

ABRAHAM IN THE QUR'AN: THE FIRST MUSLIM

by M. B.

Muslims would agree with the New Testament (Rom 4:11) that Abraham is "father of all who believe." An analysis of Abraham's faith in the Qur'an can help us communicate to those whose knowledge of Abraham is based on the Qur'an just what the New Testament means by "believe."

An Overview of the Qur'anic Presentation of Abraham

When we follow the Muslim chronology of the Qur'an, given in the official Egyptian text, we discover that there are two groups of traditions about Abraham (see Table in Watt 1970:206-213). The first group contains versions of stories from Genesis and the Talmud (the collection of Biblical interpretations made by Rabbinic Jews.) The second recounts completely new stories about Abraham which are unique to the Qur'an.

Stage One: The earliest mention of Abraham comes in Sura "Mary" (19:42-50/41ff). It is a version of a story from the Talmud about Abraham's rejection of his father's gods in favor of the Creator. Next comes the story of a visit to Abraham by some heavenly messengers with the promise of a son. This comes in Sura "Hod" (11:72-76/69-73). Thirdly, "The Rangers" (37:100-111/102-112) mentions Abraham's attempt to sacrifice his son. According to the chronology of the Egyptian text of the Qur'an, these were the 44th, the 52nd and the 56th Suras respectively in historical sequence of revelation.

Stage Two: A later group of suras gives stories about Abraham unique to the Qur'an. Sura "Abraham" (14:38-43/35-41) tells us that Abraham was at Mecca and established a sanctuary there for the worship of the Creator. "The House of Imran" (3:58-62/65-69) declares that Abraham was the first Muslim, and in the "The Cow" (2:120-123/126-129) we read a prayer of Abraham in which he blesses the Kaaba at Mecca, asks God to turn the Arabs to Him and earnestly desires an Arab prophet to arise to lead them in God's way. According to the Egyptian chronology, these were respectively the 72nd, the 89th and 87th suras in historical sequence of revelation.

Why Two Stages? The most likely explanation is that stories about Abraham were current in Arabia in Muhammad's time, relayed by Jewish tribes. This accounts for the stories from Genesis and the Talmud being introduced in the Qur'an. The unique stories can be explained by the controversy that arose between Muhammad and the Jews who rejected his message. It was in response to that rejection that the new stories develop connections between Abraham and Arabia, Mecca, the Kaaba, the Arabs, and the Arabian prophet himself. In other words, the later stories legitimize the call of Muhammad by anchoring Islam in history back before the Torah and the Prophets; they take Islam back to the first man who heard the call of God and obeyed. Islam becomes the original religion, and Abraham the first Muslim.

The First Cycle: Abraham Fights Idolatry

Now let us examine these Qur'anic stories in detail. The first one ("Mary" 19:42-50/41-50) tells how Abraham challenges the idol worship of his father. His father threatens to stone him. Abraham asks God to forgive his father.

This conversion of Abraham is retold seven times in the Qur'an, making it by far the most important tradition about Abraham to be recorded. In two recensions Abraham breaks the idols around him in the name of God. He asks the idolaters, "Do you serve what you hew, and God created you and what you make?" ("The Rangers" 37:94/95-6). He is promptly threatened with fire, but God delivers him.

This story can be found in the Talmud but not in the Bible (Tisdall 1905:74f). No doubt it is an attempt by the Rabbis to fill out the Genesis account where it is silent on Abraham's relationship with his father's religion.

In a later version of this story in the Qur'an, Abraham explains his break with idolatry:

O my people, surely I am quit of that you associate. I have turned my face to Him who originated the heavens and the earth, a man of pure faith; I am not of the idolaters.' ("Cattle" 6:79/78-9)

God is defined as the Creator, not some local deity such as his father worshipped. These local deities can no longer be "associated" with the Creator of the whole world. The concept of association becomes a watchword in the Qur'an, a kind of marker of the Muslim faith. It defines what God is not (just as Christians have used negative words to fence off belief about God). When one sees the marker one turns neither to the left (to things which might be said to represent God) nor to the right (to people who might be held to reveal Him), but rather one keeps straight ahead, acknowledging God as unseen.

