Durham University

# Durham E-Theses

# *The Dhabih Allah as metaphor for self-submission: a critical reassessment of the sacrifice narrative in Q.37:99-113*

Petsani, Maria

**How to cite:**

Petsani, Maria (2007) *The Dhabih Allah as metaphor for self-submission: a critical reassessment of the sacrifice narrative in Q.37:99-113*, Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1978/

**Use policy**

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a link is made to the metadata record in Durham E-Theses
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the full Durham E-Theses policy for further details.

Academic Support Office, The Palatine Centre, Durham University, Stockton Road, Durham, DH1 3LE
e-mail: e-theses.admin@durham.ac.uk Tel: +44 0191 334 6107
http://etheses.dur.ac.uk

# 'The *Dhabīḥ Allāh* as Metaphor for Self-Submission: A Critical Reassessment of the Sacrifice Narrative in Q.37:99-113'

by Maria Petsani

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author or the university to which it was submitted. No quotation from it, or information derived from it may be published without the prior written consent of the author or university, and any information derived from it should be acknowledged.

**Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Durham**



**2007**

1 3 FEB 2008

## Acknowledgements

For his encouragement, critical comments and suggestions, I am grateful to my supervisor Dr Colin Turner (Durham University).

I also wish to express my gratitude to Professor Dimitris Kaimakis (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) for his invaluable guidance and support throughout my studies.

Many thanks are due to the Greek State Scholarships Foundation (I.K.Y.) for funding my doctorate.

I also wish to thank Dimitrios Voutiris, Eva Grigoropoulou and John Quinn for their moral and practical support.

My last thanks are to my parents, sister and brother-in-law for their love and encouragement.

To the memory of my grandmother,

Anastasia Petsani

Up till now research on the Islamic version of Abraham's sacrifice (*dhabih Allah*) has concentrated on the Muslim-Jewish controversy around the identity of the victim (Isaac or Ishmael), raising issues of ethnicity and exclusivity whilst overlooking the theological meaning of the story. Reinterpreting the story in its neglected Qur'anic context, the purpose of this thesis is twofold: it examines the evolution of the meaning of sacrifice from the ancient times through the monotheistic world view and finally, the Islamic world view; and it aims to show that the narrative of Abraham's sacrifice was incorporated in the Qur'an as a powerful image of self-submission.

Chapter One looks at a representative sample of theological and philosophical readings of the well-known account of the story in Genesis 22 (*Akedah*) and discusses the recent criticism that Abraham's sacrifice has attracted in the field of social studies as a legend that has instigated and legitimized violence. Chapters Two and Three are devoted to the representation of the sacrifice story in the *tafsir* literature and its subsequent association with the Abraham-Ka'ba traditions and the Western reading of the sacrifice ayas (Q.37:99-113) as a Medinan addition aimed to legitimize the Hajj sacrificial ritual. An investigation into the Abraham-Ka'ba ayas (Chapter Four) confirms that the Qur'an does not seem to hint at such a connection. Chapter Five explores the figure of Abraham in the Qur'an and the Hadith and shows that the sacrifice story perfectly fits the Meccan representation of Abraham as a self-sacrificing figure, the type of the persecuted Muhammad. This sacrificing element is de-emphasized in the Hadith literature.

Chapters Six to Nine are an attempt to decipher the spiritual message of Q.37:99-113 on the basis of information that we draw from the Qur'an and other literary and historical sources on sacrifice. Chapter Six focuses on the main themes of sura 37, i.e. belief in the hereafter, personal responsibility and the prophets' mission against idolatry. Furthermore, based on the meaning of the terms *ilm*, *iman* and *islam*, often used in the Qur'an to refer to Abraham's spiritual condition, this chapter argues that the sacrifice narrative is included in Islamic scripture as an example of perfected *islam*. Chapter Seven looks at literary examples of father-son relationships and child sacrifice stories and explores the essence of sacrifice throughout history, with an emphasis on ancient ritual. In chapters Eight and Nine, recent cultural anthropological findings on the idolization of wealth and children among the prophets' communities in the Qur'an are compared with our findings on three key Qur'anic concepts that appear in relation to Abraham, those of divine trial (*fitna*), purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and idolatry (*shirk*). Finally, Chapter Ten tests the applicability of Ernest Becker's theory of sacrifice as an immortality technique to Abraham's sacrifice as it has been interpreted in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

# Table of Contents

**INTRODUCTION 1**

**LITERATURE REVIEW 6**

**CHAPTER 1: CLASSICAL AND MODERN INTERPRETATIONS ON ABRAHAM'S SACRIFICE**

**1.1. Abraham's Sacrifice in the Bible 21**

**1.2. Philosophers on Abraham's Sacrifice and their Critics 24**

**1.3. The Reading of the Sacrifice as a Misunderstanding or an Intended Murder 29**

**1.4. Delaney's Case: Endorsement of Patriarchy / Blind Obedience to Authority 39**

**CHAPTER 2: ABRAHAM'S SACRIFICE IN ISLAMIC TRADITION**

**2.1. Introduction 43**

**2.2. Sacrifice Narratives 44**

***a. The 'Iblis' Traditions* 44**

***b. The Sacrifice* 48**

***c. Legends of the Prophets: Kisa'i's Version* 59**

**2.3. The Identity of the Sacrificial Son in Islam 61**

**2.3.1. Introduction 61**

**2.3.2. *Dhabīḥ* Traditions and Arguments in Favour of One or the Other Son 62**

***a. Two Ishmael Dhabīḥ Narratives* 62**

***b. The Isaac Dhabīḥ Narratives* 64**

***c. 'Umayya b. Abi al-Salt* 66**

**2.3.3. Tabari's and Other Exegetes' Arguments 67**

**CHAPTER 3: MODERN INTERPRETATIONS ON THE EVOLUTION OF THE SACRIFICE IN ISLAM AND THE IDENTITY OF THE VICTIM**

**3.1. Extra-Qur'anic Evidence of a Shift in the Identity of the *Dhabīḥ* 72**

**3.2. Arguments in Support of One of the Other Son as the Sacrifice based on Scripture 75**

**3.3. On the Deliberate Transposition of the Sacrifice from its Initial Locus in Early Islamic Tradition (a Mountain in Jerusalem or Syria) to the Central Muslim Sanctuary (the Ka'ba) 82**

**3.3.1. Introduction 82**

**3.3.2. The Time and Locus of the Sacrifice and its Connection to Abraham's First Pilgrimage 83**

**3.3.3. Abraham's Sacrifice and Politics during the 'Abbasid Caliphate 88**

**3.4. Calder on Narrative, Liturgy and Canonical Scripture 94**

**3.5. On the Thematic Evolution of the Sacrifice Story prior to its Incorporation in Islamic Exegesis: Caspi and Cohen's Theory 97**

## CHAPTER 4: THE LINK BETWEEN ABRAHAM, ISHMAEL AND THE KA'BA IN THE QUR'AN

**4.1. Introduction 102**

**4.2. Isaac and Ishmael in the Qur'an 103**

**4.3. The Religion of Arabia in Pre-Islamic Times 106**

***The Ka'ba* 109**

**4.4. Ka'ba and Abraham: Qur'an 2:125-127, 3:97 and 22:26 110**

***a. The House and its Purification* 110**

***b. The Station of Abraham* 113**

***c. The Prayer* 114**

**4.5. The Connection of Abraham and Ishmael with the Ka'ba and the Possibility of the Perception of Ishmael as the Father of the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times 115**

**4.6. Ethnocentricity or Universality? 121**

**4.7. Conclusion 123**

## CHAPTER 5: THE FIGURE OF ABRAHAM IN THE QUR'AN AND THE HADITH

## A. ABRAHAM IN THE QUR'AN

**5.1. Introduction 126**

**5.2. Abraham, the Friend of God 127**

**5.3. *Millat Ibrāhīm* (the Way of Abraham), the Prophets and how They are All linked to the Mission of the Prophet Muhammad 128**

**5.4. Abraham's Early Stages: Turning to Monotheism 132**

***a. Abraham's Environment* 132**

***b. Revelation* 134**

***c. The Course of Abraham's Prophetic Mission* 135**

***d. God's Blessings to Abraham* 136**

**5.5. Abraham in Old Age 137**

***a. Abraham's Sacrifice* 137**

***b. Abraham's Encounter with God's Messengers* 138**

***c. Abraham's Forgiving and Loving Nature* 139**

***d. The Foundation of the Ka'ba by Abraham and Ishmael* 140**

**5.6. Conclusion 142**

## B. ABRAHAM IN THE HADITH LITERATURE

**5.1. Introduction 143**

**5.2. Abraham's Sunna followed by the Arab Prophet 144**

**5.3. *Ḥunafā'*: Followers of the Abrahamic Faith prior to Qur'anic Revelation 145**

**5.4. Abraham in Life 147**

**5.4.1. The False Statements 147**

**5.4.2. Abraham's Family in the Hadith 148**

***a. Sarah*** **148**

***b. Hajar*** **150**

***c. Ishmael*** **151**

**5.5. The Alteration of the Building of the Ka'ba in the Course of Time 152**

**5.6. Abraham in Life after Death 154**

***a.*** **Abraham's Status and Abode in Heaven 155**

***b.*** **Intercession for Infidels and Believers on the Day of Judgement 156**

**5.7. Conclusion 157**

## CHAPTER 6: READING ABRAHAM'S SACRIFICE IN ITS QUR'ANIC CONTEXT

**6.1. Introduction 160**

**6.2. The Didactic Nature of the Prophets' Stories 165**

**6.3. The Sacrifice of the *Dhabīḥ* as Abraham's Highest Level of Submission to the Will of God 169**

**6.3.1. Sacrifice and Reward in Abraham's Life 169**

**6.3.2. *'ilm* (knowledge), *īmān* (faith) and *islām* (submission) 170**

**6.3.3. *islām* as a Changing Quality and Abraham's Sacrifice Story as an Example of its Perfection 172**

**6.3.4. Submission by Choice or Blind Obedience? 174**

**6.4. Sura 37: Belief in the Unity of God, Idolatry, Prophethood and the Hereafter 178**

**6.5. Qur'anic References to Literal Sacrifice 179**

***a. Animal Sacrifice in the Qur'an*** **179**

***b. Child Sacrifice in the Qur'an*** **182**

## CHAPTER 7: LITERARY AND HISTORICAL SOURCES ON SACRIFICE

**7.1. Fathers and Sacrificial Children in Literature 184**

**7.2. The Nature of the Sacrificial Ritual in the History of Man 190**

**7.2.1. Introduction 190**

**7.2.2. Gift-Offerings 191**

**7.2.3. Communion Sacrifice 193**

**7.2.4. Other Theories 195**

***a. Life-Giving Sacrifice*** **195**

***b. Expiation-Substitution*** **196**

**7.2.5. The Offering 197**

***a. Human Sacrifice*** **198**

***b. Animal Sacrifice*** **202**

**7.3. Conclusion 204**

**CHAPTER 8: BECKER'S THEORY OF SACRIFICE AS AN IMMORTALITY TECHNIQUE AND TURNER'S THEORY ON WEALTH AS AN IMMORTALITY SYMBOL IN THE QUR'AN**

**8.1. The Meaning of Historical Sacrifice according to Ernest Becker 205**

**8.2. Perceptions of Afterlife 208**

**8.3. Turner's Theory on Wealth as an Immortality Symbol 210**

**8.4. Fathers and Sons 217**

**CHAPTER 9: DIVINE TRIAL, PURIFICATION OF THE HEART AND IDOLATRY**

**9.1. Introduction 220**

**9.2. Divine Trial in the Qur'an 223**

**9.3. Purification of the Heart 232**

***a. Revelation* 235**

***b. Creator and Creation according to Islamic Spirituality* 237**

**9.4. *Shirk*-Associating Others with God 241**

***Saïd Nursi on the Human 'I'* 245**

**9.5. Conclusions 250**

**ANCIENT, MONOTHEISTIC AND ISLAMIC SACRIFICE (GENERAL CONCLUSIONS) 260**

**EPILOGUE 266**

**APPENDIX A 271**
**Qur'anic References on Abraham: Juxtaposition of Two English Translations (Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Asad)**

**APPENDIX B 301**
**Abrahamic References in *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim***

**REFERENCES 315**

'He said: "I will go to my Lord! He will surely guide me" "O my Lord! Grant me a righteous (son)!" So We gave him the good news of a boy ready to suffer and forbear. Then, when (the son) reached (the age of) (serious) work with him, he said: "O my son! I see in vision that I offer thee in sacrifice: now see what is thy view!" (The son) said: "O my father! Do as thou art commanded: thou wilt find me, if Allah so wills one practising patience and constancy!" So when they had both submitted their wills (to Allah), and he had laid him prostrate on his forehead (for sacrifice) We called out to him, "O Abraham! thou hast already fulfilled the vision!"- thus indeed do We reward those who do right. For this was obviously a trial- and We ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice: and We left (this blessing) for him among generations (to come) in later times: "Peace and salutation to Abraham!" Thus indeed do We reward those who do right For he was one of Our believing servants. And We gave him the good news of Isaac -a prophet- one of the Righteous. We blessed him and Isaac: But of their progeny are (some) that do right, and (some) that obviously do wrong, to their own souls.'

(Q.37:99-113)

*In the field of religious knowledge, the revisions of the understanding of the sacred text are not understood as innovations; they are byproducts of the quest for better understanding. The truth is already present in the sacred text and it is the task of the student to elicit it by interpretation. An innovation in interpretation does not imply an innovation in the sacred text; it is a better discourse of what was there already*[1].

## Introduction

As indicated by the second part of the title, the main object of this thesis is to explore the meaning of the sacrifice story in Q.37:99-113. Despite the fact that since the first half of the nineteenth century there have been several efforts to interpret the sacrifice passage in terms of chronology and origins, the theological meaning of the story has been consistently neglected. And although recent scholarship has been concerned to address the contents of the text, effort has concentrated more on reading the biblical story in the light of its qur'anic counterpart rather than interpreting the Islamic sacrifice narrative in its own scriptural context.

At first sight, compared to the multitude of Jewish and Christian materials that deal with the biblical version of the story, the scarcity of secondary sources for the study of the qur'anic version seems inexplicable. Given, however, the lack of *tafsīr* and hadith traditions that deal with the implications of the sacrifice ayas for Islamic belief and practice (as opposed to the large number of materials that concentrate on the identity of the sacrificial victim), the researcher soon appreciates the difficulty in dealing with Abraham's sacrifice in the Qur'an.

Since research into Islamic exegesis has not been able to provide us with an insight into the spiritual meaning of the story, the present study will make an attempt

---

[1] Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 108.

to suggest a new interpretation to the sacrifice ayas based on an interdisciplinary approach. Such an approach will include critical literary analysis (textual analysis and cross-reference), anthropological data as well as the examination of certain Sufi interpretations.

First of all, it has to be noted that in analysing the sacrifice and other qur'anic ayas, I do not follow the Wansbrough School which views the Qur'an as a later document but the traditional chronology of the Qur'an. Therefore, in this study the Qur'an is assumed to have been revealed among the seventh century historical communities of Mecca and Medina and to have addressed Muhammad, the founder of the Islamic religion, and his followers.

Adopting the traditional dating of the Qur'an and based on recent findings of narratologists as to the evolution of oral traditions according to the needs of different target audiences, my hypothesis is that Abraham's sacrifice in the Qur'an does not share the same meaning with the biblical sacrifice. On the contrary, it is intended to communicate a particular message to Muhammad's new faith community, a message that must have been brought forth in response to certain circumstances.

