

Abraham in Mecca¹

by Marten de Vries

‘The stories from the Qur’an and from tradition appear to be especially suitable for a dialogue between Jews, Muslims and Christians.’

Thus ends the report of a symposium held in 2006 and entitled ‘Biblical Figures’, published in the periodical Begrip.² During the conference, theologians from both Christian and Islamic traditions raised the subject of Abraham, Hagar and Lot.

So it seems that here in Rotterdam, we are busying ourselves with something quite worthwhile. Every two months we meet Muslims and the subject of our discussion is always a person who is mentioned in both the Bible and the Qur’an. The assumption is that by using these examples, we can present not only the similarities, but also the specificities of our own religion.

It is likely that our discussion is livelier and more assertive than that of the previously mentioned scholars. But that makes it all the more interesting!

Fighting about Abraham?

In 1994 Karl-Josef Kuschel published his *Streit um Abraham*, which became available in Dutch in 2001³. In short, the book comes down to this: if Jews, Christians and Muslims would simply moderate the specific characteristics of their own religion, we would all have fewer problems. But that is not our starting point, to be sure. In our opinion, this concept only brings forth losers.

In the Netherlands, Francien van Overbeeke-Rippen dedicated the first chapter of her 1998 thesis⁴ to ‘Ibrahiem/Abraham in Koran / Bijbel’. After summing up the complete and partial similarities and differences, she arrived at the conclusion that both religions are about the same Abraham, and therefore, about the same God. In her opinion the self-revelation of God/Allah in Jesus Christ is not in contradiction with the announcement of his will via Muhammad.

1. This article should be read as a follow-up to ‘Mary in the Mosque’, which appeared in an earlier issue of Seedbed.

2. Periodical published by Bureaus voor ontmoeting met moslims van de Rooms Katholieke Kerken in Nederland en de PKN, 32nd annual volume (2006), nos. 4 & 5, pp. 183ff.

3. Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Strijd om Abraham*, Zoetermeer 2001.

4. Francien van Overbeeke-Rippen, *Overgave aan God - Navolging van Christus, Een onderzoek naar afstand en nabijheid tussen Islam en Christendom*, Nijmegen, 1998.

And if it does seem to differ, we should read the texts again and in the right context, so she claims.⁵

This too, is not our starting point.

Following the approved procedure, we had another discussion in February 2007, in a truly pleasant atmosphere. This was probably due to the fact that we, both Muslims and Christians, were able to sample from each other what Abraham means to us. It became crystal clear that the belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and God's Son is all-defining.

Was Abraham a Muslim?

In 1987 a Dutch minister, Rev. Herman Feenstra, wrote a book with the somewhat sensational title, *Was Abraham Reformed?*⁶ To Muslims there is no question about it: Abraham was a Muslim! His merit was that he, as a type of Muhammad, restored monotheism to glory. In so doing, he was the *primeval model* of the true *Muslim*.

While seated in a cave, Abraham came to the conclusion, by thinking logically, that multi-godheads could not exist. He set out on a one-man iconoclastic spree, thereby risking the wrath of his father, King Nimrod, and his community. They set him on fire, but God came to the rescue. For He said to the fire, 'O fire, be cool and harmless to Ibrahim'.⁷

After Abraham came Muhammad. According to tradition, the prophet of the Muslims ascended to heaven from the spot where the Al-Aqsa Mosque now stands. Muslims commemorate yearly this Islamic deed of salvation, from which they derive the precise instructions for the ritual prayers in the *laylat al-miraadi*, the night of the heavenly journey.

After Muhammad had passed by John and Jesus(!) in the second heaven, he discovered in the seventh heaven that he looked most like Abraham. He was even his outward double (hair, nose). His mission was also none other than to bring to perfection the work that the illustrious father of all Muslims had begun.

Abraham's *hajj* (pilgrimage)

What was highly surprising to our Islamic discussion partners was the precedence of Isaac over Ishmael within the Christian perspective. What then is the story as they tell it?

Hagar was originally one of the Egyptian Pharaoh's slaves. He had given her to Sarah as a kind of hush-money for it was not to become known that he had tried to make advances towards her while Abraham was at *salaat* [prayer].

5. pp. 46 ff.

6. H.J.J. Feenstra, *Was Abraham Gereformeerd?*, Goes 1987, Series: *Woord en Wereld* (volume 4).

7. Surat *Al-Anbiya'* (The Prophets 21:69)

Sarah was unable to have children and after some deliberation, they agreed that Hagar would become Abraham's legal second wife. After the birth of Ishmael, Sarah became jealous of Hagar and the bigamous monotheist, Abraham, brought Hagar to Mecca.

There it was that Hagar sought water for her son. While she desperately ran back and forth between the hills of Safa and Marwa, the Zamzam spring welled up before her feet.