God's Call to Abraham in Genesis

I believe that Genesis 12:1-3 is an ideal commentary on the story just considered. How did Abraham come to acknowledge "the God" above the many gods of the idolaters around him. The Qur'an does not answer this question in the way that Genesis does. We are not told in the Qur'an that God spoke to Abraham at this stage in his life. Only later is there conversation between them. How appropriate then to introduce a Muslim to the personal revelation of God in Genesis 12:1-3. Here God gives Abraham a command to obey and a set of promises to believe. We can therefore begin to develop the notion of faith as it is expounded in the Bible. Faith in God is trust in His promises and obedience to His commands. Surely here is a rationale for Abraham's attack on his father's idols.

The Promise of a Son

The account in Genesis 18 of messengers arriving at Abraham's tent and promising him a son is found twice in the Qur'an. The earliest version comes in Sura "Hood" (11:72-76/69-73).

Our messengers came to Abraham with the good tidings. ... We gave her [Abraham's wife] the glad tidings of Isaac, and, after Isaac, of Jacob. She said 'Woe is me! Shall I bear being an old woman, and this my husband is an old man?' They said 'What, dost thou marvel at God's command.'

The context of Genesis 18 is missing. There, the Lord has already promised Abraham a son (12:2,7; 15:4,5; 17:19). The messengers come to repeat for the fourth time God's commitment to give Abraham a son in his old age. We are also told in Genesis that Abraham had a son by his wife's maid. We do not hear about Ishmael in the Qur'an, however, until we come to the sacrifice story. Again, we discover in Genesis that Abraham asks that Ishmael be accepted as the son of the promise (17:18). The Lord then makes a distinction between the two sons. Ishmael, the son born naturally, is blessed and will become the father of a great nation. It is Isaac, however, the "son of the promise" who was conceived supernaturally, who will be Abraham's heir and the bearer of God's everlasting covenant.

All of this Biblical context is important for the Muslim to grasp. We need to help him to see that God made His covenant with Isaac and his descendants, not Ishmael, and that this covenant is everlasting. We can try to point out that the prophets of Israel looked back to this covenant with Isaac, and forward to a new covenant established through the Messiah with all who follow Him (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb 8:7-13). Ultimately, God worked out His promise to Abraham through Jesus Christ to all, whatever the race, who are "sons of the promise" by faith in Jesus (Gal. 4:28-31). Gentiles, and this includes Muslims, can become Abraham's heirs only through faith in Christ.

The Call to Sacrifice His Son

The second Biblical story to be included in the Qur'an is a version of the sacrifice story of Genesis 22:1-19. In "The Rangers (37:100-111/102-112), Abraham says to his son:

'My son, I see in a dream that I shall sacrifice thee; consider, what thinkest thou?' He said, 'My father, do as thou art bidden; thou shalt find me, God willing, one of the steadfast.' ... We called unto him, 'Abraham, thou hast confirmed the vision. ... This is indeed the manifest trial.' And We ransomed him with a mighty sacrifice. ... Then We gave him the good tidings of Isaac...

Again, the Genesis account gives essential data not found here. In Genesis 22:2 it is God who gives that awesome command "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and sacrifice him as a burnt

offering." The Qur'an can be taken to imply that it was Ishmael who was sacrificed, because Isaac's birth is only announced after the account of the sacrifice. This is the traditional Muslim view.

We can use this Qur'anic story to show several things to our Muslim friend. First of all, we need to point out that the command to sacrifice Isaac goes against God's promise to Abraham. It is this seeming denial of His word that is the real test for Abraham. This paradox is absent from the story in the Qur'an. The sharpness of human sacrifice can still be felt in the Qur'anic version, however, and we can use that dilemma of faith to show how much more difficult it was for Abraham to trust God in the Genesis story. A second issue has to do with the fact that Abraham's faith culminated in obedience to the word of God even when that word seemed to contradict all that God had said before. Finally, we can point to this event in the life of the father of the Hebrew nation as a prophetic foreshadowing of the sacrifice of the "Lamb of God."

