

Abraham Visits Ishmael

Guiding Comments & Questions

(based on the 10 + 1 motifs)

1. Note how the Jewish version responds directly to a biblical issue. `A'ishah is the name of Muhammad's youngest wife. Like the Jewish version, the Muslim version is a continuation of a longer story that includes the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. It associates Ishmael with an ancient Arabian tribe that, according to Islamic tradition, was settled in the vicinity of Mecca.
2. What might be the significance of the three years in the Jewish version? The Arabic word for "settle down" is the same word for "get down" or "get off" [of a camel]: *nazala*.
3. The sanctuary (*haram*) is a sacred area around a holy site in Arabia. In such sacred areas, hunting and even uprooting living plants was traditionally forbidden (and is to this day in the *haram* of Mecca). Is there any significance to the two different occupations of Ishmael in the two versions?
4. What might be the significance of the "threshold" of the door or home to the story?
5. *Fatimah* is the name of Muhammad's daughter who married `Ali, Muhammad's closest male relative and the fourth Caliph. Why might Ishmael's unacceptable wife be specifically referred to as Moabite?
6. "...as long as God willed" is an idiom in Arabic that means, simply, "for a while."
7. What difference might it make that the Jewish version has Ishmael grazing camels in the wilderness while the Islamic version has Ishmael hunting?
8. The *Maqam Ibrahim* is mentioned in the Qur'an (Q.2:125). There is a short stone pillar in the *haram* of Mecca today called the *Maqam Ibrahim* that is revered as part of the Hajj ritual. In Islam, the dietary laws do not separate milk from meat products. What might be the significance of milk and meat on the one hand, and wheat, dates and barely on the other?
9. Why was Ishmael's first wife rejected and the second approved? Why is Abraham associated with the determination of the proper wife for Ishmael? Why would it be so important to have a wife who would be acceptable to Abraham?
10. Legend has it that the mark of Abraham's footprint was miraculously left on the stone of the *Maqam Ibrahim* in Mecca but was rubbed off from the thousands of pilgrims that would touch and kiss it in ancient days.
11. Continuation in the Islamic telling: Note the second origin given for the *Maqam Ibrahim*. See Qur'an 2:124-134 for the qur'anic telling of Abraham and Ishmael raising up the foundations of the "House" (*al-bayt*) in what appears to be Mecca. This House is universally understood by Muslims to be the Ka`ba. Compare with Gen.12:7-8 and 13:3-4 where Abraham builds altars where he prays to God. How does the construction of the Ka`ba in Mecca relate to this biblical trait of Abraham? What traits does the qur'anic Abraham share with the biblical Abraham? In what ways are they different?