As a starting point for the study of Q.37:99-113, there are three questions that need to be asked. Firstly, how does the sacrifice story fit in the overall Abrahamic portrait in the Qur'an? Secondly, in what way could the image of Abraham's son's sacrifice relate to its hearers? Finally, could the intended message not have been presented in a different way?

In order to deal with the first question, I will examine the arguments for the later Medinan inclusion of the sacrifice story into a Meccan sura. Following that, I will look at certain qur'anic concepts which appear in connection to Abraham (both

within and outside sura 37) such as *'ilm*, *īmān*, *islām*, divine trial, purification of the heart, the hereafter and *shirk*. To bring to light the circumstances in which the text was revealed, I will draw upon Ernest Becker's theory of the 'hunt for immortality' as well as Colin Turner's findings on the qur'anic symbology of wealth and children. Based on a comparison between the textual-literary and anthropological sources, I will argue that the sacrifice narrative refers to a tendency among Muhammad's contemporaries to depend on their sons to such a degree that they have idolized them; Abraham's sacrifice is, then, included in Islamic revelation to warn that eternal life is designed only for those who do not attribute any kind of magic power to anything or anyone except for God.

Finally, in order to confirm my conclusion about the nature of the episode as a divinely initiated learning experience, I will draw on certain Sufi ideas about the realization of God-knowledge through the purification of the heart. Reference to Sufi concepts, cursory though it may be due to my language restraints, will be used to confirm our textual and anthropology-based findings and further address the question as to why the Qur'an has chosen this particular image of the sacrifice of the son to communicate its message.

Prior to start dealing with the topic, it has to be noted that due to the lack of historical evidence, which could confirm our hypothesis, this study should be read as an interpretative exercise. Notwithstanding methodological limitations, however, I will attempt to show that there are several scriptural aspects, cultural anthropological findings and Sufi ideas that support my proposal.

***Some Explanatory Notes***

The translation of the qur'anic text is from 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*[2] unless stated otherwise. The transliteration of Arabic words is according to the transliteration system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. In referring to qur'anic verses, I either use the term 'verses' or the term 'ayas', accepted by the *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*. When I refer to the Gregorian calendar, I make use of the abbreviations BC and AD instead of the newly introduced ones, CE and BCE, since, in agreement with two of Delaney's points in regards to the matter, a. the system by which time is divided into periods remains the same and the new names do not express a new meaning and b. CE is not thought of as a 'common' era by the Muslims[3]. Last but not least, I employ Turner's method of differentiating between Islam as '…the historical Muslim community with its objectification and systematization of beliefs and ritual practices'[4] and *islām* as 'the internal act of belief and submission'[5] by giving the first one a capital 'I' and the second one a small 'i' for as the author observes, although such a distinction could not be possibly made in the Qur'an as there is no upper and lower case in the Arabic language, it is obvious that in the sacred book of the Muslims, the same word -*islām*- sometimes refers to the specific religion whose members are obliged to observe God's laws and other times to the personal submission to God[6]. Likewise, I follow Turner in making a distinction between Muslim (the individual who is recognized as a member of the Islamic

---

[2] Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* (Amana Publications, Maryland, USA, 2001, 1st ed. 1989).
[3] Carol Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: the Social Legacy of Biblical Myth* (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 267, n. 6.
[4] Colin Turner, *Islam without Allah? The Rise of Religious Externalism in Safavid Iran* (Richmond, Surrey, Curzon Press, 2000), pp. 11-12.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
[6] For a detailed analysis of the terms Islam, *islām*, *īmān* and *'ilm*, the interrelationship between one another and the way that they have been interpreted by the five schools of Islamic law and the Sufi traditions, see *ibid.*, chapter 1.

religion) and *muslim* (the believer who has submitted his/her whole inner self to God)[7].

[7] Of the qur'anic verses that obviously refer to *islām* rather than Islam, Turner points to 2:112; 31:22 and those ayas that relate the notion of *islām* or *muslim* to the prophets who preceded Muhammad. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

## Literature Review

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, textual analysis of the Qur'an and the rest of Islamic literature was based on the assumption that the Islamic texts had direct borrowings from the Judaic or Christian ones, and so efforts were directed to tracing the 'original' sources of the subsequent Islamic versions[8].

Since Albert Lord's study *Singer of Tales*, it has been widely accepted that all creations of oral literature are at the same time unique and influenced. The new elements that are brought forth each time the apparently same story is told are determined by the target audience, the place where the story is told, the mood of the storyteller, etc. In regards to the genre of epic poetry, Lord notes: 'The song we are listening to is "the song"; for each performance is more than a performance, it is a re-creation…'[9]. Twenty years later, Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues that original narrative legends do not exist and that each version of a tale is brought forth by certain ambitions and is designed to serve certain interests[10].

As far as the Muslim scripture is concerned, although it has reached us in written form, the Qur'an presents itself as the Word of God and even its name, 'the recitation', discloses its oral composition. Whether or not accepted as a work of literature, Islamic revelation addresses a particular group of people (Muhammad's

---

[8] See, for example, Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, trans. F. M. Young (Madras, 1898) from *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* (Bonn, 1833); Charles C. Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (New York, Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1933); Heinrich Speyer, *Die Biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, (Hildesheim, G. Olms, 1961, 1st ed. 1931). Even in recent studies, the orientalist attitude is not absent. Karl-Josef Kuschel, for example, speaks of 'the reception of this narrative [i.e. Abraham's sacrifice] from Genesis 22', *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims*, trans. John Bowden (New York, The Continuum Publishing Company, 1995, 1st ed. 1994), p. 155.

[9] Albert Lord, *Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 101; see also Montgomery W. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 26.

[10] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, 'Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories' in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, (1980), pp. 221-25.

faith community) who live under certain social, religious and cultural conditions in seventh century Arabia. Serving as a source of guidance for its followers, the Qur'an cannot but take under consideration their tradition, rites and habits. Therefore, any assumptions about the import of a qur'anic narrative based exclusively on the meaning of its biblical counterpart are bound to be erroneous.

Indeed, Marilyn Robinson Waldman, who -drawing on Smith's ideas- juxtaposes the biblical and qur'anic versions of the Joseph story, concludes that 'formal similarities do not necessarily mean they tell the same story in a thematic, moral or theological sense'[11].

The narrative that this thesis explores, Abraham's sacrifice, has long attracted the attention of scholars. Interpreted and re-interpreted for more than two thousand years, Abraham's sacrifice has conveyed a great number of spiritual meanings and has supported an even greater number of political ideas. More than any other religious text it has caused mixed emotions by inspiring and giving hope and at the same time confusing and upsetting its readers.

Research, however, on the Islamic version of Abraham's sacrifice has, for the most part, developed around the Muslim-Jewish controversy about the identity of the sacrificial victim indicating, thus, an ethnic concern whilst overlooking the theological meaning of the story. Thus, among Western scholars, on the one hand, Geiger and Torrey based on arguments presented by Muslim exegetes support the belief that the intended sacrifice of sura 37 was Ishmael[12] and on the other, Goldziher maintains that Isaac was initially thought of as the sacrificial victim but in the end the

---

[11] Marilyn R. Waldman, 'New Approaches to "Biblical" Material in the Qur'an' in William M. Brinner, Stephen D. Ricks (eds), *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions* (Atlanta, Georgia, Scholars Press, 1986), p. 58.

[12] Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, pp. 102-103; Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*, pp. 89-90.

view that it was Ishmael 'emerged victorious'[13]. Likewise, Thomas Patrick Hughes in his *Dictionary of Islam* expresses the view that the Qur'an intended Isaac as the offering, simply because in Q.11:74 it is stated: 'we told her that she would give birth to Isaac' and in Q.37:101 'we gave him news of a gentle son'[14].

In recent years more substantial research has taken place on the evolution of Abraham's sacrifice in Islamic literature. First, Norman Calder explores various versions of the sacrifice story from a literary point of view and classifies them into a. those in narrative form that correspond to the social type of the story-teller (*qāṣṣ*), b. those in liturgical form that correspond to the 'reciter' (*qāri'*) and c. a mixed type that includes both features of scripture/liturgy (corresponding in a greater or lesser degree to the qur'anic text) and popular narrative[15]. Based on the fact that the accounts in narrative form do not seem to presuppose a fixed canonical text that is used for prayer, Calder asserts that the qur'anic sacrifice story is secondary to the sacrifice narrative traditions[16].

Examining the chains of transmission of the sacrifice traditions, Bashear shows that *isnāds* tend to 'grow backwards'[17]. He finds that the authorities on a certain story are often reported elsewhere as having a different opinion concerning the identity of the victim from the one they have been attributed with in that story. Based on this and on the grounds that often the same tradition has two *isnāds*, one going back to the prophet or a companion and one ending with a subsequent source, Bashear

---

[13] Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen Der Islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1970), p. 79.
[14] See Thomas Patrick Hughes, *A Dictionary of Islam* (London, W. H. Allen, 1885), p. 219 (the translation is Hughes's).
[15] Norman Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture: the Sacrifice of Abraham in Early Islamic Tradition' in *Le Museon*, Vol. 101 (1988), pp. 375-402.
[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 388-89 and 396.
[17] Suliman Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice of his Son and Related Issues' in *Der Islam*, Vol. 67 (1990), No. 2, p. 277.

argues that of all sources mentioned in an *isnād*, those heavily or exclusively associated with the opinion expressed in the tradition are most likely the ones responsible for stretching the *isnād* backwards, to an earlier highly respectable source.

Since Abraham's sacrifice starts being associated with Mecca (e.g. the sacrifice takes place during the Hajj or the building of the Ka'ba) in traditions that belong to the second century AH, but have been purposefully attributed to first century authorities, he concludes that it was not before the beginning of the second Hijri century that Mecca started to be promoted as the Muslim holy land through its association with the biblical tradition of Abraham's sacrifice. He also concludes that the identity of the sacrificial victim changed from Isaac to Ishmael 'as part of…the reproduction of an Arabian-Ḥijāzī version of Judeo-Christian "prophetology"'[18] - which was at its peak during the 'Abbasid reign and up until the end of the second Islamic century[19].

Focused on issues that relate to the identity of the victim but also the evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael legends in general, Firestone's studies are the most comprehensive and detailed ones that have taken place up till now concerning Abraham's sacrifice in Islamic exegesis. Unlike Bashear, Firestone believes that any conclusions based only on *isnāds* are totally unreliable. He trusts that popular traditions are a source of genuine information on the customs and beliefs of a culture as it would not have been easy for the collectors of the legends to modify a story that was very well known to an audience in a particular way. A popular oral tradition can be recognized by the number of times it has been recorded without major

---

[18] Wansbrough's terminology used by Bashear. John E. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 58 and 179 cited in Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice of his Son and Related Issues', p. 277.
[19] Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 277.

discrepancies by various early collectors.[20] Furthermore, the author believes that the very existence of many different renditions for the same stories (which is the outcome of the natural adaptation of a legend to the needs of a certain audience and locus) attests to the authenticity of the stories; if the first Muslims who collected the oral traditions had also deliberately changed them, they would have made sure to modify them so that they all share the same style[21]. As for the confusion that arose because the discrepancies between the various renditions of the same traditions could direct to different interpretations of the law, and the action that had to be taken so that some conformity is facilitated, Firestone notes that the narrative legends were not particularly influenced by the process of standardizing Muslim belief and practice during the 'Abbasid caliphate as the Islamic law was mainly structured around the legalistic legends[22].

Firestone records the traditions he has located in a large number of *tasfīr* his main goal being to demonstrate how the Islamic exegetical material was evolved in an ever-changing environment where peoples of different culture and religion interacted and shared traditions[23]. The author maintains that in the same way that influence cannot be denied since much of the oral tradition was brought into the Arabian peninsula by Jewish and Christian immigrants, it has to be acknowledged that stories,

---

[20] Reuven Firestone, 'Abraham's Association with the Meccan Sanctuary and the Pilgrimage in the pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Periods' in *Le Museon*, Vol. 104, issue 3-4 (1991), pp. 361-62.

[21] Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: the Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany, New York, State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 17; of course, during the transcription from one collection to another there must have been unintentional mistakes and transcribers would probably add their own explanatory notes to some parts. There are also some obvious additions by late transcribers. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

[22] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: the Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*, p. 17 and 'Abraham's Association with the Meccan Sanctuary and the Pilgrimage in the pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Periods', pp. 360-61.

[23] For the Jewish and Christian settlers in Arabia, see Gordon D. Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia: from Ancient Times to their Eclipse Under Islam* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1988) and John S. Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in pre-Islamic Times* (London, Longman, 1979).

told and re-told, each time incorporating new ideas and motifs, ultimately became 'Arabized'[24]. He argues that there are three kinds of motifs that can be located in the various versions of each tradition. These are: a. the Arab motifs which were born and involved in the pre-Islamic Arab world (only some of the pre-Islamic motifs survived; the ones which could be re-interpreted to fit the Muslim creed[25]), b. the 'biblicist' motifs which were born out of 'the shared scriptural environment of Jews and Christians'[26] (mainstream as well as non orthodox) of Arabia[27] and c. the Islamic motifs which were the product of the Islamic world view[28].

Similar to Firestone's perception of the origins and development of the Islamic sacrifice legends, Calder regards the rabbinic sacrifice motifs as the cornerstone of the Islamic sacrifice traditions. He notes that out of a multitude of rabbinic sources only those motifs that were useful to the story teller were selected[29] and demonstrates how certain Judaic motifs have been saved in Islamic versions of the sacrifice in a segmented form because a part of the narrative was lost during transmission[30]. However, because of the 'undigested quality' of such motifs and the consistency of rabbinic motifs compared to Christian ones, Calder doubts that rabbinic motifs had become part of a common oral tradition that the multilingual population of the Arabian peninsula shared around the time of the emergence of Islam, let alone before

---

[24] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 18.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[26] The author makes use of the term 'biblicist' instead of 'biblical' because the latter implies direct borrowing. Elsewhere, for the same type of motifs he suggests the term 'biblesque', 'Abraham's Association with the Meccan Sanctuary and the Pilgrimage', p. 359.
[27] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. x.
[28] *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
[29] Norman Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture: the Sacrifice of Abraham in Early Islamic Tradition' in *Le Museon*, Vol. 101 (1988), p. 380.
[30] In a version attributed to Ibn Hadir, for instance, the phrase 'Stay behind, you' that Abraham addresses to some unnamed individuals before he takes Isaac away and informs him about the dream, does not make sense unless seen in the context of Genesis 22. *Ibid.*, p. 381; the full narrative is cited from 'Abd Ibn Hamid in Suyūṭī, *al-durr al-manthūr fī'l-Tafsīr bi-'l ma'thūr* (Beirut, n.d.), Vol. 5, pp. 283-84), trans. in Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', p. 380.

that time. On the contrary, he maintains that the prophetic biblical stories must have started being translated into Arabic following the first Arabic conquests of the Near East and, therefore, it was not before the eighth century AD that certain Jewish motifs of the sacrifice were transferred to the Islamic tradition[31].