The Second Cycle of Traditions

We have seen how, in the Qur'anic version of Abraham's sacrifice, Ishmael takes the place of Isaac. We will now discover that Isaac disappears from the scene altogether, and that Ishmael assumes his place in the narrative. Chronologically the next mention of Abraham comes in the Sura named "Abraham." Here we find him in Arabia at an ancient sanctuary in a valley where Mecca would later be built.

Abraham Establishes God's House at Mecca

In Sura "Abraham" (14:40/37) Abraham prays to God, "Our Lord, I have made some of my seed to dwell in a valley where is no sown land by Thy Holy House." In a later revelation, the Holy House is explained to be set apart by a word from God:

'... We appointed the House to be a place of visitation for the people, and a sanctuary. ... And We made covenant with Abraham and Ishmael: 'Purify My House for those that shall go about it and those that cleave to it, to those who bow and prostrate themselves.' ("The Cow" 2:117, 119/125)

Finally in "The Pilgrimage" (22:27) God commands Abraham to call for a pilgrimage to the house.

There are two issues that spring from these quotations. The first is that God makes His covenant with Abraham and Ishmael. Isaac has no part in this covenant, neither is there an elect people. The covenant has to do with a sanctuary, a holy place. Thus the promise of the land in Genesis is transformed into a commitment to a building. Why so? The answer probably lies in the fact that the Kaaba was already an ancient sanctuary in Muhammad's time. It may be too that Abraham was associated with this temple before Muhammad, but of this nobody can be sure. In any case, for Islam, the ancient house anchors Muhammad's novel call in antiquity. Although the Kaaba had

become a seat of idolatry in Muhammad's time, that was not its original purpose. Men had long distorted its purity, but Muhammad restored it to its true purpose that Abraham had planned for it.

The second issue is that in the Qur'anic account it is Abraham's seed that establishes Mecca. In "The Ccw" (2:120/126), Abraham asks God, "My Lord, make this a land secure". In the context "the land" is the area around "the House", the Kaaba. So the building becomes the focal point of a "holy" land. The Qur'an does allude to Canaan as "holy" on two occasions. But that is in the context of Moses delivering Israel from Egypt. Significantly there is no record of God promising Canaan to Abraham, and no mention of Abraham living there.

Thus we discern a movement away from Biblical tradition and toward the development of a new tradition favorable to the claims of Muhammad. This new tradition displaces the Genesis tradition in terms of its importance for the Muslim. This becomes all the clearer in the prayer of Abraham which occurs in "The Ccw" (2:120-3/126-9).

Abraham's True Descendants

In his prayer, Abraham makes this request: "Lord make us submissive to Thee, and of our seed a nation submissive to Thee." ("The Ccw" 2:123/128). The word translated "submissive" is the word 'muslim,' used in the Qur'an to signify the relationship that should obtain between men and God. The phrase translated "a nation submissive" is 'umma muslima.' The word 'umma' signifies a distinct community or nation, in distinction from humanity as a whole. Here, then, Abraham is not speaking of Isaac and his descendants. He is not concerned with the Hebrew "nation." Rather, he is praying for Ishmael and his descendants, the inheritors of Mecca, the Arabs.

Abraham continues his prayer "Lord, do Thou send among them [i.e. the submissive nation] a Messenger, one of them, who shall recite to them Thy signs, and teach them the Book, and the Wisdom, and purify them." ("The Ccw" 2:123/129) It could not be clearer. Abraham looks for the coming of Muhammad. The "seal of the Messengers" would be not a Jew from the seed of Isaac but an Arab from the seed of Ishmael.

Abraham Was Neither Jew Nor Christian, but rather a Muslim

The ultimate word on Abraham comes in "The House of Imran" (3:58-62/65-68).