In Mecca, Abraham, together with his son Ishmael, rebuilt the shrine known as the *Kaaba* that had been built long before by the 'prophet' Adam. Later on, from Damascus, Abraham made one more pilgrimage to Mecca with his wife Sarah, who had by now become the mother of Isaac.

Abraham's sacrifice

You can already envisage the whole hajj event. For Muslims, the climax of the month of pilgrimage is the sacrificial feast. It is a reminder of the *ritual sacrifice* that Abraham once offered when he was tested by God with the request to sacrifice his son Ishmael(!). In acquiescing, Abraham

showed himself to be a perfect Muslim. He was literally one *surrendered* to God. A true example! As a reward, he was given a ram to sacrifice.

We spoke about *our* sacrificial feast, Good Friday, when we commemorate the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus. We testified that the ram who was slain in Isaac's(!) place speaks of the substitutionary suffering and death of our Saviour.

Abraham is presented as an example to us, too. Not just because of his monotheism... but it was because of his faith that he ...was called *God's friend*. It was his self-sacrifice (his surrender) that allowed him to let go of the results of his achievements.

Abraham is presented as an example to us, too. Not just because of his monotheism (it was God who called him; he

would not have come up with the idea of monotheism otherwise) but it was because of his faith that he – and on this we were in agreement once more – was called *God's friend*. It was his self-sacrifice (his surrender) that allowed him to let go of the results of his achievements. That faith was – of course – accompanied by good deeds.⁸ But it was this faith alone, in answer to God's calling, that formed the basis of the bond (covenant) that bound him to God. And so we also respond to God with our faith in Jesus Christ, the one who surrendered himself for us.

8. James 2:22

Abraham's descendants

At the time of his calling, Abraham received the promise that he, in his descendants, would be a blessing to all mankind.⁹ According to Galatians 3,¹⁰ this promise was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the descendant, whom the patriarch had looked forward to during his entire life¹¹ and who, humanly speaking, was to be his descendant via Isaac. It was because Isaac was the child of the promise¹² that Abraham dared bring him to the altar. He told himself that God was able to raise his son from the dead if He so wished.¹³

We believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.¹⁴ In Galatians 4, Hagar and Ishmael stand for slavery; Sarah and Isaac stand for freedom.¹⁵

Muslims adorn themselves with names starting with *abd* [servant]. Christians have received the privilege of naming themselves God's children through Jesus.¹⁶

In Galatians 4 we even see the name *Arabia* mentioned. It also appears in chapter 1. Paul first shared the testimony of his conversion with the people *there* – though not exactly in the vicinity of Mecca and Medina. He would have told them how he was overcome, against his will, while on the road to

Damascus – on his way to persecuting Christ's church.¹⁷

In Abraham's footsteps

It was a fascinating evening. Questions were answered, but new ones were also evoked. For example: why do Muslims actually have rituals with blood? What is their meaning? Fatma suggested that it may have to do with the protection of one's own blood and life. Emin immediately rejected this as a form of superstition. But we did find it understandable that the sacrificial feast during the month of Hajj is called *the great feast* rather than the Ramadan feast at the end of the month of fasting. Does not our life depend on the great sacrifice on the Best Friday?

A question came from another person: how can *one* be punished for the faults of the other? Answer: it is an *injl*,¹⁸ – literally a *gospel* [good tiding] that we, as human beings, would be unable to fabricate. That too can be found in Galatians 1!¹⁹ We just believe it. And we celebrate it when 'we cherish the blessed memory of the bitter death' of God's Son who became Man... on Good Friday... and at the Lord's Supper. (We even

9. Genesis 12:1-3

10. Galatians 3:16

11. John 8:56

12. Genesis 17:18-21

13. Hebrews 11:17ff

14. Genesis 50:24; Matthew 22:32; many other biblical stories

15. Galatians 4:21-31

16. John 1:12

17. Galatians 1:17

18. This is what the Muslims call the revelation that apparently descended upon Jesus, just as later the Qur'an descended upon Muhammad.

19. Galatians 1:11

invited our friends to attend our next celebration in April!)

We were seated in a *dershane* or *madrasa*²⁰ with close to twenty-five people, with each one of us calling himself a *child of Abraham*. However it may be, that does create a bond. We feel that we are in some way related to one another. And we keep on looking each other up.

But it is exactly because of this, that it is painful. We cannot truly reach each other. We cannot fit onto Father

Abraham's lap together as long as we are not 'gathered under one Head, under Christ' ²¹ – which is the goal or destination of *our* weekly Sunday 'pilgrimage'. Yet, as Muslims and Christians, we do not want to lose sight of one another.

But, above all, Christians follow Jesus. We know ourselves to be pilgrims in the footsteps of Abraham, on the road to what is called 'the wedding feast of the Lamb'! ²²

20. Expressions that refer to an Islamic school of learning

21. Ephesians 1:10

22. Revelation 19:9