Corresponding to Firestone's Islamic motifs are the motifs that Calder specifies as 'Arabian sanctuary traditions associated with Mecca'. Apparently Calder believes that interference from old Arabic motifs is not worth considering. Instead, he mentions two other determining factors in the evolution of the Arabic sacrifice traditions; firstly, the narrators' attempts to deal with difficult terms and motifs, whose ambiguity was generated 'in the process of translation and transmission' and b. the ornamentation of certain parts aimed at keeping the listeners' attention. [32]

As is clearly expressed in the title of their book *The Binding [Aqedah] and Its Transformations in Judaism and Islam*, Caspi and Cohen have undertaken the task of determining the way that the same story (Abraham's sacrifice) evolved into the *Akedah*[33] of the Jewish tradition and the *dhabīḥ*[34] of the Qur'an and the rest of Islamic literature. Throughout their book, it is made clear that when the authors refer to Abraham's sacrifice in Judaism and Islam they are talking about the same tale which, however, has developed into various versions in order to accommodate religious and

---

[31] Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture' pp. 376 and 395-96.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 402.
[33] *'Aqēdat Yitsḥāq* (עקידת יצחק). The term *'Aqēdat* derives from the root *'aqd* meaning 'to bind'; since there was no actual sacrifice, the sacrifice of Isaac in Jewish tradition is called 'the binding'.
[34] *Dhabīḥ Allāh.* The term *Dhabīḥ* refers to 'an animal prepared for slaughter (or sacrifice; i.e. an intended victim)'. The word comes from the root *d-b-ḥ*, which means to 'cut or divide lengthwise', 'to split', 'to slit', 'to slaughter in the manner prescribed by the law', 'to kill' etc. Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1956); in Islamic tradition, *Dhabīḥ Allāh* refers to Abraham's sacrifice of his son in compliance with the divine command.

cultural differences[35]. Interestingly enough, six years following this joint publication, Caspi states that the qur'anic sacrifice story and the *Akedah* do not necessarily refer to the same episode and that the Muslim narrative is connected to the biblical story in the same way that any other human sacrifice story could be connected to it[36]. I feel that such disagreement can be translated either as a development in Caspi's thought over the six years that intervened between the co-authorship with Cohen and his new study or as an indication that the main concept of the 1995 book was the co-author's proposal that Caspi was not exactly agreeable to. Given the fact that Caspi's book does not make any mention about a new approach to the reading of the Islamic version of sacrifice, we are left with difference of opinion between the authors, which must be the case.

In his book entitled *Take Now Thy Son*, Caspi looks at the various ways that the *Akedah* is illustrated in literature and art. The small section of the book that deals with the Islamic sacrifice story includes the translation of four different renditions of the sacrifice story as well as the citation of a few traditions concerning the identity of the victim that Caspi has chosen at random from the Islamic exegetical material available. His references, however, are incomplete. Normally, when a tradition is cited, reference includes the name of the exegete who has recorded the tradition, the authority on which the tradition is given (not always available), the work of the exegete in which the tradition occurs, the particular chapter, verse or paragraph. Caspi, on the other hand, may only refer to the exegete[37] or the exegete and the

---

[35] See, for example, Mishael M. Capsi and Sascha B. Cohen, *The Binding [Aqedah] and its Transformations in Judaism and Islam* (New York, Mellen Biblical Press, 1995), pp. 50, 97, 112.
[36] Mishael M. Caspi, *Take Now Thy Son: the Motif of the Akedah (Binding) in Literature* (USA, D.&F. Scott Publishing, Inc., 2001), p. 94.
[37] See *ibid.*, pp. 91 and 93.

authority[38] and neglect to mention the work of the exegete or he may refer to the exegete and his work but leave out chapters, pages etc[39]. In some cases, the author omits references altogether[40]. Another weak point of Caspi's analysis is that some parts of it lack coherence. It is not clear, for instance, what he means when he speaks of 'the absence of a relationship [in the qur'anic sacrifice story] between the father and the son'.[41] An even more inexplicable comment is made in connection with a tradition according to which, the prophet said: 'Then we ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice'; Caspi remarks that if *'azim* suggests a fat ram, then Muhammad thought of Isaac as the intended sacrifice.[42] Such a strange comment can only be taken as an error due to oversight.

With regard to the qur'anic version of the sacrifice story, in a three page article, Richard Bell -based on the structure of the text- argues for the subsequent Medinan addition of the sacrifice story to a Meccan sura, as a political move that aimed to legitimize the Hajj sacrificial ritual, once Muhammad had come into conflict with the Jewish community in Medina. Bell is positive that Muhammad must have known that the sacrificial son of the story is Isaac, however, he takes the omission of the victim's identity to be unintentional[43].

Furthermore, Jackie Naudé, while discussing an Isaac typology that she claims to have discovered in the Qur'an (i.e. Isaac as the prefiguration of Jesus), argues for the intentional inclusion of *Isaac's* sacrifice in Islamic scripture. In her opinion, the passage serves the following practical purpose: in order to have Jesus' alleged divine

---

[38] See *ibid.*, pp. 91-92.
[39] See *ibid.*, pp. 95-96.
[40] See *ibid.*, pp. 92 and 95.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 95.
[42] See *ibid.*, pp. 91, 319, n. 43.
[43] Richard Bell, 'The Sacrifice of Ishmael' in *Glasgow University Oriental Society Transactions*, (n.d.), Vol. 10, pp. 29-31.

qualities 'relativated', Muhammad keeps referring to other prophets who have been blessed with the same gifts[44]. So that the crucifixion and resurrection are 'relativated', Muhammad refers to Isaac's near sacrifice. The reference to Isaac's sacrifice that never took place and the substitute that secured Abraham's progeny through Isaac is meant to suggest that since so many people converted to Christianity following Jesus' alleged crucifixion, Jesus must have survived the Jewish persecution; hence, it was not him who died on the cross but someone else[45]. Although interesting, Naudé's theory fails to notice that in the qur'anic version of Abraham's story, the motif of the divine promise of numerous descendants (through either of Abraham's sons) is missing.

Finally, two recent comparative studies call our attention to what the *qur'anic* sacrifice story can reveal about the *biblical* sacrifice story. The first one, undertaken by John Kaltner, argues for the unnoticed significance of Isaac's role in the biblical version of the story, which only comes to light when we consider the meaningful role that Abraham's son has in Q.37:99-113. As far as the qur'anic text is concerned, Kaltner focuses on the reference to the son's ability to work with his father. As the author correctly observes, this particular verse serves to indicate that Abraham has his vision at a time when the *dhabīḥ* has reached physical and mental maturity[46]. However, what is really new about Kaltner's approach is the way that he interprets

---

[44] Jackie Naudé, 'Isaac Typology in the Koran' in I. H. Eybers (ed.), *De Fructu Oris Sui: Essays in Honour of Adrianus Van Selms* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), pp. 121-29; Naudé draws this first part of her theory on J. M. S. Baljon, 'Warrom verloochende de Koran Jezus' Kruisdood' in *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*, Vol. 19, No. 5 (1965), pp. 337-42 quoted in Naudé, 'Isaac Typology in the Koran', p. 124. According to Baljon's theory, because there was no other example of a holy man who had returned to life after his death, Jesus' resurrection had to be denied. *Ibid.*

[45] Naudé, 'Isaac Typology in the Koran', pp.124 and 127-28.

[46] In the translation of the Qur'an, the phrase '[when (the son)] reached (the age of) (serious) work with him' (Q.37:102) is the attempted interpretation of the Arabic word *sa'ya*, which Kaltner translates as follows: 'to be active or busy', 'able to engage in an activity with energy', 'to act according to one's own judgment, discretion or free will'. John Kaltner, 'Abraham's Sons: how the Bible and Qur'an see the Same Story Differently' in *Bible Review*, Vol. 18 (2002), p. 45.

Abraham's response to his dream. To the author, the fact that Abraham asks for his son's opinion concerning the vision in which he sacrifices him, could be a sign of uncertainty; Abraham may not be certain about what he should do. The son, on the other hand, has no doubt that the vision is a divine command. By readily accepting to be sacrificed, the *dhabīḥ* challenges Abraham to show his own faith and, thus, enables his father and himself to fully submit to the will of God[47].

The second comparative study is yet again Reuven Firestone's. This time the scholar suggests that the qur'anic sacrifice story may possibly represent a more ancient literary tradition than that of the Genesis version. He proposes that persecuted religious groups could have brought an old rendition of the legend to Arabia, where it was in circulation for a long time until it was made part of the Qur'an. This old version, as the Qur'an suggests, did not name the sacrificial victim, although it must have referred to Ishmael. Firestone is only concerned with one aspect of the qur'anic passage, i.e. the absence of the *dhabīḥ* identity. This aspect gives him the initial impetus to re-examine the biblical sacrifice from a different perspective. He argues for the subsequent addition of the name Isaac in the biblical narrative on the basis of two main arguments: firstly, the grammar, syntax and context of Genesis which make

---

[47] *Ibid.*; the author goes on to examine whether biblical Isaac plays a similar role to that of the qur'anic sacrificial son. To do this, he focuses on Genesis 22:5, the verse in which Abraham tells the two young men who travel with him and Isaac that he and Isaac will come back to them after they worship. According to Kaltner, if this statement means that Abraham knows that Isaac will be redeemed, there is no explanation as to why the sacrifice episode is said to be a test. Thus, based on qur'anic Abraham's supposed hesitation and the emphasis that the Qur'an places on the son's position, Kaltner suggests that Genesis 22:5 could be a sign that the patriarch is not certain that he can find the strength to execute God's command until Isaac asks him where the lamb is; at this point, Abraham openly articulates his trust in God (for the first time in Genesis) and from now on, he is ready to fulfil the divine command (*Ibid.*, pp. 45-46). Conclusively, in both religious texts, 'the son's words serve as the catalyst that brings the father to faith'. *Ibid.*, p. 45; according to Kaltner, the indication that Isaac is -like the *dhabīḥ*- physically mature is that he is able to carry the wood for the sacrifice up the mountain. Isaac's question about the lamb shows that he is also mentally mature, as 'he is able to evaluate his situation through observation and reason'. Likewise, the fact that he is going to worship with his father shows his ability to think and behave in an adult manner. *Ibid.*

the repetition of Isaac's name in Genesis 22 seem redundant and secondly, the preference in the Bible for the sacrifice of firstborn sons[48].

Previous research on Abraham's sacrifice has shown that there must have been several ways in which the narrative of the sacrifice was told in Muhammad's time and for the next two centuries that followed his death, until all Islamic traditions were recorded by the 'Abbasids. This study does not claim to have recovered the original Islamic sacrifice story (that would be an impossible task) but rather considers the possible message that was meant to be communicated through the version of the story that was included in the Qur'an.

Given that Abraham's sacrifice is known to the average Western reader from the Bible and since Islamic scripture seems to assume previous familiarity of its audience with this and other biblical stories, this study will start with a brief reference to some of the most popular readings of the well-known Genesis account of the sacrifice. Among other references, special reference will be made to the way that the story has been interpreted in the field of philosophy as well as to the reading of Abraham's vision as a misunderstanding and the theory of the anthropologist Carol Delaney who about ten years ago interpreted Abraham's sacrifice as a dangerous story, which has instigated violence and created passive victims (**chapter one**).

In contrast to the standard practice of briefly commenting or not commenting at all on the spiritual implications of the qur'anic sacrifice story in favor of the in-depth examination of issues pertaining to the victim's identity, our enquiry into Abraham's sacrifice in Islam will follow a different path. It will start by looking at

---

[48] For the author's complete argumentation, see Reuven Firestone, 'Comparative Studies in Bible and Qur'ān: a Fresh Look at Genesis 22 in Light of Sura 37' in Benjamin H. Hary, John L. Hayes and Fred Astren (eds), *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication and Interaction* (Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2000), pp. 169-84.

the evolution of the narrative in Islamic tradition as well as the issues of identity, ethnicity and heritage that have been repeatedly raised in order to move on to the theological meaning of Q.37:99-113.

Familiarizing ourselves with the interpretational background of the narrative under study is necessary for its reassessment. For that reason, chapters two and three are devoted to classical and modern interpretations on the Islamic sacrifice legend. More specifically, **chapter two** will look at the various renditions of Abraham's sacrifice that have been recorded in the works of Muslim exegetes and, of course, the popular traditions in favour of one or the other son as the *dhabīḥ*. **Chapter three** will reflect on the issues pertaining to the thematic progression of the sacrifice legend in Islam. The focus, here, will be a. on the deliberate transposition of the sacrifice from its initial locus in early Islamic tradition to the Ka'ba in the works of subsequent exegetes and b. on the shift in the identity of the *dhabīḥ*, which does not always follow the change in locus. Reference will also be made to two theories which concern possible changes that the sacrifice narrative seems to have undergone before it was integrated into the Qur'an (Calder, Caspi&Cohen).

The reason why the theological meaning of the sacrifice ayas has been largely overlooked could lie in various reasons. Obviously, looking at the passage as a political move (either as a way to have Jesus' crucifixion 'relativated' or as a Medinan addition that would provide a monotheistic basis for the pilgrimage sacrifice) leaves no space for theological considerations. Moreover, in terms of research material, the rich extra-qur'anic literature looks a lot more promising than a 14-verse qur'anic passage. To these two most likely explanations we may add the possibility that it has been taken for granted that despite the differences between the qur'anic sacrifice story and its biblical counterpart, in essence the spiritual meaning of the story remains the

same, i.e. by readily consenting to sacrifice his son, Abraham demonstrates his unshaken faith in God.

Prior to dealing with the sacrifice passage itself, I will attempt to show that despite the fact that the *dhabīḥ Allāh* gradually evolved to be associated to the Meccan sanctuary and/or the Hajj pilgrimage, in the Qur'an there is no indication that the sacrifice story is in any way related to the Ka'ba traditions (**chapter four**). On the contrary, an investigation into the image of Abraham in the Qur'an and the hadith will hopefully show that the *dhabīḥ Allāh* fits the early Meccan portrayal of Abraham as a self-sacrificing figure (a prefiguration of the persecuted by the Meccans Muhammad) and that the sacrificing element of the prophetic figure is naturally de-emphasized outside its qur'anic context (**chapter five**).

Looking at Abraham's sacrifice in its qur'anic context, the passage will, first, be compared to the rest of the Abrahamic accounts in which the ideas of submission (*islām*) and reward occur. Following that, the story will be read in the context of the sura in which it occurs, sura 37. Also, a comparison will be made between Abraham's sacrifice and the qur'anic references to literal sacrifice (**chapter six**). As regards extra-qur'anic sources, since our narrative is about the near-sacrifice of a child by his father, the sacrifice ayas will be contrasted both to similar sacrifice stories that we find in works of literature as well as the historical information that we have about the practice of sacrifice among the ancient peoples (**chapter seven**).

Based on the information that we obtain from the above, drawing on Turner's theory of wealth and children as immortality symbols in the Qur'an and investigating the three key qur'anic concepts of divine trial, idolatry (*shirk*) and the purification of the heart- all of which appear connected with the prophetic figure of Abraham, I will attempt to show that Abraham's response to the divine trial in Q.37:99-113 epitomizes

nothing less than the essence of *islām*, i.e. self-submission through setting free from any kind of dependency on anyone or anything that is not God (*la ilaha illa Allah*) (**chapters eight & nine**). Additionally, applying Becker's theory of sacrifice as an ancient immortality technique to our narrative will hopefully cast new light on the fascinating evolution of the meaning of sacrifice from the ancient times through the new monotheistic world view and finally the qur'anic world view (**chapter eight & general conclusions**).

## Chapter 1: Classical and Modern Interpretations on Abraham's Sacrifice

### 1.1. Abraham's Sacrifice in the Bible[49]

A reading of the biblical version of the narrative that has been suggested time and again is that the story arose as a protest either against the practice of sacrificing children[50] or against human sacrifice in general[51]. Since historical and archaeological surveys have not been able to provide us with sound evidence as to whether the ritual of human sacrifice was being practiced in the early second Millennium BC (the time when supposedly Abraham lived) and in the light of biblical texts that condemn the ritual of child sacrifice to a Canaanite (or both Canaanite and Israelite) deity named Moloch[52], scholars have come to believe that the Genesis text projects contemporary customs to the past. Others have read the story as a legend that explains how, at some point in the biblical times, in a certain sanctuary, the practice of human sacrifice was substituted by animal sacrifice[53]. Similarly, to Shalom Spiegel, the story commemorates the historical transition from one type of sacrifice to the other- 'a religious and moral achievement which in folk memory was associated with the name of Abraham, the father of the new faith'[54].

