3748 - History of Al-Masjid Al-Haram

the question

A patron at our library has asked for the architecture and history of the Great Mosque in Mecca known as Masjid Al Haram.

Summary of answer

The history of Al-Masjid Al-Haram goes back to its founding by Prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael. The sacred mosque has witnessed numerous renovations and expansions, reflecting its enduring significance as the holiest site in Islam. The Ka`bah continues to be the focal point for millions of Muslims worldwide.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

The Founding of Al-Masjid Al-Haram by Prophet Ibrahim

Al-Masjid Al-Haram (the Sacred Mosque) is situated in Makkah, a city in the Arabian Peninsula 330 meters above sea-level. The history of the mosque goes back to its founding at the time of Ibrahim (Abraham) and his son Isma`il (Ishmael), peace be upon them both.

Makkah is the place where the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) was born and where the Revelation began, and from which the light of Islam spread. Al-Masjid Al-Haram is located here. This is the first mosque that was built for people on earth, as Allah Says in the Quran (interpretation of the meaning):

{Verily, the first House (of worship) appointed for mankind was that at Bakkah (Makkah), full of blessing, and a guidance for Al-`Alamin (mankind and jinns).} [Al `Imran 3:96]

It was reported in Sahih Muslim that Abu Dharr (may Allah be pleased with him) said: “I asked the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) about the first mosque to be built for people on earth. He said, `Al-Masjid Al-Haram.’ I asked, 'Then which?’ He said, 'Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa [The Furthest Mosque, in Jerusalem].’ I asked, ‘How long between them?’ He said, ‘Forty years.’”

The Ka`bah: The Heart of Al-Masjid Al-Haram

The Ka`bah – which is the direction of prayer for all Muslims throughout the world – is situated roughly in the middle of Al-Masjid Al-Haram. It is a 15-meter high stone structure more or less in the shape of a cube. It was built by Ibrahim (peace be upon him) on the command of Allah. Allah Says (interpretation of the meaning):

{And (remember) when We showed Ibrahim the site of the (Sacred) House (the Ka`bah at Makkah) (saying): `Associate not anything (in worship) with Me, and sanctify My House for those who circumambulate it, and those who bow and make prostration.} [Al-Hajj 22:26]

The word “bawwa’na” [translated here as “We showed”] means “He guided him and gave him permission to build it.” (End quote from Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

Allah also Says (interpretation of the meaning):

{And (remember) when Ibrahim and (his son) Isma`il were raising the foundations of the House (the Ka`bah at Makkah)…} [Al-Baqarah 2:127]

Wahb ibn Munbih (may Allah have mercy on him) said: “… It was built by Ibrahim, then [rebuilt] by the Amalekites, then by Jurham, then by Qusayy ibn Kilab. Its rebuilding by Quraysh is well known… They began to rebuild it with the stones of the valley, which Quraysh carried on their shoulders, and they built it up, 20 cubits high…

Rebuilding of the Ka`bah Over the Centuries

Between the rebuilding of the Ka`bah and the beginning of the Revelation there were five years,

and between the rebuilding and the Hijrah there were fifteen years.

`Abd Ar-Razzaq (may Allah have mercy on him) reported from Mu`ammar from `Abdullah ibn `Uthman from Abu At-Tufayl, and from Mu`ammar from Az-Zuhri: 'They were building it and when they reached Ar-Rukn (the black stone), Quraysh argued about which tribe should lift it up. Then they said, "Let us ask the first person who comes from this direction to judge between us." They agreed on that, then the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) came to them, and he was a young man wearing a spotted sash. They asked him to judge between them, and he told them to place Ar-Rukn on a piece of cloth, then he told the chief of every tribe to hold the edge of the cloth, then he climbed up and they lifted Ar-Rukn up to him, and he himself (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) put it into its place." (End quote from Tarikh Makkah by Al-Azraqi, 1/161-164)

Muslim (2374) reported that `A'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her) said: "I asked the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) about Al-Jadr and whether it was part of the House [the Ka`bah]. He said, 'Yes.' I asked, 'So why is it not incorporated into the House?' He said, 'Your people ran out of money.' I asked, 'What about the door? Why is it high up?' He said, 'Your people did that so they could let in whomever they wanted and keep out whomever they wanted. If it were not for the fact that your people are still new [in Islam] and too close to their Jahiliyyah, and I am afraid that they would resent it, I would think of incorporating Al-Jadr into the House and bringing the door down to ground level.'"

The Attack of Abrahah and Allah's Divine Intervention

Before Islam (in the year in which the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) was born), the Ka`bah was subjected to an attack by the Ethiopian Abrahah, who had built Al-Qulays, a church to which he wanted the Arabs to make their pilgrimage. He set out with his army, with whom was the elephant, and when they reached Makkah, Allah sent flocks of birds against them; each bird was carrying three stones like chickpeas or lentils, one in its beak and two in its claws. Every man who was struck by a stone was killed, so the army was destroyed, by the command of Allah.

