

Ponderings and Possibilities

The *Stories of the Prophets* (*Qisas al-anbiya'*) literature emerged in Islamic culture and civilization in much the same way as did the Jewish equivalent of Midrash. Some comments or narrative pieces (the building blocks that were eventually joined together informally and then formally to form longer narratives) may have originated as old family traditions that were passed on orally by word of mouth. They may have been "bedtime stories," or *bubba-ma`asehs* – intuitive responses to questions raised in family gatherings or around campfires. Others seem to have emerged in direct relationship to scripture as studied in more formal settings. The latter might seem more formally exegetical. Whatever their mixed origins, they became part of the larger culture when they were told and re-told in private and public settings.

When such stories became part of the general culture, they entered what might be called today the "public domain," and could be narrated with intentional or unintentional variation by the various individuals or groups that related to them. As such, they tended to take shape within various sub-communities within the larger civilization according to the sub-groups' unique cultural values, expectations and biases. Given the fluidity of oral transmission, it should not be surprising to find "Jewish" as opposed to "Muslim" versions of such shared cultural narrative artifacts.

Their very existence in the public domain is proof that Jews and Muslims talked to one another and shared their favorite stories and assumptions about God, their ancestors, and the relationship between God and their ancestors as well as their understanding about what God expects of them in their own generations. The nature of the narrative variants makes it clear that they sometimes agreed and sometimes argued about their respective roles in God's divine plan.

One of the many fascinating aspects of working with stories that are shared by Jews and Muslims is to think about why they occur in their particular forms in each religious community. I personally find it interesting to theorize which version might be more original, but since they were told and retold by Jews and Muslims separately and sometimes certainly in mixed company, it is likely that there is no version that can be considered "the original."

Why would the story of Abraham's visits to Ishmael emerge into literary history? One answer is that it fills in some of the gaping holes in scripture. One such simple item is the reference in Gen.21:20-21, "God was with the boy and he grew up; he dwelt in the wilderness and became a bowman. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt." As such it may have begun its literary life as a response to the biblical text, since the story of marital tension in the Abrahamic family leading up to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael occurs in the Torah but not in the Qur'an. The story might seem, then, to respond to some problems that are presented by the biblical narrative. What might these problems have been? A wide range of possibilities immediately present themselves from the geographical to the moral-ethical and legal as well as humanistic and literary perspectives. In teaching the story I have encountered a wide range of suggestions from readers as to what its major purpose might be.

Another possible reason for the story's emergence into literary history is that it provides a subtext for a scriptural reference that seems to call out for some background information. This is another type of literary lacuna, one that appears to require an explanatory story. In language that became popularized through the neo-folkloristic "Star Wars" cycle (that has become part of the public cultural domain of America and much of the rest of the world), the story could appear as a "prequel" to a puzzling text that is established in sacred writ. In this scenario, the story may have originated as a means of making sense of the Qur'anic references to Abraham appearing deep inside the Arabian Peninsula. It also explains his and Ishmael's joint act of raising up the foundations of the sacred Ka`ba in Mecca mentioned in the Qur'an, and why there is a monument in Mecca even today that is referenced in the Qur'an as *maqam Ibrahim* – "the Place of Abraham" (Q.2:125-132).

It is interesting to note that Jewish scholars are themselves divided as to the origin of the story. Joseph Heineman (*Aggadot Vetoldoteihen* [Jerusalem, 1974], pp. 189ff), for example, considers the Islamic version to be older, while Aviva Schussman ("*Mekoro hayehudi umegamato shel sippur bikkurei avraham atzel yishma`el*" [Tarbiz 49 (1980)], 325-45) regards the Jewish version as earlier. In any case, I was able to locate three Jewish renderings of the story. It can be found also in *Sefer HaYashar* (*vayera'*) and *Yalqut Shim`oni* 95 (*vayera'*), and a reference may also be found in the *Palestinian Targum* to Genesis 21:21. I found a full seventeen Islamic renderings of the story.

There are many differences of course between the two parallel narratives, and different readers and reading communities will relate to them in their own unique ways. I provide a bit more information about some of the eleven motif units in what follows.

Although Tabari, whose rendering of the story is the one chosen for this comparison, does not provide names for Ismail's wives, other Islamic versions do. It is probably impossible to know why the names found in both the Jewish and Islamic versions were chosen, but the tribal names given in the Islamic tellings are all of ancient Arabian tribes known to have existed in ancient days. It will be of interest to Jews to know that one of those names of ancient Arabian tribes associated in three versions with Ismail's first wife is Amalek. The name does not occur in the Qur'an, and it has a mixed status in Arabian genealogies. Some of the Amalekites are clearly bad or corrupt people. In some legends, however, they are not, but rather represent some of the oldest and thus respected tribes of ancient Arabia.

In a few of the Islamic versions, Abraham travels to visit Ishmael on a Pegasus or a horse brought to him by Gabriel from heaven. The Pegasus is called *Buraq*, which like the Hebrew, can also mean "lightning" or "shiny and sparkly." *Buraq* is also the steed that miraculously brought Muhammad to Jerusalem millennia later, from where ascended to heaven to receive personal instruction from God.

Some of the Islamic renderings of the story are quite explicit when they stress that Ishmael would always leave the *haram* or sacred area of Mecca to hunt. The sacred nature of *harams* in pre-Islamic Arabia is well-known, and it has been forbidden from ancient days to uproot plants or kill any living things within them. Ishmael is thus portrayed as a righteous patriarch of the Arab peoples who epitomizes not only the piety of Islam but the cultural norms of Arabia.

Another interesting item is the object of Abraham's blessing. In the Islamic versions, Abraham blessed the pastoral products of milk and meat, which were the main food in the diet of desert nomads. The Islamic version of the story seems to regret that Ishmael's wife did not bring agricultural products for Abraham to bless, for his blessing would have insured that Mecca would have been a lovely agricultural oasis in the holy center of the Islamic world. To this day, Mecca is a barren place in which agricultural production is impossible.

This leads to an interesting aside about a linguistic parallel between Hebrew and Arabic that is reflective of Semitic language in general. The word *l.ch.m.* (in Hebrew *lechem* and Arabic *lachm*) actually means "main food item." In the *Tanakh*, for example, *lechem* can mean "food" in general rather than simply bread (1 Sam. 20:27), but it usually refers to bread as distinguished from meat (Gen. 27:17, 1 Sam. 25:11). In Arabic it typically refers to meat. This distinction reflects the economic differences between ancient Israel and Arabia. Israel was primarily agricultural, and its main foodstuff bread. In Arabia, the main food was meat. I have been told that in an old and now extinct Semitic language spoken by people living on islands in the Red Sea, the local pronunciation of the root *l.ch.m.* meant fish (as it seems to in Prov. 31:14).