---

[49] Since my thesis aspires to shed light on the qu'ranic version of Abraham's sacrifice, apart from a brief reference to the most widespread interpretations of the biblical story, I will only consider those theories which could (hypothetically) also apply to the qur'anic version.

[50] See *The Interpreter's Bible: the Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible* (eds) George A. Buttrick et al. (New York, Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951-57), Vol. 1, p. 1009.

[51] See *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House, 1971-72), Vol. 2, p. 481.

[52] See Leviticus 18:21; 20:2, 3, 4, 5; 4 Kings 23:10, Jeremiah 32:35.

[53] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 2, pp. 480-81.

[54] Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: on the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: the Akedah*, trans. Judah Goldin (New York, Schocken Books, 1969, 1st ed. 1967), pp. 63-64; cf. Morton Smith, 'A Note on Burning Babies' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (1975), p. 478.

The main objections to this sort of interpretation are: Firstly, apart from the Abraham story, nowhere else in Genesis is there any reference to human sacrifice[55]. Secondly, the story cannot be about substitution since the dialogue between father and son suggests that animal sacrifice was presupposed ('My father!..Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?')[56]. Thirdly, should the narrative be about the condemnation of a custom, disapproval would be obvious throughout the text. Quite the opposite, the patriarch is highly honoured for his deed[57]. Lastly and most importantly: 'The etiological interpretation diminishes the theological importance of the story'[58].

Later Judaism attached great importance to this biblical episode; Isaac was given a messianic role[59] and the binding a redeeming character[60]. A not widely accepted by rabbinic Judaism version of the *Akedah* has it that Isaac actually died of terror while on the altar and was brought back to life by the heavenly voice[61]. Above and beyond, 'many tragic events in Jewish history…even the Holocaust- have been viewed through the prism of the Akedah'[62].

---

[55] Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: the Social Legacy of Biblical Myth*, p. 72.
[56] Genesis 22:7, *ibid.*; see, also, chapter 7.2.5.(b) as to why the cultural evolution theory according to which, the more ancient peoples have practiced more barbaric rituals and, thus, human sacrifice has preceded animal sacrifice is not well-founded.
[57] *Ibid.*, p. 101.
[58] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
[59] He was identified with the 'suffering servant' of Isaiah 53 and seen as the archetype of the martyrs, the one who *σφαγιασθηναι δια την ευσεβειαν υπεμεινεν Ισαακ* [endured to be slaughtered for the sake of piety] 4 Maccabees 13:12 (*Septuaginta*, Alfred Rahlfs ed., 1935).
[60] The liturgical remembrance of the incident is a guarantee of the forgiveness of Israel's trespasses; See also Abraham's supplication following Isaac's redemption in Genesis Rabba 56:10.
[61] See Naudé, 'Isaac Typology in the Koran', pp. 125-26; see also Spiegel, *The Last Trial: on the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: the Akedah*, pp. 38-42 for the tradition of the 'ashes of Isaac' which implies that Isaac was consumed by the fire. Because the biblical narrative ends with Abraham leaving the mountain alone, it is not surprising how such traditions occurred.
[62] Curt Leviant, 'Parallel Lives: the Trials and Traumas of Isaac and Ismael' in *Bible Review*, Vol. 15 (1999), p. 20; for studies that criticise the kind of interpretations which link Abraham's story to the Holocaust in order to promote self-sacrifice for a 'higher' cause see Michael Brown, 'Biblical Myth and Contemporary Experience: the Akedah in Modern Jewish Literature' in *Judaism*, Vol. 31, No. 1

Two unique readings of the binding are those of Philo of Alexandria and Moses Maimonides. Philo considers the text to be an allegory; what is being sacrificed is Abraham's joy, which is embodied in Isaac[63]. Maimonides, on the other hand, argues for the educational significance of the story; through this episode we are 'informed of the limit of *love* for God' that an individual can achieve[64]; for Abraham submitted to the divine order neither because he was afraid of being punished nor because he was hoping to receive some kind of reward but because he loved God[65].

The majority of modern critics can see two themes in the Genesis story. The older one is the theme of the divine covenant being jeopardized; the patriarch is righteous 'However, a whole series of events endanger the divine promise and ask of Abraham a renewed act of faith'[66]. The second theme is the trial of Abraham's faith; this later motif is believed to have been combined with the first one by the biblical editor to give us the biblical story of the sacrifice in its present form. Thus, 'The divine promise is endangered by God himself as a test for the faith of Abraham.' Abraham passes the test, and the promises are renewed in verses 22:15-18, which are the later addition[67].

---

(1982), pp. 99-111 and Jack Cohen, 'Is this the Meaning of My Life? Israelis Rethink the *Akedah*' in *Conservative Judaism* Vol. 43, No. 1 (1990), pp. 50-60.

[63] Samuel Sandmel, *Philo of Alexandria: an Introduction* (New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 62.

[64] Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 500.

[65] *Ibid.*, p. 501.

[66] Alviero Niccacci, 'Opening Remarks' in Frederic Manns (ed.), *The Sacrifice of Isaac in the Three Monotheistic Religions*- Proceedings of a Symposium on the Interpretation of the Scriptures held in Jerusalem (Jerusalem, Franciscan Printing Press, March 16-17, 1995), p. 8.

[67] *Ibid.*, p. 9; Caspi&Cohen offer an unusual interpretation to the biblical sacrifice that corresponds with the first theme. Based on the fact that the sacrifice may have occurred as a result of an ambiguous episode [Genesis 22 starts with a phrase that the authors translate as 'And after these things' (another translation is 'some time afterward' see Laurence H. Kant, 'Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text: Abraham's Binding of Isaac and the Horror of Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22)' in *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2003), Part 2, p. 161)] which could be the episode described in the last verse of the previous chapter: 'And Abraham planted a tamarisk (tree) grove in Beer Sheba and called there on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God', Caspi&Cohen suggest the following

A third theme is pointed out by Firestone, who asserts that the legend, like many of the earlier biblical legends, suggests a genealogical concern in regards to those who are included in God's covenant. An indication of that is that the trial takes place only after Ishmael has been exiled. The sacrifice story increases the effectiveness of the divine promise, the exclusive character of which has been displayed before in the Bible[68].

## 1.2. Philosophers on Abraham's Sacrifice and their Critics

Since the sacrifice episode seems to contradict the moral law, it was only natural that it should generate interest in the field of philosophy. Killing is immoral; let alone killing your own children. For that reason, the great philosopher Immanuel Kant refuses to accept that the killing of a child could be a divine command and believes that such a command must not be obeyed. According to the philosopher, one can never be certain about the divine origin of a voice; what he can be certain about is that a voice that demands an act that goes against the moral law is not God's. Abraham, he says, should have replied to the voice he heard: 'That I may not kill my good son is absolutely certain. But that you who appear to me are God is not certain and cannot become certain, even though the voice were to sound from the very heavens.'[69]

---

interpretation: There used to be two traditions, that of Beer Sheba and that of Moriah. When the latter surpassed the former, in order to present the first as pagan, the biblical author related how Abraham had sinned by planting a tamarisk tree (pagan symbol) by an altar (the act of planting a tree next to an altar is taken as a sin -Deuteronomy 16:21) in Beer Sheba and how God asked Abraham to reconfirm his faith by sacrificing his son on Moriah, the place where altars should be built and the name of God should be invoked (hence the emphasis on the word 'place', '...and he went to the place' (22:3), 'and saw the place' (22:4). For the full analysis, see Caspi&Cohen, *The Binding [Aqedah] and its Transformations in Judaism and Islam*, pp. 3-7.

[68] Reuven Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice (Al-Dhabiḥ, Qur'an 37:99-113): Issues in Qur'anic Exegesis' in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1989), pp. 95-96.

[69] Immanuel Kant, *Streit der Fakultaten*, trans. Emil Fackenheim as *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy: a Preface to Future Jewish Thought* (New York, Schocken, 1973), p. 34.

Lerner argues against the reading of the narrative in terms of ethics. He objects to Kant's denouncing the act of the sacrifice as immoral and notes that the latter has failed to notice a very important factor, i.e. God has promised Abraham that the divine covenant will flow through Isaac and through Isaac's descendants[70]. As a result, when God demands the sacrifice, Abraham is aware that although he must follow the divine order, God cannot go back on his word and, therefore, approaches the altar knowing that somehow, Isaac will live[71]. That the covenant presupposes Isaac's safety means to Lerner that even if the patriarch had slit his throat, Isaac would still be miraculously saved. In the same line of thought, the awareness that Isaac cannot be harmed makes any attempt by Abraham to kill his son morally acceptable. Just as the surgeon who cuts open a person's body is not considered immoral, even if he had cut Isaac's neck, Abraham would not be morally wrong[72]. Of course, even though Abraham knows that Isaac will somehow survive, attempting to stab his own child is still a dreadful task that he may fail to carry out if his trust in God is not sufficient. That Abraham does not hesitate to perform such a task does not only prove his obedience but also attests to his unlimited trust in God's promise[73].

Abraham's sacrifice has attracted the attention of another well known scholar, Søren Kierkegaard, who explains the episode in terms of what he calls 'the teleological suspension of the ethical'. According to the Danish existentialist

---

[70] Genesis 17:19.
[71] In Islam, God's promise concerning one of Isaac's descendants, Jacob, (Q.11:71) has been used as an argument to prove that the sacrificial victim was Ishmael. See chapter that follows, p. 69.
[72] Berel Dov Lerner, 'Saving the Akedah from the Philosophers' in *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (1999), p. 168.
[73] *Ibid.*, pp. 170-71; in order to illustrate his point, Lerner describes the hypothetical case of himself taking part in a popular trust-building activity, i.e. the trust lean. The author or the 'Faller' trusts that the 'Catcher', his friend, will not let him fall over and get hurt. He goes on to say: 'However, at the moment of truth, my faith may easily fail me. While my conscious mind commands that I fall, my very body resists. My entirely rational trust in my friend has not penetrated into my muscles and bones…absolute trust in God had permeated every aspect and level of Abraham's existence.' *Ibid.*

theologian, Abraham has reached the 'religious' stage, that is the highest spiritual level that an individual can reach, which contains -therefore is above- the lower 'ethical' level. At this stage, he is also in a position to know God's thoughts. Knowing that God will not allow something immoral to happen, Abraham can accept to obey God's command. Conversely, God knows that the angels will prevent the sacrifice from happening and, thus, He can ask Abraham to perform an immoral act - or else He can suspend the ethical- in order to test the patriarch's obedience[74].

Even so, Lerner mentions another –even more important- factor besides the covenant that proves the philosophers who have interpreted the biblical episode based on what is ethical or not, wrong. For the biblical Jew, as he correctly observes, there is no such thing as ethics; to be in the right is to follow God's orders;[75] what we define as moral today is radically different from what was thought of as good, just or proper for the biblical Jew.

Although this fact per se would be enough to support his argumentation, Lerner feels that he has to account for Abraham's protest against God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah in order to prove that even in this case Abraham has not failed as an obedient believer. He, therefore, argues that contrary to the sacrifice episode, here God has not commanded Abraham to do anything; besides, it would be

---

[74] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness unto Death* (originally published as Frygt og baeven, 1843), trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1941); Kierkegaard's unorthodox interpretation of Abraham's sacrifice has been strongly criticised in the academic world; Tucker, e.g., argues that through his distinction between the ethical and the religious and through his description of Abraham as a man who cannot be totally understood by others, Kierkegaard gives legitimacy to the killing of one's children on the basis of religion, irrespective of what the religious community thinks and for that reason characterizes Kierkegaard as 'a forerunner of modern religious fundamentalism'. Aviezer Tucker, 'Sins of our Fathers: a Short History of Religious Child Sacrifice' in *Zeitschrift fur Religions und Geistesgeschichte*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1999), p. 41.

[75] Lerner, 'Saving the Akedah from the Philosophers', pp. 169-70; Lerner points to Genesis 18:19 and Deuteronomy 4:6-8 that attest to this fact. *Ibid.*

unnatural for a compassionate human being like Abraham to show indifference for the total destruction of two entire communities[76].

When combined with his 'contract' theory of the sacrifice episode, the second statement is convincing. The first explanation, however, is not, because Moses, e.g., who *was* asked by God to do something (i.e. lead the Jewish people out of Egypt) was not obedient in the beginning, and yet his questioning God[77] does not mean that he failed as a believer, for being in dispute with God is not uncommon or punishable in the Bible.

In an article that looks at different theologies which have developed around the story of Abraham's sacrifice in time, Yvonne Sherwood shows that criticisms of the text and doubts about the soundness of its message had been voiced long before post-Enlightenment philosophers started arguing over the authority of the text. In contrast to the latter who -divided between two groups, the religious and the secular- would either support the text down to the minutest details or denounce it altogether, the early interpreters (Jewish, Christian and Muslim) while remaining respectful to the text chose to express subtle but powerful criticism through words of resentment that were put in the mouth of certain figures. Those figures (Sarah, Hagar, Satan and the victim himself) as minor players of the story are allowed to break with convention and be short of piety. Through their reactions, they call into question the justification of mental and physical suffering in the name of higher truths[78].

---

[76] *Ibid.*, pp. 171-72.
[77] See Exodus 3:11, 4:1, 10.
[78] A large number of traditions including such reactions can be found in Yvonne Sherwood, 'Binding-Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the "Sacrifice" of Abraham's Beloved Son' in *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (2004), pp. 821-61; Criticism has also been expressed in art. Caravaggio's painting in which Isaac, shocked and terrified, seems to be letting out a scream is representative of this kind of criticism. *Ibid.*, p. 847.

In addition to this kind of critique, the later generations of interpreters have also tried, Sherwood argues, to soften the story[79] and make it sound more ethical[80]. In Christianity, where the story has been tied to the passion of Christ, the new greater Isaac who really dies and rises again is the same as the father and the lamb and since the father takes death into himself, connotations of child abuse are avoided. Similarly, midrashic Judaism presents Isaac as a thirty year old man who, mature enough to make his own decisions, walks up Moriah *yachdav* (together- as one) with his father. Islam appears to soften the story even more by dissociating it from anything that signifies death. Firstly, the victim does not have a near-death experience and the fire, the wood and the knife are missing. Secondly, the father is interested in what the son has to say; this is of great significance for it seems that the most upsetting part of the story for the Bible reader is the fact that the son is never asked. Thirdly, even by having placed the *dhabīḥ* on his forehead rather than his side -as is the norm in animal offerings- the Qur'an could be expressing resentment either towards the connotations of slaughter in its own sacrifice story or towards the amalgamation of man and animal (i.e. Isaac and ram or Jesus and lamb) in Christianity and Judaism[81]. Most importantly, having connected the narrative to the Hajj pilgrimage, 'The emphasis is deflected toward survival and redemption from death (sons emphatically don't die; rams, camels or goats do), toward an economically (metaphorically) "sacrificial" gift that can cost up to twenty percent of

---

[79] It has often been implied that the biblical version itself is a softening of an old harsh version according to which Isaac *is* slaughtered. The main argument for this is that following the ordeal, Abraham walks down the hill alone (Genesis 22:19) *Ibid.*, p. 841.

[80] Again, I have to draw attention to the fact that what people see as ethical or moral varies from era to era and, therefore, what the new interpreters were really trying to do was to provide an explanation for - or downplay- those parts of the text that the moral code of their own time could not possibly accommodate.

