



ABLUTION, ISLAMIC

ABLUTION, ISLAMIC (*voṣū*), the minor ritual purification performed before prayers, circumambulation of the Ka'ba, recitation of the Qur'ān, and the prostration expressing gratitude after reciting the Qur'ān. According to the Koranic injunction which states "O you who believe! When you stand up for prayer, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe your heads and your feet up to the ankles. And if you are unclean, purify yourselves" (Qur'ān 5:6), ablution is a prerequisite to performing the prayers. Its importance is also stressed in the Traditions (*aḥādīṭ*). A Tradition states that being purified is half of faith. Another says that prayer without purification will not be accepted.

Although details vary with different schools of jurisprudence, the ablution is generally performed in the following order: The worshipper first washes his hands three times before dipping them in the vessel placed on his right side. He then rinses his mouth three times, pouring the water into it with his right hand. Preferably, he cleans his teeth with a tooth-stick or brush with the index finger and the thumb. Then he brings water to his nostrils with the left hand, snuffing it up and blowing it out three times. Then, holding water in both hands, he washes his face from the top of the forehead to the chin and as far as each ear three times. If he has a beard, he combs it with the wet fingers. Next, he washes his right hand and the forearm up to the elbow three times, causing water to run along his arm from the palm of the hand to the elbow. In the same way he washes the left. Then he draws his moistened fingers over the top of his head, proceeding from the center to the front and from the



center to the back. He puts the tips of his forefingers into his ears and twists them round, passing his thumbs at the same time round the back of the ears from the bottom upwards. Next he wipes his neck with the fingers of both hands, making the ends of his fingers meet behind his neck and then drawing them forward. Lastly he either wipes or washes (thrice) his feet, starting with the right, from the toes up to the ankles. During the ceremony he recites certain formulae with each act. Before beginning the ablution he must formulate the intention (*nīya*) of performing it, and must follow the exact order mentioned above.

According to the Koranic command, the essential elements of ablution are four: washing the face, washing the hands and the forearms up to the elbows, rubbing the wet hands on the head, and either rubbing (if one reads *arjolekum*) or washing (if one reads *arjolakum*) the feet up to the ankles. The Sunnites, Kharijites, and Zaydīs wash their feet, whereas both the Emāmī and the Isma‘īli Shī‘ites rub them, which seems closer to the literal meaning of the Qur’ān.

For cleanliness the Isma‘īlis and the Emāmīs recommend washing the feet either before or after the ablution, but they insist that it is neither obligatory nor part of the ablution. All acts in addition to the four requisite elements of ablution are considered recommended by the *sunna* (custom). Rubbing is done once, but washing is done more than once. A single washing is obligatory. The Sunnites and the Isma‘īlis regard washing thrice as the *sunna*. The Emāmīs, on the other hand, regard washing twice as the *sunna*. Moreover, the Emāmīs consider wiping the ears an innovation (*beḍ‘a*).

The *sunna* recommends that the ablution be performed thoroughly, with plentiful water. For each washing of the face and the hands, a handful of fresh water is used; but for rubbing, new water is not necessary. The ritual must be performed without interruption. If one is interrupted long enough for the water of the last washed limb to dry, one should start from the beginning. Wiping dry with a cloth after completing the ablution is allowed, but it is recommended that the skin be left to air-dry. When suitable water cannot be procured, or washing with the water might be injurious because of illness or injury, it is permitted to perform the *tayammom* (q.v.), rubbing the face and hands with fine clean dust or sand. Washing of the whole body, known as *ḡosl*, is necessary after major ritual pollution. The water used for ablution must conform to rules regarding its purity. The details are discussed s.v. *Āb* “water.”



The Koranic text, taken literally, prescribes ablution before each prayer. The Zāherī school maintained this to be obligatory, whereas all the four Sunnite schools of jurisprudence maintain that the ablution need not be performed before each prayer if the person has avoided every kind of impurity since the last ablution. Thus a single ablution alone is obligatory, and it is valid for all five prescribed daily prayers so long as the state of ritual purity is not invalidated by an action which requires ablution. The Shi'ites concur with the Sunnite position, but advocate that performing ablution before every prayer is indeed commendable.

The Sunnites and the Shi'ites disagree over the practice of wiping of the shoes (*mash' ala'l-koffayn*). According to all the Sunnite schools and the Zāherīs, a man at his permanent abode is permitted, once a day (and if he is on journey, thrice in three days), to rub his foot-covering instead of washing the feet during the ablution, if the feet when covered were washed properly and the shoes are clean, impermeable, and fit tightly. This wiping of the foot-covering is not permitted by the Shi'ites and the Kharijites. The Emāmīs allow it only under duress (i.e. by *taqīya*), and in circumstances where there is a threat to life from an enemy, wild beasts, or extreme cold. The Isma'īlis, on the other hand, permit it, not under duress, but only under the following two conditions: when a person has a valid reason preventing him from washing his feet with water, as when he wipes over splints and bandages; and when a person renews the ablution out of devotion without invalidating the state of purity acquired by a previous ablution.

The state of ceremonial purity attained by the ablution is annulled by minor impurities (*ḥadat*). Opinions vary widely as to what causes minor impurity. In general, relieving nature (breaking wind, urination, and excretion), loss of consciousness, and sleep (apart from dosing while sitting) produce minor impurities, making ablution indispensable. According to the Shi'ites and the Hanafites, kissing and touching of the other sex does not invalidate the ablution, but according to the Shafe'ites touching the skin of the other sex, unless the worshippers are related in a way that prohibits marriage, does invalidate it. The Malikites and the Hanbalites maintain that only passionate and sensuous touching invalidates the ablution. The Zāherīs, on the other hand, maintain that any contact of a man with a strange female, even a baby girl an hour old, invalidates the ablution.

The performance of ablution is highly extolled in the Traditions. The Prophet is reported as saying, "He who performs the ablution thoroughly will extract



all sin from his body, even though it may be lurking under his fingernails.” Another Tradition says, “The key of paradise is prayer, and the key of prayer is being purified.” The Messenger of God is also reported as saying, “My people will be summoned on the Day of Resurrection with white faces and hands and feet from the marks of ablution. If any of you can extend his brightness, let him do so.”

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