the prayers of the servant of Abraham is revealing in a number of ways. The prayer tradition of Abraham is almost better described here than in the case of Abraham himself. The circumstances of this prostration to earth are remarkable. When the servant heard Laban and Bethuel agree to the marriage of Rebecca, he worshipped the Lord, bowing himself to the earth. The same practice of doing prostration to God upon hearing remarkable news will be seen in a later text as well.

In Genesis 42:6, there is another use for prostration to the earth. Joseph's brothers prostrate before him as governor of Egypt. This is the first example of prostration before a ruler, but later texts will show this to be the type of prostration most commonly reported in the Bible. There is a recurrence in Genesis 43:26. In Genesis 48:12 Joseph himself prostrates to the earth before his father. At this time and at the

time of later kings, prostration to the earth was not yet reserved for God alone.

In Exodus 34:8, Moses bows to the earth in prostration before the appearance of God. The same practice appears in Joshua 5:14. 'And he said, Nay; but as captain of the host of the Lord am I now come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto him, What said my Lord unto his servant?'

Three figures are mentioned in this text, Joshua, the 'captain of the host', and the Lord. It is clear from the end of the verse that the captain of the host is a divine messenger, that is, an angel. 'My Lord' (*adoni*) at the end of the verse seems to refer to the angel.

There is some ambiguity in the wording of the text. It would be possible to understand the construction to mean that Joshua prostrated to the earth before the angel. It is not necessary to read it in this way, however. There is no object suffix attached to the words 'he worshipped'. Therefore worship of God in the general meaning may be implied, and not prostration to the messenger seen by Joshua. If the text intends to say that Joshua prostrated on the earth in worship of God, this would be a similar case to that of the servant of Abraham, who worshipped God before Laban and Bethuel. Since the angel appeared as a captain of the army, this could well be prostration of fear as in the case of Manoah.

What is absolutely clear in the text is the manner or form of worship. The expression 'fell on his face to the earth' can only mean prostration on earth.

In Joshua 7:6, Joshua prostrates on earth before the ark. This worship of God is in petition after the defeat before Ai.

Judges 13:20 reports the prostration to earth on the part of Manoah and his wife after the angel had revealed the coming birth of Samson to them. It is not clear in this text whether they prostrated to the angel, who had already disappeared; to God; or whether they merely fell to the ground fainting before the miraculous fire and the ascension of the angel.

In Ruth 2:10, Ruth prostrates to the earth in gratitude to Boas. This is another occurrence of prostration to earth before a superior such as governor, king, father, or master.

Another type of prostration to earth appears in 1 Samuel 20:41. Here David makes three such prostrations to his friend Jonathan out of an excess of emotion upon seeing him. 1 Samuel 24:8 reports David's prostration to the earth in respect of the anointed king. 1 Samuel 25:23,41 reports a similar prostration to David by Abigail.

The most surprising prostration to earth is reported in 1 Samuel 28:14. Saul the king prostrates to earth before the spectre of the dead Samuel.

2 Samuel 1:2; 14:22,33; 18:28; and 24:20 all report prostrations to the earth before David the King. In 18:28 the invocation of God, however, shows that such prostration does not imply worship. Even while

prostrating before the king, Ahimaaz prays to God and not the king. 1 Kings 1:23 shows the prophet Nathan doing such prostration before David. 1 Chronicles 21:21 reports a final prostration on earth to David as king.

There is an important text in 1 Kings 18:42. `So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees.'

Elijah's prayer for rain is described as seven prostrations to the earth. This text gives the detail about prostration, that the knees are flexed and drawn up so that the face is against the earth directly in front of and between the knees. This description rules out a position with the legs extended and the stomach against the earth.

Another clarifying text is 2 Kings 5:17-18. `And Naaman said, Shall there not then, I pray thee, be given to thy servant two mules' burden of earth? for thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the Lord. In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing.'

The story of the conversion of Naaman contains this note on prostration and earth. The ancient concept of earth defilement through idolatry, murder, and other crimes seems to appear here. Naaman takes earth undefiled with idolatry from the place of the prophet specifically for the purpose of providing an undefiled place of sacrifice and prayer.

This is immediately tied to the situation of prostration (note the Hebrew word translated `worship¹) in the temple of a false god. Prostration in worship is a gesture common to idolatry and the worship of the true God. The implication is that Naaman will actually prostrate in prayer in his own place of worship containing undefiled earth. He asked to be allowed to carry out the forms of his office to the king in the idol temple. He states that he will in fact submit himself in worship to God alone, although he will go through the motions of prostration before the idol on the arm of the king.

This story is a clear witness that not only ancient Israel but the idolatrous nations surrounding understood the implications of absolute monotheism. They shared the concept of earth defilement which could affect the validity of prayer. In consequence, prostration on earth is clearly implied.

During the reign of Solomon, prostration to the earth in the temple worship of God comes into its own. This is reported in 2 Chronicles 7:3. The practice is reported for later kings as well. In 2 Chronicles 20:18 we find another example of such congregational prostration in the temple.

In the time of Nehemiah the forms of worship are clearly described. Nehemiah 8:6 says, `And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.'¹ Here we have a

prayer leader beginning the prayer with a cry on the greatness of God. All the people respond to this indication of the beginning of prayer by raising their hands and speaking aloud. Next there is bowing and then prostration on earth.

There is also a witness to prostration on earth in the texts referring to the prayer of Jesus in the garden that he might be saved from death by crucifixion. Matthew 26:39 contains the expression 'he fell on his face in prayer'. Comparing to the same story in Mark we find in Mark 14:35 the addition of the words 'upon the earth'. In reporting this incident Luke does not refer to the prostration on earth at all. Instead, he notes that Jesus places himself on his knees in Luke 22:41. This addition suggests sitting back on the heels with knees bent upon the earth between prostrations. The description states the prostration to be one with the face on the earth.

The final witness is Revelation 22:8–9. 'And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which showed me these things. Then said he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellow servant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God.'

Several points of information can be gleaned from the Bible texts referring to prostration on earth. First of all, it must be mentioned that worship or prostration on any other substance is not mentioned.

Prostration on earth is clearly an act of submission by a subordinate to a superior. It was a gesture of worship common to a wide area in the Middle East over a period covering, on the basis of these texts, at least many centuries. It is clearly described as a position with the knees flexed upon the ground and the face on the earth directly in front of and between the knees, in such a way that sitting on the heels while kneeling between prostrations is possible.

In sum, Islamic prayer is described as normative in the Bible down to the smallest detail of practice with only one exception. From the time of David to the time of Jesus, the direction of prayer is Jerusalem and not Mecca. Otherwise, the essential features of prayer are identical.

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