[81] Sherwood, 'Binding-Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the "Sacrifice" of Abraham's Beloved Son', pp. 841-46.

the household's annual income, and toward charity (*zakāt*) as testified to by the strangely traditio-modern phenomenon of refrigerated planes flying out to Africa from Saudi Arabia'[82].

## 1.3. The Reading of the Sacrifice as a Misunderstanding or an Intended Murder

A number of commentators of the biblical account have interpreted the episode as Abraham's frailty to comprehend the divine will. Abraham is at God's bidding, displaying implicit obedience. He follows the dictates of his vision but fails to realize the nature of his God who would never bring forth such absurd demands. Despite the special role he has been given as a patriarch, when it comes to the point, Abraham acts wrongly as a devotee and fails as a father[83].

In rabbinic literature we do come across a similar reading that thinks of the binding as a misunderstanding; God only asked Abraham to bring his son up to the top of the mountain -performing this way a symbolic sacrifice- and bring him down again[84]. In this case, however, Abraham is considered to be righteous beyond any doubt.

Laurence Kant endorses the validity of the abovementioned reading, his basic arguments being that firstly, God does not use the word 'slaughter', secondly, He does not name the victim and most importantly, the Hebrew term עלה which is used twice in Genesis 22:2, once as a verb (*'alah*) which is traditionally translated as 'to offer' and once as a noun (*'olah*) which is traditionally translated as 'sacrifice' also means 'to go up', 'to rise', 'to ascend' or as a noun, 'ascent'. Accordingly, God's words can

---

[82] *Ibid.*, pp. 843-44.
[83] See Leviant, 'Parallel Lives: the Trials and Traumas of Isaac and Ismael', p. 47.
[84] Genesis Rabba 56:8.

be translated as 'bring him for an offering-up' indicating a call for an animal sacrifice or as 'Bring him up for an ascent' indicating a request for 'a pilgrimage to a sacred high place'[85].

Leviant, in a study that collates the biblical texts of the binding and the expulsion of Ishmael, draws attention to a parallel that he feels has been consistently ignored i.e. the conformity in the deeds of the Abraham-Isaac and Hagar-Ishmael stories and also the agreement in the wording used in both texts. As he notes, it seems that the writing style of the biblical author meant to show how much similar the lives of the two brothers were in their encounter with near-death, presenting Ishmael's suffering as a parallel *Akedah*.

Because this thesis is not concerned with the literary analysis of biblical passages (unless it is made to contrast or compare the verses of the biblical sacrifice with those of the qur'anic sacrifice) I will refrain from quoting cases of correspondence between the passages of Isaac's sacrifice and Ishmael's exile which are indeed numerous[86]. I have to note, however, that before Leviant, Louis Massignon had repeatedly characterized Ishmael's expulsion as Abraham's 'first paternal sacrifice'[87] and that Caspi and Cohen had also spotted the similarity in images and expressions between the two passages and they had come to the same

---

[85] Kant, 'Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text: Abraham's Binding of Isaac and the Horror of Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22)', Part 2, pp. 173-75; the author also notes that the verb 'to take' קח (*qakh*) in the Hebrew text is followed by the participle נא (*na'*) that turns a phrase in the imperative form into a request (*qakh-na'*='Would you take', 'I ask you to take'), meaning that Abraham had the choice to refuse. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

[86] The researcher can find all analogies in Leviant, 'Parallel Lives: the Trials and Traumas of Isaac and Ismael'.

[87] Cited in Willem A. Bijlefeld, 'Controversies around the Quranic Ibrahim Narrative and its Orientalist Interpretations' in *The Muslim World*, Vol. 72 (1982), No. 2, p. 90.

conclusion of the biblical portrayal of two sacrifices although their analysis was not as detailed as Leviant's more recent analysis[88].

Although fascinating, Leviant's analysis, I feel, fails to notice or passes over a striking contradiction. Abraham is described as merciless towards his sons; he lacks any paternal compassion and without questioning, clings to his illusions that deprive him of his moral sense. In addition, Hagar's agony is the prevailing characteristic of the Ishmael story whereas 'Before the sacrifice, Abraham displays no regret, only blind obedience to God's will. And when Isaac is saved, Abraham expresses neither joy nor relief'[89]. To Leviant's understanding, one of the most significant reasons the two narratives appear in the Holy Scripture is because 'the Bible does not cover up the leaders' moral lapses'[90]. He notes, however, that 'despite his lack of parental compassion, God rewards him'[91] and here is the evident antithesis; the idea of God selecting a heartless father to bring forth two peoples and make His covenant with goes beyond all reason.

The most extreme possible scenario is suggested by Hain. The latter draws attention to certain verses in Genesis which, he argues, clearly indicate that Isaac was not only blind but also mentally ill. Isaac's disability in addition to the fact that Abraham was happy with Ishmael (he had never asked for a second son) who was

---

[88] See Caspi&Cohen, *The Binding [Aqedah] and its Transformations in Judaism and Islam*, pp. 100-101 and 103; a number of scholars who have spotted similarities between the two stories are also mentioned in L. H. Kant, 'Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text: Abraham's Binding of Isaac and the Horror of Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22)', Part 2, p. 182, n. 81.
[89] Leviant, 'Parallel Lives', p. 22.
[90] *Ibid.*, p. 47.
[91] *Ibid.*

healthy and would, thus, make a potentially successful leader led him to use his 'vision' as an excuse to rid himself of the burden of a sick child[92].

It would seem as if Abraham is either held responsible for misunderstanding the divine message or accused of willfully attempting to murder his son only when the passage is translated out of context; for as Van Seters notes, the fact that from the very beginning it is unequivocally stated by the biblical author that the patriarch is being tested by God in addition to the allusion to his obedience and the renewal of the contract between God and himself render the case of failure highly improbable[93].

Nonetheless, Laurence Kant makes sure to provide an explanation even for those two factors, i.e. the test and the reward. He notes that there was indeed a test, however, not one of faith but one that involves realizing the ambiguity in God's words and understanding His intentions through great effort[94]. The very fact that God does not provide Abraham with any details or reasons for the sacrifice suggests that '…God expects Abraham to use his intellect…' in order to figure out the real meaning of the request[95].

---

[92] Herbert W. Hain, 'Prologue' in Mishael M. Caspi (ed.), *Take Now Thy Son: the Motif of the Akedah (Binding) in Literature*, pp. 1-11; Hain's quite convincing argumentation concerning Isaac's hypothetical blindness includes the following: the verb 'I see' is never used by Isaac. 'Behold' is used instead; in the sacrifice story, Isaac mentions the wood -because he can feel it on his back- and the embers -because they are burning- but not the knife as he cannot see it; Abraham is carrying the knife and the embers in one hand, possibly because he is using the other hand to guide Isaac; the two of them are walking together 'as one' as the Hebrew *yahdav* indicates; two young men are following Abraham and Isaac, perhaps to meet Isaac's needs, as there is no other reason why they should be there. In regards to other passages, Isaac spends his life in his mother's tent and does not travel to other places like the rest of the patriarchs; Abraham has to trick a woman, Rebecca, into marrying his son; in her first encounter with Isaac, Rebecca 'falls off ' the horse (meaning she must have been unpleasantly surprised). As for the mental disability, Isaac does not react at all when he is about to be slaughtered (note that he has not been informed about the sacrifice) and he is easily tricked by his wife into blessing Jacob instead of Esau. Hain also cites rabbinic sources that attest to Isaac's physical disabilities.

[93] John Van Seters, 'Abraham' in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Vol. 1 (1987), p. 15.

[94] L. H. Kant, 'Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text', Part 2, p. 176.

[95] *Ibid.*, p. 163.

As for the misconception, the author argues that Abraham had a few good reasons to assume that God could ask him to execute such a dreadful command. Among those reasons, Kant mentions the annihilation of the human race in Noah's time, the practice of child sacrifice in his time, the fact that God had surprised him before as well as the fact that 'Abraham did not have the benefit of much prior human experience in dealing with God'. Those reasons in addition to the courage and obedience that he had shown in the past and his good intentions (he always acted out of love for God) earned him his reward for 'God looks at our better nature and rewards us when we make even limited use of it'[96].

In Islam, Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240 AD) in *The Bezels of Wisdom* interprets Abraham's sacrifice in a way that reminds us of Genesis Rabba 56:8 and contemporary Jewish exegesis, i.e. as a misunderstanding. According to the mystic, what Abraham saw in his dream was a ram assuming the form of his son. But that was only a symbol for the institution of the sacrificial ritual. Abraham, however, took his vision in a literal way and was ready to sacrifice his son. If what Abraham supposed to be the message of the dream was really what God meant, says Ibn 'Arabi, the sacrifice would not have been prevented. Instead, Abraham having completely misread the divine sings, God intervenes. Here, the mystic inserts the divine call, not in the typical qur'anic diction (Q.37:104-5) but in the following form: 'O Abraham, thou hast taken the vision for truth'[97].

---

[96] *Ibid.*, pp. 176-77.
[97] Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: a Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1984, 1st ed. 1966-67), p. 14.

According to the Qur'an, Abraham saw in a dream that he was sacrificing his son[98]. This time, no angel came forward with a message from God and the Qur'an is not clear as to as to whether his dream was a vision in the sense of a supernatural experience someone has while awake. Yet, dreams are considered to be one of the ways revelation is granted to prophets[99]. In regards to dream interpretation, Sackiko Murata and William Chittick note that dreams are connected with the human soul which is still self-aware while the body is asleep. Therefore, interpreting dreams pertains to the human psyche and is not something that everyone is capable of. On the contrary, explaining dreams correctly is a gift bestowed on the prophets and only a few other holy individuals because 'since the human being is a divine form, one must have direct knowledge from God in order to understand the real significance of dream images'[100]. To support their argument Murata and Chittick point to the famous story of Joseph who was especially skilled in this field and also Muhammad who, according to numerous hadith, used to interpret the dreams of his companions at their request. Ordinary men cannot have a full understanding of their dream images but they may still have some insight into their dreams. As to the nature of dreams, the authors note that in Islam, dreams are neither exactly what they appear to be nor completely unrelated to the images we perceive. The truth is something in the middle; one has to

---

[98] '…he said: "O my son! I see in vision that I offer thee in sacrifice' (Q.37:102).

[99] A tradition (attributed to 'Ubayd bin 'Umayr) that expresses this notion in connection with Abraham's sacrifice is given in Ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr*, abridged by a group of scholars under the supervision of Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri (Riyadh, Darussalam, 2000), Vol. 8, p. 272; see also Edward W. Lane, *Selections from the Ḳur_ran* (London, Trübner & Co., 1879), p. 72; John Burton, *An Introduction to the Hadith* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1994), p. 62 on prophets' dreams; Helmut Gätje, *The Qur'ān and its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations*, trans. Alford T. Welch (Oxford, Oneworld Publications, 1996), pp. 45-46 for Zamakhshari's exegesis on Q.42:51 (methods of divine inspiration). Cf. Maimonides, 'The Guide of the Perplexed', pp. 501-502.

[100] Sachiko Murata & William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul, Minnesota, Paragon House, 2006, 1st ed. 1994), p. 222.

find the correspondence between one's dream images and what lies behind those images because a dream image is always 'a sign of something beyond itself'[101].

To Ibn 'Arabi, the whole world is a mere dream and everything that is perceived through the senses in this so-called reality is a vague reflection of the 'absolute Reality' and, therefore, needs to be interpreted. To interpret/see what lies beyond this phenomenal world, one has to go through a kind of spiritual death, i.e. 'self-annihilation' (*fanā'*) and become, thus, the perfect man. Prophets have some understanding of the situation and take their dreams/visions to be only as symbolic as everything else they perceive in this present world. Yet, not all prophets have become perfect men; some have attained a higher degree of understanding of the situation than others.

Dreams are produced in the 'world of Images' which lies between the sensible world (the world that is perceived through the senses and is recognized by most of the people as reality) and the spiritual world that is reached through 'self-annihilation'. In the 'world of Images' things 'are sensible, but of an extremely fine and rarefied sensible-ness'[102]. The 'world of Images' is ceaselessly reflected in the human consciousness which means that not only prophets but (in a greater or lesser degree) all human beings are endowed with 'imagination' i.e. the function needed to receive images (in Ibn 'Arabi imagination is not related to fantasy). While awake and distracted by the material elements of the phenomenal world, people receive images in a vague form; because of their indirect nature, they call them delusions and forget

---

[101] *Ibid.*

[102] Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: a Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*, p. 13; Izutsu's analysis on Ibn 'Arabi's world view is based upon the latter's major work *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, (*The Bezels of Wisdom*), Cairo, 1321 AH.

about them. During sleep, however, 'imagination' can operate properly and this is when 'veridical' dreams are generated. Even so, dreams are communicated in the form of sensible images and - in the same way that all things of the sensible world have to be interpreted - can only be understood when interpreted[103].

Being a prophet, Abraham is aware of the fact that dreams are sensible images that exist in the 'world of Imagination' and that as symbols for things that belong to a higher reality, they must be interpreted. However, when his knowledge -i.e. his ability to realize that visions have to be interpreted- is put to the test, Abraham fails as he forgets to interpret his dream. This is the context in which according to Ibn 'Arabi Q.37:106 should be read. Finally, it is said that God redeemed Abraham but what is really meant by this verse is that Abraham saw the sacrificial animal as the redemption of his son; to God, on the other hand, Who never intended the actual sacrifice of the boy, what happened was not a matter of redemption[104].

In regards to the nature of the vision, Izutsu adds a very important comment that I will come back to towards the end of this study: the sacrificial animal appeared in the form of Isaac because the sacrifice ritual signifies the offering of one's own soul to God[105]. Presumably what Izutsu means by this statement is that because the sacrificial rite is a spiritual event that symbolizes the offering to God of the human soul, it is revealed in the form of a human being; all the more so, it is revealed in the form of Abraham's son, suggesting the significance of the rite.

When reference is made to Ibn 'Arabi, it is important to remember that the mystic sees everything through his own mystical experience, hence interprets the

---

[103] See Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, chapter 1(*Dream and Reality*), pp. 7-13.
[104] Ibn al- 'Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, pp. 84-86 cited in Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 14.
[105] Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 14.

scriptural passages in a way that is radically different from that of the theologians whose interpretation is based on the rules of logic. Thus, we should not be surprised that a celebrated qur'anic figure like Abraham can be portrayed as a man who fails at a very elementary –at least for a prophet- stage of his spiritual journey. Besides, it is not unlike Ibn 'Arabi to criticize prophets despite the fact that the latter are repeatedly praised in the Qur'an for the very same acts that the mystic speaks of negatively[106].

Of course, the fact that Abraham is said to have interpreted the divine signs of his vision incorrectly does not mean that he is considered to have remained in the world of the sensible images until the end of his earthly life. For in a different part of his treatise dealing with the 'perfect man', Ibn 'Arabi derives the first component of Abraham's title *khalīl Allāh* from *takhallul* that means 'permeation' - 'penetration'[107] and states that Abraham "…is called khalīl for no other reason than that he 'permeates', and comprises in himself, all (the qualities) by which the Divine Essence is qualified…""[108]. Based on the above and in view of the mystic's interpretation of the sacrifice story, one may conclude that, to Ibn 'Arabi, Abraham was given the title *khalīl* at a stage of his life following that in which the event of the sacrifice occurred when the prophet had not yet become a 'perfect man'.

---

[106] See, for example, Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, chapter 4 (throughout) where Ibn 'Arabi holds Noah responsible for having failed in his mission to bring true faith to his people while, to the reader's surprise, the latter are being justified in worshipping idols.