People of the Book! Why do you dispute concerning Abraham? The Torah was not sent down, neither the Gospel, but after him. What, have you no reason? ... No: Abraham in truth was not a Jew, neither a Christian; but he was a Muslim and one pure of faith; certainly he was never of the Idolaters. Surely the people standing closest to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet, and those who believe; and God is the protector of the believers.

Muhammad had discovered Jews and Christians in Arabia who disputed his claim to prophethood. The new traditions had already been revealed and had undoubtedly thrown Jewish and Christian Arabs into turmoil. (There is a hadith to the effect that this revelation came as a result of a dispute with Jews and Christians.)

Strictly speaking, of course, Abraham was not a Jew but rather the father of the Jews (and, according to the New Testament, "of all who believe"). But that is not what the passage is about. Notice that "idolater" is the key word in the argument; Abraham was not an idolater. It would seem to be implied that Jews and Christians are. Abraham did not "associate" gods with "the God". It is the fault of Jews and Christians that they do.

It is far from clear in the Qur'an in what way the Jews as a whole are idolaters. The story of the golden calf is related several times; it is perhaps this incident which is seen as branding all Jews with the same infidelity. But there is another aspect to the idolatry idea. Those who fail to acknowledge Muhammad's call are automatically considered idolaters. It is assumed that a man who rejects the Prophet's call to submission must harbor false views of God.

Abraham: the "Father of All Who Believe" (Romans 4:11)

First of all we have to acknowledge that this second cycle of traditions is not capable of being a bridge for the gospel. However I have found that one young man accepted the authenticity of Genesis by a careful comparison of the Bible and the Qur'an. This led him to expect that the rest of the Biblical revelation would be truthful.

Secondly, we can accept the "submission" of Abraham and his rejection of idolatry. We can build on this by referring to Paul's presentation of Abraham as a man whose faith involved "unwavering trust in God" (Rom. 4:20). Submitting to God (described in the New Testament in terms of discipleship) is part of faith in God. But we can go on to show that Abraham also trusted God as a person; trust is not mere assent to doctrine. There are two sides to trust/faith according to Romans 4: a) there is a passive acceptance of the will of God; and b) an active commitment to the will of God. Submission admirably expresses the first but we can point out that the second is absolutely essential to true faith. In other words, faith is an active self-giving to God. It is this double attitude of submission and trust that underlies Romans 4:3, 22 and Genesis 15:6. "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Thirdly and finally, we can proceed to describe all that faith involves for the believer in Christ (Epistle to the Romans). He or she receives a righteousness from God apart from law (3:21, 22), is counted righteous as a free gift of God's grace (3:24, 26), and through the atoning death of Christ (3:25), is now at peace with God (5:1), and receives the Holy Spirit of God who enables one to live by faith (8:1-17).

This presentation of the gospel arises out of the context of Abraham's faith and fits perfectly into a consideration of what is involved in faith for any believer. Abraham is the "father of all who believe," those who God counts as righteous as a result of their commitment to Him.

¹The names of the Suras are from Arberry's translation (1964). All quotations are from Arberry's translation, whose verse numbering is given, followed by that of the Egyptian text and the translations based on it.

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CHURCH GROWTH THEORY AND THE MUSLIM WORLD

by David W. Shenk

[The following is a condensed extract from a chapter, entitled "The Muslim Umma and the Growth of the Church," from the book Exploring Church Growth, edited by Wilbert R. Shenk, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983. It is published by permission of author and publisher.]

Surely we should rejoice when people experience grace in Christ. Nevertheless, we need to ask to what extent church growth models fit into the communication and experience of redemptive grace. At the Pattaya Consultation on World Evangelization (1980), the miniconsultation on reaching Muslims identified five commitments of contemporary church growth missiology: a belief that churches ought to grow; a commitment to working with people groups; concentrating resources primarily on receptive peoples; contextualizing the gospel; and careful planning for evangelism. I will comment on each of these rubrics from the perspective of a Kingdom missiology.

A Belief That Churches Ought To Grow

All Christian evangelists rejoice when churches grow. In relationship to Islam, however, church growth has been very slow. In fact for