



10 Great Texts – Background Information: Abraham Visits Ishmael in Two Religious Literatures

Reuven Firestone, Los Angeles

The biblical story of Abraham's relationship with his "second wife" Hagar and their son, Ishmael, raises a number of ethical issues that have plagued readers for millennia. Particularly problematic is Abraham's involvement, with God's blessing, in their banishment to the desert, and Ishmael's (and surely also Hagar's) certain death through thirst had God not finally intervened at the last moment. The Midrash treats the problem from a variety of angles beginning in its earliest layers. One midrash on the topic is particularly interesting because virtually the same narrative interpretation is found also in the Islamic equivalent of Midrash, a literature called "Stories of the Prophets" (*qisas al-anbiya'*).

The Islamic "Stories of the Prophets" (or "Prophetic Stories") is a literary *genre*. Like Midrash, it is constructed from comments, legends, fables, and commentaries that were passed down orally until they were gathered and recorded in collections. Also like the Midrash, "Prophetic Stories" developed largely in order to fill in the gaps of scripture. The scripture in question is of course the Qur'an, which often references biblical stories or characters without retelling the narrative in detail. There are a few early references to Muslims going to the Beit Midrash during the generations immediately following Muhammad. In fact, the Qur'an itself seems to suggest that early Muslims ask Jews or Christians about their scriptures ("We sent inspired people before you, so ask the "people of remembrance" if you do not know" Q.16:43). It should not be surprising to note, therefore, that many of the Islamic stories in these collections find parallels with Jewish stories. But the flow of information was not uni-directional, as our midrash about Abraham's visits to Ishmael seems to suggest.

The Midrash in question is *Pirkey deRabbi Eli'ezer*. One of the markers that dates the editing of the collection to no earlier than the late seventh or early eighth centuries is that the names given for the wives of Ishmael are the same names as the last wife of Muhammad (A'isha) and Muhammad's daughter (Fatima). The Islamic parallel comes from a massive history of the world, written by the 8th-9th century polymath, Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d.924).¹ Tabari used the genre of "Prophetic Stories" as well as the Bible itself for some of the data to write his history of the biblical period. Because the story of Abraham's visits to Ishmael occurs in parallel among roughly contemporary literatures, one of the questions that scholars in the field of Jewish and Islamic studies ask is of course, who "borrowed" from whom? There is evidence to support the origin of the story in each religious system.

¹ *Ta'rikh al-rusul wal-muluk*, translated into English under the editorship of Ihsan Yarshater (State University of New York Press). Volume two contains our story.

Abraham appears in the Qur'an more than one hundred times in more than twenty chapters. He is a foundational character for Muslims, who pray in their daily prayers for blessings on Abraham's family just as they pray for blessings on Muhammad's family. His moral stature is just as important for Muslims as it is for Jews, a fact that is evident in the extensive interpretive literature that evolved around his character.

Ethical considerations are evident from the very inception of the "midrashic" tellings of our story. Abraham's assumption that he could visit Ishmael demonstrates that he had faith that his banishment of wife and son would not result in their deaths. Abraham's trust in God is confirmed by the narrative of God's deliverance, which also preserves the moral stature and both Abraham and God. Sarah's anger and resentment of Hagar seems to be taken entirely for granted in both religions' version of the midrash. Both Jewish and Islamic religious cultures accepted the practice of polygamy, and there seems to have been little need in such systems to redeem her character after her emotional treatment of Hagar. Her behavior probably appeared unexceptional. Abraham's continued love and care for Ishmael are paramount in both versions of the story, in which Abraham gives his son his blessing and approves of the wife that would become the matriarch of the Arab peoples and the religious community of Islam.

The story of Abraham's visits to Ishmael is told in classic folkloristic fashion. Certain motifs are repeated in folkloristic style, such as Abraham's words to Sarah upon leaving home, his words to Ishmael's wives, etc. Entire phrases are repeated within the repetitive sections, and certain cultural realia appear and reappear in slightly altered form. Note that the familiar three-fold repetition that is such a common folkloristic feature ("third time's the charm") occurs only in the Islamic version.

The differences between the Jewish and Islamic renderings of the story reflect both religious and cultural differences. Perhaps the first question that a reader comparing the two versions of the narrative would ask is, "does the story of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael occur in the Qur'an?" The answer to this question is a simple "no." Ishmael as a persona does indeed occur in the Qur'an. He is mentioned slightly less often than Isaac (about a dozen times), but very little can be gleaned about his life from Islamic scripture. It was necessary, therefore, for Muslims to learn about him from the Hebrew Bible, from Jewish and Christian interpretive traditions, and from Arabian legends that had absorbed biblical information into them.²

The "Stories of the Prophets" form of narrative exegesis that developed and became so popular in Islam, therefore, is also a form of *biblical* interpretation, since it often treats material that occurs in the Bible but is absent from the Qur'an. It is interesting to read this material because it makes sense of the Bible in ways that must be harmonious with the Qur'an, with general Islamic precepts, and often, Arabian culture. This literature can add wonderful nuances to teaching in Jewish contexts as well. It sometimes adds insights and perspectives that are not found in Jewish interpretations, and engagement with these texts also helps to familiarize

² If you are interested in this process of absorbing biblical information into pre-Islamic Arabia, take a look at Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990.

students with the religious and cultural traditions of Muslims, our closest monotheistic brethren. Note, for example, that midrashic interpretation is actually rare in Christian tradition, but ubiquitous in Islam. Islam emerged out of an environment that had more direct cultural and literary parallels with traditional Israelite-Rabbinic culture than with Greco-Roman culture. The story of Abraham's visits to Ishmael is thus important for a variety of reasons. It epitomizes not only a parallel literary approach of Islam, but also its concern to make sense of Abraham in a way that preserves his moral stature of patriarch, not only to Jews and Judaism, but also to Islam and Muslims.

In order to make sense of the Islamic version of the narrative, one must know that Abraham is intimately associated with the Hajj Pilgrimage in the Qur'an and Islamic tradition. The Qur'an associates Abraham and Ishmael with raising up the foundations of the Ka`ba (called *al-Bayt* in the Qur'an), purifying it and circumambulating it (Q 2:125-132), and he is commanded by God to call humanity to engage in the Hajj (Q 22:28, though some interpreters believe that the command was given to Muhammad rather than Abraham – it is not absolutely clear from the qur'anic context who was intended to receive the command). In the Islamic "narrative," which is not found exactly as such in the Qur'an, the Ka`ba was first established on earth by God or by Adam as the original House of God. It was raised up to heaven during the Noahide flood, and Abraham then rebuilt it on its original foundations in Mecca. Abraham then nearly sacrificed Ishmael there (not explicit in the Qur'an).

In Mecca today pilgrims visit the *Maqam Ibrahim*, which is a monument containing a stone that is said to have had Abraham's footprint imbedded in it at one time, but which was wiped away from centuries of beloved touching by pilgrims. Other rituals of the Hajj are associated with Abraham as well, such as the "stoning of the devil," which is associated with Abraham repelling Satan who tempted him to disobey God's command to sacrifice Ishmael (not found in the Qur'an but explicit in the "Stories of the Prophets" literature). The final "days of sacrifice" at the end of the Hajj recalls Abraham's sacrifice of the goat (not ram) in place of his son, Ishmael. It should be noted, parenthetically, that the story of the intended sacrifice of Abraham's son in the Qur'an does not specify which son was the intended victim (Q 27:99-113). Commentators have disagreed historically over whether the son was Ishmael or Isaac, but today the overwhelming consensus is that it was Ishmael.