[107] See Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 232; the title *khalīl* is typically derived from the word *khullah* that means 'sincere friendship'. *Ibid.*, 245, n. 39.

[108] Ibn al- 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, pp. 71-72 citied in Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 232.

Ibn 'Arabi makes use of the story of Abraham's sacrifice once more in order to exemplify a fundamental aspect of his ontological system, namely that the Absolute is One Reality that manifests itself in many different forms[109]. He notes:

'My father, do what you have been commanded to do!' The child is essentially the same as his father. So the father saw nothing other than himself sacrificing himself. 'And We ransomed him with a big sacrifice'. At that moment, the very thing which had appeared in the form of a human being appeared in the form of a ram. And the very thing which was 'father' appeared in the form of 'son', or more exactly in the capacity of 'son'…The reality is one but assumes many forms.'[110]

The above is philosophically interpreted by 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Qashani (d. 1330) -one of the most important figures of the Ibn 'Arabi school- as follows; on the level of the archetypes [i.e. the permanent realities - essences of all things that lie in Divine Consciousness[111]] the Absolute manifests itself -is self-determined- in the 'universal' images of 'man', 'ram' etc. In the sensible world [where the archetypes become existent by assuming the forms of concrete things] the Absolute is manifested in 'individual' forms such as 'Abraham', 'the sacrificial son', 'the certain ram that was eventually sacrificed'. Before any self-determination of the Absolute takes place, 'man' and 'ram' are the same. Therefore, when 'man' [i.e. Abraham prior to any self-determination] sacrificed the ram, he sacrificed himself[112]. Furthermore, to Ibn 'Arabi when Abraham saw himself sacrificing his son, he saw himself sacrificing himself for [in the world of the archetypes] 'father' and 'son' are both 'man'. This last equation corresponds to al-Qashani's 'universal' type of self-determination of the Absolute. Nevertheless, we have to keep in mind that any philosophical explanation given to the

---

[109] Note that in Ibn 'Arabi's thought the Absolute is not God. God is only the holiest manifestation of the Absolute for the Absolute manifests itself in the form of all spiritual and material things. In other words, the Absolute is the origin of the essences of all things.

[110] Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p. 67 cited in Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 80.

[111] For a detailed analysis of the archetypes in Ibn 'Arabi's thought, see chapter 12 in Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*.

[112] 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qashānī, *Sharḥ al-Qāshānī 'ala Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (Cairo, 1321 AH), p. 67 cited in Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, pp. 80-81.

passage quoted above is destined to be incomplete if not incorrect since the only way to understand how Abraham, his son and the ram are of the same essence is to experience the 'Unity of the Being'[113].

Ibn 'Arabi's theological reading is an exception. As far as the qur'anic version of the narrative is concerned, there is a tendency among the scholars to swiftly interpret the essence of the story as the perfect submission to God's will in order to move on to other subjects, especially the identity of the son placed on the altar. In order to understand, however, the reason why Muslim and non-Muslim scholars have focused on the identity of the sacrificial victim, we have to look at the way that the sacrifice narrative evolved in Islamic tradition as well as the factors that motivated its thematic progression.

Before we move on to Islamic tradition, it would be appropriate to make reference to one more interpretation produced by Carol Delaney who, about ten years ago, criticized the particular Abrahamic story as a dangerous story of violence. Despite my objections to some of her main points, Delaney's theory is of critical importance for it shows that the narrative of Abraham's sacrifice is in urgent need of reinterpretation.

### 1.4. Delaney's Case: Endorsement of Patriarchy / Blind Obedience to Authority

Carol Delaney, in a treatise that examines Abraham's story through anthropological lenses, rejects the attempts at interpreting the passage on the basis of sacrifice theories or the essence of faith as conformist and undertakes to demonstrate

---

[113] Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 81.

the way that this certain narrative has had far reaching social repercussions for the steeped in the monotheistic tradition West[114].

Her theory goes as follows: different myths of procreation emerge in different societies at various stages of history. The biblical era was the time when the Western myth came about. According to this myth that has imparted to men the authoritative role nature never gave them, the male '…(he) is the one who "begets" and by means of his "seed" imparts the life-giving essence that defines a child'[115]. The female, on the other hand, operates as the 'earth' where the seed is planted but not as a co-creator[116]. Over and above, since 'The power to create life implies the concomitant power to destroy'[117], the male was believed to have the right to take away the life he created. Modern biology and genetics have proved that the genetic material is equally provided by the female and the male. However, the impact of cosmic theories does not vanish as soon as science comes up with a new finding and this certain myth was legitimized and secured in the West for it was rooted in the monotheistic world view.

To Delaney's thinking, mainly responsible for the perpetuation of the myth that shelters patriarchy patterns is this certain narrative of sacrifice in which Abraham -the Jewish, Christian and Muslim model of faith- never asks himself if the child is his to kill. Again, the author views the fact that '…Abraham is revered not for putting an end to the practice (of child sacrifice) but for his willingness to go through with it'[118]

---

[114] Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: the Social Legacy of Biblical Myth.*
[115] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[116] In different societies, the meanings and roles of 'maternity' and 'paternity' differ in a very substantial way. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-29.
[117] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[118] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

as confirmatory of her belief that the story teaches lessons about blind obedience to authority[119].

To support her argument, she refers to a court case that took place in California about fifty years ago, where a man who was charged with the murder of his young daughter alleged that the 'sacrifice' was ordered by God[120]. Should the paradigm and everything that it implies had not been there, the author argues, this man would have not been able to use the Abrahamic narrative as an alibi.

It is indeed essential to look at a religious text in its historical context and comprehend the kind of social structure and values it presupposes not only for the better understanding of its spiritual message but also so that certain misconceptions (in this case wrong images about gender) are not perpetuated. It is more than likely that the biblical texts do imply patriarchy and that the biblical writers did assume that Isaac belonged to Abraham and this is why the story was handed down to us in its present form.

However, despite the fact that the story reflects the mindset of its authors and the standards of the era, it was not included in the holy book of the Jews (or the Muslims) with the intention of promoting certain notions on gender but to bring out a spiritual message. As for the extreme for the human standards example, it could be given -as I will attempt to show later on- to match the importance of its message.

What is more, in regards to her case study, the author fails to see that religious texts as such do not make religion. Texts have always been interpreted[121]. And

---

[119] If this is the case, then how would the author translate the Sodom-Gomorra story; as rebellion against the same authority?

[120] See chapter 2 of Delaney's *Abraham on Trial: the Social Legacy of Biblical Myth.*

[121] See, for example, L.H. Kant, 'Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text' (parts 1 and 2) who is worried about the ill effects that the uncritical interpretation of such a narrative can have to modern

Abraham's sacrifice has never been interpreted or presented by any of the three monotheistic religions to their devotees as a murder story or one of a God who takes pleasure in fathers killing their children. Besides, Delaney does not seem to be concerned with one of the most significant aspects of the narrative; the biblical/qur'anic story of the sacrifice does not end with a murder[122]. What appears, then, to be problematic concerning the incident mentioned above is not the text. There are plenty of religious texts, for that matter, which could be used to justify violence if interpreted in a wrong way[123].

On the contrary, I strongly believe that the incident raises serious questions about the ecclesiastical environment in which the individual used to live, the pastor he confided his secret to and the kind of theology that was developed in that certain church, which seems to encourage each of its members to interpret texts in their own special way and act according to their own interpretations[124].

---

society. As a progressive Jew, he is especially concerned that the old interpretations of the sacrifice, not being able to account for the clash between faith and ethics, drive modern Jews away from the synagogues. Instead of rejecting the story as dangerous, however, Kant offers a new well-grounded interpretation of it [one that cannot be possibly used to 'promote submissive victimhood' (p. 85)] based on the ambiguity of the biblical language that promotes the interpreting of a text in more that one ways, so that it can always speak to the different communities of the Jews.

[122] She only recalls the fact and draws attention to it later in her study, when her main goal is to prove that the Abraham story should not be considered in the context of child sacrifice in the Bible. See Delaney, *Abraham on Trial*, p. 87.

[123] In the Apocryphal Gospels, for example, there are stories about avenging angels (appointed by God on the Day of Judgement) that a mentally disturbed individual could identify with. To give an example from the Qur'an, the sura in which Abraham breaks the idols (Q.21:51-71) can be either interpreted as religious fanaticism or as follows: '...here Abraham is not fighting against another understanding of God, another religion, but against idolatry...the demonizing of earthly things...'. Kuschel, *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims*, p. 236.

[124] Even scholarly exegesis is there only to promote fruitful thinking and assist those interested understand the texts in the best possible way and not to be perceived as dogmatic truth.

## Chapter 2: Abraham's Sacrifice in Islamic Tradition

### 2.1. Introduction

Abrahamic stories, just like all other prophets' stories in the Qur'an with the exception of Joseph's, are not recorded in a continuous narrative but in a series of isolated episodes. Furthermore, the Qur'an reports only those details of the prophets' lives that can serve didactic purposes and is not concerned with giving the location or chronology of events. The task of filling the gaps of these stories was taken up by Muslim exegetes who framed the qur'anic stories with extra-qur'anic traditions that were circulating among the Muslims of the first generations. Extra-qur'anic Islamic literature functions as exegesis of the Islamic scripture no matter how systematic the work of the exegetes is.

Calder offers an interesting illustration of the most likely way that story-tellers would structure and present their material (before the various legends were recorded in the compilations of the exegetes and gradually took a fixed form). The sacrifice, he notes, is one of a number of independent narratives that used to describe different episodes in the life of the prophet Abraham; other autonomous stories were the devil's attempts to obstruct Abraham and his family from obeying God's order, the patriarch's first pilgrimage etc. By making use of such stories that Calder names 'narrative units', a story-teller could put together a biography of Abraham, which was again a part of a larger cluster of narratives, namely 'a cycle of prophetic stories'. Kisa'i's (twelfth century) *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* most probably corresponds to this kind of a cycle. This series of legends, the legends of the prophets, existed among others, e.g. the Alexander legends and the Iranian heroic myth. Now, of the existing tales of Abraham's deeds (i.e. 'narrative units'), a story-teller could -depending on the audience and his own mood- put together some or all of them, incorporate one into the

other (he could relate e.g. the sacrifice narrative and the stoning of the devil as part of the story of Abraham's first pilgrimage) or make them shorter or longer. Finally, 'narrative units' were made up from a choice of 'narrative motifs'. Again, the story-teller could shorten or completely leave out some motifs and expand on others; he could also to some extent change the order of the motifs[1]. Calder provides us with a list of the main motifs that the sacrifice legend seems to have consisted of. Those are:

'1. age/identity of victim
2. vision of Abraham
3. inform-accept motif
4. journey to site of sacrifice
5. disposition of victim on site
6. last requests of victim
7. execution, failure, reaction (execution, failure…)
8. supernatural intervention
9. provision of substitute'[2]

## 2.2 Sacrifice Narratives

### *a. The 'Iblis' Traditions*

One of the legends concerning Abraham's sacrifice relates how Shaytan / Iblis attempts to stop Abraham, Sarah and Isaac or Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael from obeying God using logical arguments; the devil fails as Abraham's family display unhesitating submission to the divine will. The most prevalent version is attributed to a Jewish scholar and convert to Islam, named Ka'b al-Ahbar (d. 652-3 or 655-6AD):

'1. Ka'b asks Abū Hurayra if he would like to hear the story of Isaac son of Abraham. Abū Hurayra responds in the affirmative. 2. After Abraham is shown his vision about the sacrifice, Satan says: '…if I do not beguile the family of Abraham [now] I will never beguile them!' 3. Satan appears as a man known to Abraham and Sarah and goes to Sarah after Abraham and Isaac had already left for the place of sacrifice. Satan asks Sarah where they went and she replies: 'to do an errand' (4/5) or 'to gather firewood' (1/5). Satan tells her that Abraham

---

[1] Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture: the sacrifice of Abraham in Early Islamic Tradition', pp. 397-99
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 398.

actually took Isaac out to sacrifice him. Sarah responds that Abraham would never do that (4/5) or that he is more compassionate toward the boy than even she (1/5), but asks why he would ever wish to sacrifice him. Satan answers that Abraham claimed God commanded that of him. Sarah replies: 'If God commanded that of him, then he should do it!' (3/5) or that if God commanded that of him, he would do it since he is absolutely faithful to God (2/5). 4. Foiled, Satan leaves and finds Isaac walking next to his father. He tells Isaac that his father is going to sacrifice him (1/5) or asks Isaac where Abraham is taking him. Isaac answers: 'To do an errant' (3/5) or 'to gather firewood' (1/5). Satan counters: 'No by God…he is going to sacrifice you!' Isaac does not believe him and asks why he would do that. Satan replies that Abraham claimed God commanded that of him. Isaac answers: 'If God commanded that, then he should obey Him!' 5. Foiled again, Satan hastens to Abraham and asks him where he is going. He replies that he must do some errands with Isaac. Satan says: 'Well, by God, you took him in order to sacrifice him!' Abraham says: 'Why would I sacrifice him?' Satan answers: 'You claimed that your Lord commanded that of you' Abraham replies: 'By God, if my Lord commanded that of me, I would do it!'' [3]

There is only one account, in which Satan is trying to tempt Abraham, Ishmael and Hagar into disobeying God's command. This version is attributed to Ibn Ishaq (d. 767AD), an indication that it is not until the eighth century that Ishmael is depicted as the victim in this tradition[4].

According to another version that is only found in the exegetical work of Shi'ite scholars, the incident takes place in Mecca while Sarah is performing the 'Umra pilgrimage. Here, the old man (Satan) tells Abraham that if he offers his son in

---

[3] Al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* (Beirut, Dār al-Fikr, 1405/1984), Vol. 23, p. 82 and *Ta'rīkh al-Rusul wal-Mulūk*, (ed.) M. J. DeGoeje as *Annales* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1964), Vol. 1, pp. 292-94; al-Tha'labī, Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Nīsābūrī, *'Arā'is al-Majālis* (Cairo, Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabi, 1374/1954), pp. 94-95; Ibn al-Athīr, 'Izz al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī, *Al-Kāmil fī al-Ta'rīkh* (Beirut: Dar Ṣādir lil-tibā'ati wal-nashir, 1385/1965), (ed.) Tornberg and titled: *Ibn-el-Athiri Chronocon quod Perfectissimum Inscribitur* (Leiden, Brill, 1867-77), Vol. 1, pp. 109-110 and Ibn Kathīr, 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl b. 'Umar, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm* (Cairo, 'Isa al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, n.d.), Vol. 4, p. 15 cited in Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice', pp. 100-101 (The numbers in the parentheses are used by Firestone to indicate the number of times that a motif occurs and the number of versions that the author has located in Islamic literature).

[4] Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice', p. 104.

sacrifice, people will follow his example because he is a leader and sacrificing one's children will become a custom[5].

This last theme of the old man who condemns Abraham's decision to sacrifice his son has a parallel in the pre-Islamic story of 'Abd al-Muttalib who vowed to sacrifice a son; the latter is rebuked by some Quraysh men who argue: 'If you do a thing like this, there will be no stopping men from coming to sacrifice their sons, and what will become of the people then?'[6] Firestone mentions this tradition but maintains that the 'Satan' legend is derived from the Jewish tradition. He states that most of the times, this story has served in Jewish exegesis to explain Genesis 22:4 'On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar', i.e. to account for the three days between God's command and the attempted sacrifice. The very fact that Islamic exegesis relates the legend although the qur'anic text does not present a similar problem suggests that Muslim exegetes simply followed the biblical sequence of events[7].