Allah has mentioned this incident in His Book, where He says (interpretation of the meaning):

{Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the Owners of the Elephant? Did He not make their plot go astray? And sent against them birds, in flocks, Striking them with stones of Sijjil, And He made them like eaten straw (in which the corn has been eaten up by cattle).} [Al-Fil 105:1-5] (End quote from As-Sirah An-Nabawiyyah by Ibn Hisham, 1/44-58)

There was no fence or wall around the Ka`bah until it became necessary. Yaqut Al-Hamawi said in Mu'jam Al-Buldan (5/146): "The first one to build a wall around the Ka`bah was `Umar ibn Al-Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him); there was no wall around it during the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) or Abu Bakr. [The wall was built] because people were building their houses too close to the Ka`bah and making the space around it too small for people. `Umar said: 'The Ka`bah is the House of Allah, and a house needs a courtyard. You have encroached on its space, it has not encroached on yours.' So he bought those houses, demolished them and added that space to the space around the Ka`bah. He also destroyed the houses of people in the vicinity of the Ka`bah who had refused to sell, and kept the money aside for them until they came and took it later on. He built a wall around the mosque, lower than the height of a man, and lamps were placed on it. When `Uthman was caliph, he bought more houses that were more expensive… It was said that `Uthman was the first one to build porticos around it … When Ibn Az-Zubayr was in power, he improved its appearance, although he did not increase its size, by adding marble pillars, extra doors and other improvements. When `Abd Al-Malik ibn Marwan was caliph, he added to the wall of the mosque, and brought columns from Egypt by sea to Jeddah, which were carried from Jeddah to Makkah on wheels. Al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf commanded that the Ka`bah should be covered in drapes (Al-Kiswah) and when Al-Walid ibn `Abd Al-Malik was caliph, he added to the adornment of the Kiswah and spent money on improvements to the drainage spout and roof… When Al-Mansur and his son Al-Mahdi were caliphs, they added more adornments to the mosque and improved its appearance."

Other Sacred Monuments within Al-Masjid Al-Haram

There are also other religious monuments in the Mosque, such as Maqam Ibrahim (the Station of

Ibrahim), which is the rock on which Ibrahim (peace be upon him) stood whilst he was building the Ka`bah.

There is also the Well of Zamzam, which is a spring of water brought forth by Allah for Hajar and her child Isma`il (peace be upon him) when he got thirsty.

We should not forget either the Black Stone and Al-Ar-Rukn Al-Al-Yamani, which are two of the precious stones of Paradise.

At-Tirmidhi and Ahmad reported that `Abdullah ibn `Amr (may Allah be pleased with him) said: "I heard the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) saying that the Rukn and the Maqam are two of the precious stones of Paradise, whose light has been extinguished by Allah. If He had not extinguished their light, it would illuminate everything between the East and the West." (Narrated by At-Tirmidhi, 804)

Near the Mosque are the two hills of Al-As-Safa and Al-Al-Marwah.

Features of Al-Masjid Al-Haram

One of the unique features of the Mosque is that it is the only mosque in the world to which people come on pilgrimage (Hajj). Allah Says (interpretation of the meaning):

Verily! As-Safa and Al-Marwah are of the Symbols of Allah. So it is not a sin on him who performs Hajj or `Umrah (pilgrimage) of the House to perform the going (Tawaf) between them. And whoever does good voluntarily, then verily, Allah is All-Recognizer, All-Knower.} [Al-Baqarah 2:158]

Another of its unique features is that Allah has made it safe, and one prayer in it is equal to a hundred thousand prayers elsewhere. Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

{And (remember) when We made the House a place of resort for mankind and a place of safety. And take you (people) the Maqam (place) of Ibrahim as a place of prayer, and We commanded Ibrahim and Isma`il that they should purify My House for those who are circumambulating it, or

staying (I`tikaf), or bowing or prostrating themselves.} [Al-Baqarah 2:125]

{In it are manifest signs (for example); the maqam (place) of Ibrahim; whoever enters it, he attains security. And Hajj to the House is a duty that mankind owes to Allah, those who can afford the expenses (for one’s conveyance, provision and residence); and whoever disbelieves [i.e., denies Hajj, then he is a disbeliever of Allah], then Allah stands not in need of any of the `Alamin (mankind and jinns).} [Al `Imran 3:97] (Akhbar Makkah by Al-Al-Azraqi and Akhbar Makkah by Al-Al-Fakihi).

And Allah is the Source of Strength and the Guide to the Straight Path.

For more details, please see the following answers: 235370, 106318.