The theme of another- unconnected with the above- tradition, i.e. the lapidation of Satan, is attributed to Ibn 'Abbas (d. 687AD):

> '1. Abraham is shown the stations of the pilgrimage (3/5), or is commanded with the sacrifice (1/5). 2. Satan appears to him at the place of the Running Ritual (3/5), or at al-Mash'ar al-Ḥarām (1/4) and tries to get the better of him, but Abraham surpasses him (4/5). 3. Then Gabriel takes him to al-Jamra al- 'Aqaba (4/5), or Abraham goes there himself (1/5) where Satan appears to him. He departs (4/5) or sinks into the ground (1/5) when Abraham throws seven stones at him. 4. Satan appears again at al-Jamra al-Wusṭā. Abraham throws the stones,

---

[5] For the full account of this version that is reported in Qummi and Tabarsi, see Firestone, *ibid.*, pp. 102-104.

[6] See Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: a Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 67; another parallel between the two sacrifice stories is that like Abraham, 'Abd al-Muttalib informs his sons about his vow and they readily accept to obey him. See *ibid.*, p. 66.

[7] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: the Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*, p. 114; for the Jewish sources where the legend is located, see *ibid.*, p. 226, n. 41-43.

and the scene repeats itself (5/5). 5. He then appears again at al-Jamra al-Quswā (1/5) or al-Jamra al-Kubrā (1/5), where the scene is repeated (2/5)…'[8]

The story ends with Abraham proceeding to sacrifice Ishmael who is dressed in a white shirt and asks his father to use it as his shroud (3/5) or Isaac who asks to be tied up lest he trembles and his father gets spattered with blood (1/5) and the appearance of the ram (3/5) or the voice that announces that the vision is fulfilled (2/5)[9].

This tradition has in all likelihood its roots in the pre-Islamic ritual of stoning the three pillars in Mina. The custom was incorporated into the Islamic religion after it had been purified from its initial idolatrous meaning by means of its association with a figure that exists in the monotheistic religions, Satan[10]. The white shirt that Ishmael wears provides an explanation as to why Muslim pilgrims are dressed in a white garment[11].

A similar legend ascribed to the same authority, recounts how Abraham's son attempts to capture the ram that is running away by throwing seven stones at it every time he gets close; first, at al-Jamra al-'Ula, then at al-Jamra al-Wusta and finally at al-Jamra al-Kubra[12]. After that, Abraham takes the ram to al-Manhar in Mina, where

---

[8] Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 23, pp. 80-81 and *Ta'rīkh*, pp. 306-307; Ibn Ḥanbal, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad, *al-Musnad* (Beirut, al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1389/1969), Vol. 1, pp. 306-307, Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Vol. 4, p. 15, and al-Kisā'ī, Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā*, (ed.) Isaac Eisenberg as *Vita Prophetarum auctore Muḥammed ben 'Abdallah al-Kisa'i* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1922), p. 95 cited in Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice', p. 105.

[9] See Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice', pp. 105-106; Bashear holds that the pro-Isaac version of the tradition has been stretched back to Ibn 'Abbas by Hammad b. Salama (d. 167 AH), Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice of his Son and Related Issues', p. 253. He also gives the name of Shibl b. 'Abbad (d. 148-50 AH) as one of those who associated Ibn 'Abbas with the pro-Ishmael view, *ibid.*, p. 252.

[10] Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice', pp. 104-105; further reference to the incorporation of old pagan traditions into the new Islamic religion will be made later on.

[11] Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture: the sacrifice of Abraham in Early Islamic Tradition', p. 398.

[12] i.e. the location of the three pillars in Mina.

he sacrifices it[13]. The two stories have more than likely derived from the same tradition but were separated as the first one was used in connection to the Hajj while the second one was associated with the sacrifice[14].

In a very interesting and unique tradition that is attributed to Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 725-737AD) Abraham is advised by his friend El'azar to obey God's command[15].

### *b. The Sacrifice*

Apart from the legends surrounding the sacrifice, some qur'anic commentaries give the account of the actual sacrificial act. Of all sacrifice narratives available, I give an outline of the three most comprehensive ones that Firestone has detected but also sporadically comment on other versions which present the researcher with unique elements. To begin with, one version, given on the authority of Suddi (d. 744AD),[16] considers Isaac to be the sacrificial victim and hints at Syria as the location of the incident. One is attributed to Ibn Ishaq (d. 767AD)[17] and locates the sacrifice in the outskirts of Mecca; here, the intended victim is the elder of Abraham's two sons and

---

[13] Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 23, p. 87 and *Ta'rīkh*, p. 306; al-Ṭabarsī, Radī al-Dīn Abū 'Alī al-Fadl b. al-Ḥasan Amīn al-Dīn, *Majma' al-Bayān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut, Dār al-Maktaba, n.d.), Vol. 23, p. 15 and al-Zamakhsharī, Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. 'Umar b. Aḥmad, *Al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqā'iq al-Tanzīl wa'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta'wīl* (Cairo, Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1385/1966), Vol. 3, p. 349 cited in Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 131.

[14] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 232, n. 27.

[15] In Ibn Qutayba, *'Uyūn al-Akhbār* (Cairo, 1963), Vol. 2, pp. 275-76 cited in Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice of his Son', p. 261.

[16] Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 23, p. 78 and *Ta'rīkh*, pp. 302-303; Tha'labī, *'Arā'is al-Majālis*, p. 21; Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-Bayān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Vol. 23, pp. 76-77 and Mujīr al-Dīn, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad Abū al-Yaman al-Ḥanbalī, *al-Uns al-Jalīl Bita'rīkh al-Quds wal-Khalīl* (Amman, Maktabat al-Muḥtasab, 1973), p. 40 cited in Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice', pp. 106-107; There is a rendition of this legend, the *isnād* of which does not end with Suddi but goes back to earlier authorities –all associated with the pro-Isaac view- the last one identified as Ibn Mas'ud and 'other companions of the Prophet'. One can only agree with Bashear that this is a '...clear case of traditional growing backwards', Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice of his Son', p. 262.

[17] Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, pp. 304-305; Tha'labī, *'Arā'is al-Majālis*, pp. 93-94; Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-Bayān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Vol. 23, p. 78; Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fī al-Ta'rīkh*, p. 112 cited in Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice', pp. 108-109.

the incident takes place during one of Abraham's visits to Ishmael in Mecca (Abraham rides from Syria to Mecca on a supernatural creature called *Burāq*)[18]. Another version is found only in Shi'ite sources; in all of them -Ya'qubi (d. 897), Qummi (d. 939AD) and two Tabarsi (d. 1153AD) renditions-[19] the sacrifice occurs within the context of Abraham's first pilgrimage. 'This corresponds exactly with the pre-Islamic pilgrimage slaughtering ritual, which was retained also in the Islamic hajj'[20]. Surprisingly enough, the Qummi and one of the two Tabarsi versions name Isaac as the son Abraham is instructed to slaughter during his first pilgrimage[21].

Studying the exegetical material available one easily notices that the narratives -as expected- provide the readers with those details missing from the brief qur'anic telling, making, thus, the story complete and shedding light to certain vague verses.

Thus, according to the Suddi version, when Isaac reaches a certain age, God commands Abraham to fulfill the vow he made when he was announced the birth of his son by the angels; that is to sacrifice him. This rarely seen motif that serves to fill the gap between the qur'anic statement that Abraham would be given a son (Q.37:101) and Abraham's vision (Q.37:102) may have its origins either in pre-Islamic Arab legends like the one found in Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*, where Muhammad's grandfather makes a vow to sacrifice a son or in Jewish legends like the

---

[18] The earliest reference to *Burāq* involves Abraham and is traced in poet 'Ajjaj (d. 97/715) (Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 208, n. 52).
[19] Al-Ya'qūbī, Aḥmad b. Abī Ya'qūb b. Wāḍiḥ, *Ta'rīkh* (ed.) M. T. Houtsma as *Historiae* (Leiden, Brill, 1969), Vol. 1, pp. 25-26; Al-Qummī, Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm b. Hāshim b. Mūsā b. Bābawayhī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī* (Najaf, 1385/1966), Vol. 2, pp. 224-25; Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-Bayān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (1), Vol. 23, p. 77, (2), Vol. 23, pp. 78-79 cited in *ibid.*, 1989, pp. 109-12.
[20] Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice', p. 109.
[21] *Ibid.*

one found in Judges 11:31, where Jephthah sacrifices his only daughter in fulfillment of a vow[22].

In the Shi'ite versions, after the building of the Ka'ba (Y. & T.2), Abraham is guided by Gabriel to his first pilgrimage (Y. & Q.) or goes to Hajj with Sarah and Isaac (T.1) / Hagar and Ishmael (T.2). He receives his vision at al-Mash'ar (Y. & Q.) [23] or earlier in Syria, after the conflict with Sarah (T.2) and the attempted sacrifice of Ishmael (Y. & T.2) / Isaac (Q. & T.1) takes place in Mina[24] after Abraham has performed the lapidation ritual with Sarah (Q. & T.1) or while he and Ishmael are performing the running ritual (T.2)

Medieval exegesis (for the most part Sunni exegesis) has also provided us with numerous details about the son's stance. In the Suddi version, Isaac learns that he is going to be the victim of the sacrifice he is to offer with his father only when he asks him where the offering is. As soon as Abraham's son is informed about his father's vision, he accepts to be offered and asks him to a. tie his bonds (Suddi, Ibn Ishaq, Q. & T.1) and hide his face (Q. & T.1), b. make sure that his (Abraham's) clothes are not soaked in blood, something that would cause his mother grief (Suddi, Ibn Ishaq) / lessen his recompense (Ibn Ishaq), c. give him an easy death by moving the knife fast (Suddi) / sharpening it (Ibn Ishaq), d. throw him on his forehead so that he will not hesitate to slaughter him because of compassion (Ibn Ishaq), e. give greetings to his mother (Suddi) or return his shirt to her (Ibn Ishaq). Then, according to Suddi:

'Abraham draws near, kisses Isaac…They both cry so much that the ground is soaked

---

[22] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, pp. 109-10.
[23] Al-Mash'ar is the place where the pilgrims stay overnight before they go to Mina, where they perform the sacrificial rite.
[24] Here, the 1st Iblis tradition is inserted; in Ibn Ishaq the episode takes place at Mt. Thabir.

underneath Isaac's cheek where he is lying'[25]. In the three Shi'ite versions (Y., Q., T.1), Abraham places the sacrificial victim on top of a donkey saddle.

Isaac's enquiry about the sacrificial animal is a well known theme from Genesis 22. Additionally, themes a, b, c, e and the 'tears', have parallels in the rabbinic literature[26]. Specifically, in regards to Abraham binding his son, Firestone notes that in the Jewish versions of the story, the reason why Isaac asks for his father to tie him firmly is that if he moves because of fear, he might get injured by the knife and, thus, become ritually unfit to be offered in sacrifice according to Jewish law (*halakha*); as the theme enters the Islamic environment, its initial meaning is lost because the Sharia prescribes different laws concerning sacrifice. The motif, however, is preserved for it serves to emphasize the son's readiness to die according to God's command[27].

Calder interprets the trembling and the binding motifs separately. Like Firestone, he believes that the trembling motif in the Jewish versions of the sacrifice is an allusion to the necessity for a flawless sacrificial victim. However, the same interpretation that Firestone gives for the binding motif in the Islamic sacrifice narratives is given by Calder for the binding motif in the Jewish sacrifice narratives. He, therefore, asserts that in Judaic tradition the motif of Isaac asking to be bound together with the 'inform-accept' motif, signify that the sacrifice is to take place with Isaac's full knowledge and approval. Because, in his opinion, the victim's active involvement in God's plans is an issue of significance only for the Jewish dogma, the

---

[25] Cited in Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice', p. 107.
[26] A number of midrashic sources displaying these motifs are quoted in Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 228, n. 17-18; cf. Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', pp. 378-80; Calder also notes that worrying about blood spattering on Abraham's clothes may be an allusion to 'priestly ritual' (*ibid.*, p. 380) and that the donkey motif is possibly 'a distant reflex of a biblical detail'. *Ibid.*, p. 384.
[27] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 120.

'request to be bound' and the 'inform-accept' motifs have been included in the Islamic versions of the sacrifice for the same reason that the rest of the 'last requests' have been preserved, that is simply to '...heighten drama, pathos and emotional involvement'[28].

Most of the times the 'inform-accept' motif conforms to qur'anic phraseology. It only occurs once in a longer form[29] and once in a concise form (Ibn Ishaq)[30]. Also, in Ya'qubi there is no mention of a vision; instead, Abraham tells his son directly that it is God's order to sacrifice him. In view of the small number of variants, Calder suggests that there must have been various forms that this motif was worded, which forms, however, were in time corrected in accordance with the qur'anic text; the above mentioned examples are old narrative forms that survived the adjustments[31].

One of the questions that arise from the depiction of the story in the Qur'an is why -even though the Islamic law prescribes that unless the animal is a camel, it should be laid on its side facing Mecca[32]- Abraham throws his son on his forehead[33]. Looking at the *tafsīr* material, one finds two possible interpretations; according to the Suddi version, 'Abraham draws the knife on to Isaac's throat but it does not cut (3/3) because God had pounded a sheet of copper over Isaac's throat (2/3). So Abraham throws Isaac on to his forehead and [tries to] make a gash on the back of his neck'[34].

---

[28] Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', p. 379.
[29] Recorded in Suyūṭī, *al-durr al-manthūr fī'l-Tafsīr*, pp. 283-84 quoted in Calder, *ibid.*, p. 380.
[30] Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, Vol. 1, pp. 303-305 and Ibn Al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fī al-Ta'rīkh*, Vol. 1, pp. 111-12 cited in Calder, *ibid.*, p. 384.
[31] Calder, *ibid.*, p. 388.
[32] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 228, n. 20.
[33] In a version provided in Suyūṭī, *al-durr al-manthūr*, p. 283, lines 27ff., Calder has come across the description of a more likely way that a sacrifice would be performed; in it the victim says: 'Father, take me by the forelook and take up a position behind me lest I harm you when I feel the fire of the knife', Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', p. 400.
[34] Cited in Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice', p. 107; in all other versions the knife does not cut because God or Gabriel has turned it to its dull side. In the Ya'qubi version, Abraham turns the knife over three times. *Ibid.*

According to the Ibn Ishaq version, it is Ishmael who asks Abraham to 'throw him on to his forehead and not on his side, for Ishmael is afraid that compassion will overcome his father and prevent him from carrying out God's command (3/4)'[35]. In two of the four Shi'ite versions, Abraham replies that he will not add to God's orders (Q. & T.1) while in the Ibn Ishaq version, he expresses his gratitude to Ishmael for assisting him in fulfilling God's wish[36].

The theme of Abraham throwing his son onto his forehead is expressed in the Suddi version by the Arabic phrase '*talla-hu li-'l-jabīn*', *talla-hu* meaning 'he threw him down' and *jabīn*, 'forehead'. The term *jabīn*, however, used to have a second meaning i.e. 'hill' or 'mound'. Calder asserts that in its initial sacrifice narrative context this word was understood as 'hill' (in accordance with the biblical Mount Moriah) and that it was part of the motif that described the way that the sacrificial victim was positioned on the hill. In the Suddi version, however, as a result of the double meaning of *jabīn* and because of some difficulty in the understanding of the phrase *talla-hu*, the phrase '*talla-hu li-'l-jabīn*' was transferred from its previous motif to the 'execution-failure-reaction motif, where it proved useful as a possible reaction to initial failure'[37]; seeing that he is not able to cut his son's throat in the ordinary manner, Abraham throws him on the forehead[38].

---

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 108.
[36] In a version attributed to 'Ata' Ibn Yasar, before attempting the sacrifice, Abraham blesses his son (Suyūṭī, *al-durr al-manthūr fī'l-Tafsīr*, Vol. 5, p. 284, lines 5ff. quoted in Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', pp. 382-83); this motif may be, according to Calder, an allusion to 'priestly ritual' *ibid.*, p. 383.
[37] Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', p. 400.
[38] *Ibid.*, pp. 399-400; a theological interpretation of the scene is provided by Sherwood: 'With his forehead (*jabin*) to the ground...the gentle son takes up the typical posture assumed by a Muslim at *salat* and becomes the perfect example of the absolute emptying of the self for Sufis like Ibn 'Arabi.' Sherwood, 'Binding-Unbinding', p. 836.

In line with the above, Suddi's interpretation of Abraham's failure to execute the sacrifice is perceived by Calder as the case of a new motif that was created in an effort to explain a difficult phrase of a previous version. In particular, a supposedly seventh century Islamic tradition (attributed to Abu Salih) relates how, as soon as Abraham's knife touched the victim's throat, 'it (the knife) was transformed (inqalabat); it became copper (ṣārat nuḥāsan)'[39]. According to Calder, the term *qalaba* must have been introduced in the Arabic sacrifice narrative to deal with an exegetical problem caused by the ambiguity of the term *shāḥāh* in Genesis Rabba, 56:7, which reads: 'LAY NOT THY HAND UPON THE LAD...Where was the knife? Tears had fallen from the angels upon it and...'. The next word, *shāḥāh*, is a troublesome term that has more often than not been translated as 'melt'. The author asserts that initially the verb *qalaba* was introduced in the Arabic sacrifice tradition exactly in order to describe how the angels interfered with the effective use of the knife, as in Ya'qubi's version. However, because the verb *qalaba* could mean both 'transform' and 'turn over', it led to the creation of two traditions, exemplified in the Abu Salih and Ya'qubi versions. Later, when the narrators wanted to explain the reason why Abraham failed to sacrifice his son although he tried or why his son was thrown down on his forehead, the element of the copper was transferred from the knife to the victim creating, thus, the motif found in Suddi[40].

Another ambivalent verse in the qur'anic telling is the one that makes mention of a 'magnificent sacrifice' that substitutes for Abraham's son. Suddi clearly states that the qur'anic verse refers to the ram that was slaughtered in place of Isaac. Almost

---

[39] In Suyūṭī, *al-durr al-manthūr fī'l-Tafsīr*, Vol. 5, p. 283, lines 31-32, cited in Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', p. 400.
[40] *Ibid.*, pp. 400-402.

all versions make mention of the ram or sheep but they do not clearly identify it as the 'magnificent sacrifice'. It is only the second Tabarsi rendition that describes the ram as 'magnificent' and says that its meat was given to the poor.

The 'magnificent sacrifice' is considered to have been a ram by the majority of the early exegetes who usually credit Ibn 'Abbas with this view[41]; the minority cite al-Hasan with saying that it was a goat. Firestone argues that neither view could possibly originate in native Arabia because they are not in accord with what the pre-Islamic Arabs thought of as a great sacrifice. His argument is based on tradition and history; first, he calls our attention to 'Abd al-Muttalib's legend, in which the latter redeems his son with no less than 100 camels. He, then, makes reference to al-Kisa'i's rendition of the sacrifice[42], according to which, when Abraham is asked to make an offering, he slaughters a fat bull; when, later, he is asked to make a greater sacrifice, he slaughters a camel; an even greater sacrifice is demanded and when Abraham asks what can be greater than a camel, his son is pointed to him. It is, thus, startling that his son - the greatest sacrifice of all- is later on redeemed with nothing more than a ram or a goat. These two traditions in addition to Nöldeke's report that the sacrificing of sheep and goats was a regular practice among pre-Islamic Arabs[43]

---

[41] A tradition given on the authority of Ibn 'Abbas has it that the ram that was slaughtered instead of Abraham's son was the identical one that had been sacrificed by Adam's son, Abel (Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, pp. 129-30). Ibn 'Abbas is also quoted as saying that the ram grazed in paradise for forty autumns (*ibid.*, p. 130). In Jewish tradition, the ram is said to have been created on one of the first days of creation to serve as a substitute for Isaac (*ibid.*). Finally, Ibn 'Abbas is credited with the notion that two and not just one 'white prime horned rams' were offered instead of Ishmael but such an idea seems to have been born out of a hadith according to which the prophet Muhammad had once made such an offering (Al-Bukhārī, Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl b. Ibrāhīm b. al-Mughīra b. Bardizbah Abū 'Abdallāh al-Ju'fī, *Al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 6:236 cited in Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice of his Son', p. 270).

[42] Further reference to this rendition is made later on.

[43] Theodor Nöldeke, "Arabs (Ancient)" in James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh, 1908), p. 665 cited in Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 232, n. 22.

are enough to prove that the idea of the redemptive sacrifice as a ram or a goat was derived from a 'biblicist' environment[44].

According to a different interpretation of Q.37:107 (given by Hasan al-Basri) that does not conflict with the above, what is meant by the qur'anic verse in question is not only the animal that was offered instead of the *dhabīḥ* but also "...sacrifice according to his (Abraham's) religion, which is the sunna until the day of resurrection" and which should be followed by the Muslims[45]. Similarly, some modern commentators of the Qur'an tend to associate Q.37:107 with the sacrificial ritual that takes place during the Hajj. Muhammad Asad, for instance, argues that if the ransom referred to in the verse was a single ram, it would not have been described as 'tremendous' or 'mighty'. It, therefore, has to refer to the sacrificial ritual of the pilgrimage that was to take place every year by countless Muslims[46]. According to Farid, in addition to its Hajj implications, the verse may also be suggestive of the substitution of animal sacrifice for human sacrifice which he believes was prevalent in Abraham's time[47]. Some traditionists translate the term *'aẓīm* as 'accepted' (*mutaqabbal*) (attributed to Mujahid)[48] or simply 'fat'[49].

It seems that there must have been a long lasting debate as to whether the ransom beast was a ram (*kabsh*) or an antelope (*wa'il*). Bashear suggests that such a debate might reflect the gradual replacement of an old Arabic ritual which involved the offering of antelopes by an 'institutionalized sunna' of a growing religious community which realized that the rare antelope had to be substituted for a sort of

---

[44] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 131.
[45] Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, Vol. 1, p. 277 quoted in Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 269.
[46] Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar, Dar al-andalus, 1980), p. 688.
[47] Malik Ghulam Farid, *The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text and English Translation with Commentary* (Oxford, Alden Press, 1981, 1st ed. 1969), p. 969.
[48] Suyūṭī, *al-durr al-manthūr fī'l-Tafsīr*, Vol. 5, p. 284 cited in Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 270
[49] Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbas, Vol. 4, p. 342 cited in Bashear, *ibid.*

animal that was easier to get hold of. However, no evidence is there to support this line of reasoning which can only be treated as a speculation[50].

In the majority of the narratives, the sudden arrival of the ransom beast is preceded by the divine call to Abraham that the vision is fulfilled. Calder, however, quotes a version -attributed to 'Ata' Ibn Yasar- from which the call is missing; in it, Abraham, having made several unsuccessful attempts to slaughter his son, realizes for himself that 'This matter is from God' and immediately raises his head to see a mountain goat standing in front of him[51].

In the narrative type of stories that it occurs, the divine call to Abraham is expressed in the passive *nūdiya* (there was a call). That, according to Calder, was once the standard way that this motif was expressed. However, as the motif of the supernatural intervention would be included in a work that was said to be the actual word of God, it was changed to the active *nādaynā-hu* (we called out to him)[52]. Given that there is mention of God 'as subject of action' elsewhere in the narratives, Calder believes that 'Had they [i.e. the narratives] been dependent on a pre-existing Quranic text there would have been no reason to avoid mentioning the there explicitly identified caller'[53].

The mother's reaction is mentioned only in the Suddi version in which Sarah appears to be upset for not having been informed about the sacrifice[54].

---

[50] Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 269.
[51] The full narrative is cited from al-Hakim in Suyūṭī, *al-durr al-manthūr fī'l-Tafsīr*, pp. 283-84 cited in Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', p. 381-82.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 388.
[53] *Ibid.*, p. 389.
[54] According to a short comment attributed to al-Sha'bi, recorded in Tha'labī, *'Arā'is al-Majālis*, p. 78, Sarah died three days after she had learned about the near sacrifice (Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 124). In the Jewish versions of the motif, the one blamed for Sarah's death is Satan. *Ibid.*, p. 229, n. 37.

Firestone maintains that the legend of the sacrifice in the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition has originated in a 'biblicist' environment as a considerable number of motifs found in the Islamic versions parallel 'biblicist' motifs[55]. He also points to a certain tradition that -if authentic- shows that while motifs originating in the old-Arabic lore (e.g. the redemption of a man from his vow to sacrifice a human life with 100 camels) were 'well-imbedded in the minds of the traditionists of Ibn 'Abbas' day'[56], the sacrifice legend -because of its non-native origin- was not easily brought to mind. The story is attributed to Ibn 'Abbas who recounts that he once ordered a man to redeem himself from a vow he had made to slaughter himself by sacrificing 100 camels. Only as an afterthought, does Ibn 'Abbas say: 'If I had made the legal opinion with a ram, I would have been content that he sacrifice a ram'[57].

The author notes, however, that the legend was not wholly derived from 'biblicist' traditions but rather, the various 'biblicist' renditions of the story evolved into unique and authentic Muslim traditions which incorporate 'Biblicist, Islamic, and in the case of the Ibn Ishaq version, old Arab motifs'[58]. The Shi'ite version evolved especially to account for the pre-Islamic practice of slaughtering an animal during the pilgrimage[59].

---

[55] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 128.
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 130.
[57] Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 23, p. 86 and Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Vol. 4, p. 16 cited in Firestone, *ibid.*
[58] Firestone, *ibid.*, p. 120; e.g., the binding of the son, the manner that the victim is positioned and *Burāq*, respectively.
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 123.

### *c. Legends of the Prophets; Kisa'i's Version*

The saga of the sacrifice is one of three episodes in Islamic tradition which are illustrated with many imaginery details; the other two are the dispute between the patriarch and the idolater Nimrod and Hagar and Ishmael's journey to Mecca[60].

A large number of miraculous events are featured in the most extensive rendition of the sacrificial act, found in al-Kisa'i's collection of popular literature *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā*; in it we find the motifs of a. baby Isaac who falls prostrate in prayer as soon as he touches the ground, b. Isaac in the age of seven acting as a grown-up, advising his father on the way he should perform the sacrifice c. the knife and the ram having the power of speech and d. the heavenly sent white fire which consumes the ram[61].

In view of the fact that Kisa'i's unique version places emphasis on Abraham's compassionate nature by relating how he distributed the meat of the sacrificed animals among the poor, Caspi and Cohen suggest that this version is not really about the sacrifice but rather about the patriarchal qualities of Abraham[62]. Elsewhere, they mention that the narrative is 'an attempt to establish a precedent in regard to the 'id ul-aḍha'[63].

That the mediating angel in Kisa'i's version is not identified as Gabriel, despite the fact that Gabriel is a. the mediator in other Islamic versions of the sacrifice, b. the angel who reveals God's message to Muhammad and c. Kisa'i's 'preferred angel', indicates, according to Caspi and Cohen, that Kisa'i' has made use

---

[60] Rudi Paret, "Ibrahim" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, Brill, 1960-2004), Vol. 3, p. 981.
[61] See Al-Kisā'ī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiya*, pp. 150-52.
[62] Caspi&Cohen, *The Binding [Aqedah] and its Transformations in Judaism and Islam*, p. 111.
[63] *Ibid.*, p. 121.

of Jewish sources since the latter do not mention the angel by name, either. Of course, they do not exclude the possibility that he has drawn on the early -still unaffected by the Gabriel tradition- Islamic sources[64].

The authors also draw comparisons between: a. the motif of the speaking ram in Kisa'i' and the midrashic motif of the ram that is running towards Abraham to take the place of Isaac[65], b. Abraham mistaking the divine voice that is asking him to show compassion for Isaac for the mountain (Kisa'i') and Abraham who is not convinced by the angel that God does not require the sacrifice anymore and is willing to stop only at God's command (Midrash)[66]; both motifs, as said by the authors, show Abraham's great determination[67] and c. the sheep introducing itself as the same one that was sacrificed by Abel, Adam's son (Kisa'i') and the tradition according to which Abraham offered the sheep on the same altar where Abel, Cain and Noah once offered sacrifice[68].

Calder comments on that part of Kisa'i's narrative that speaks about Isaac's 'last requests'. He observes that Kisa'i's version includes an unusually large number of 'last requests' motifs and notes that there is a contradiction between two of them. Specifically, while Isaac's first wish is to have his shirt removed lest Sarah see it and grieves his death for a long time, a few lines below he asks that his shirt be taken to Sarah as she may draw comfort from it. Calder explains the disagreement between the two motifs as follows; in order to create a dramatic atmosphere, the story teller gathered all the 'last requests' motifs that he was familiar with. Having forgotten to

---

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 119.
[65] Motif in *Midrash ha-Gadol*, 35 (ed.) M. Margulies (Jerusalem, 1967) cited in *ibid.*, p. 118.
[66] Motif in *Midrash Tanhuma Horeb* (Berlin, 1924) cited in *ibid.*, p. 119.
[67] Caspi&Cohen, *The Binding [Aqedah]*, pp. 119-20.
[68] *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (*PDRE*), trans. Gerald Friedlander (London, New York, 1916), 31 cited in *ibid.*, p. 120.

mention blood at the first one, he fails to draw a clear distinction between the function of a piece of clothing as a reminder of the slaughter and its function as a comfort[69].

## 2.3. The Identity of the Sacrificial Son in Islam

### 2.3.1. Introduction

Not having named the young man whose life was to be taken, the qur'anic version of Abraham's sacrifice occasioned innumerable attempts by scholars who tried to substantiate their contentions apropos of the son's identity.

Most Muslims, today, assume that the intended victim was Ishmael. LaHurd gives two modern-day illustrative examples that attest to the fact that the vast majority of Muslims see the sacrifice of Adha as a rite in remembrance of their patriarch Abraham who yielded to the divine command when God demanded that he sacrifice his son and that according to popular belief, the *dhabīḥ* is Ishmael. The first one is that during interviews that were conducted among the Muslim population of Damascus in 1981, all interviewees who spoke about the meaning of 'Id Al-Adha referred to Abraham and Ishmael's obedience. The second example has to do with 'a popular cloth print…of a blindfolded Abraham and his son' in the Damascene market; besides a number of ayas from sura 37, printed beneath the drawing are the following words: 'This is the story of Abraham, the specially chosen, the grandfather [or ancestor] of the Arabs, with his good son Ishmael.'[70]

---

[69] Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', p. 379.
[70] Carol C. LaHurd, 'One God, One Father: Abraham in Judaism, Christianity and Islam' in *Dialog*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (1990), p. 22.

Likewise, despite the fact that in 1933 Westermarck reports that many Moroccan Muslims still believe that the *dhabīḥ* is Isaac[71], some sixty years later, in 1989, Combs-Schilling reports that no Moroccan Muslim she has interviewed thinks of Isaac as the *dhabīḥ*[72]. Naturally, suspicion concentrates round the first statement given Westermarck's orientalist attitude as well as the fact that oral traditions do not simply vanish within half a century.

### 2.3.2. *Dhabīḥ* Traditions and Arguments in Favour of One or the Other Son

#### *a. Two Ishmael Dhabīḥ Narratives*

Al-Tabari (d. 923AD), the distinguished Muslim scholar of the tenth century, was the first one to record the traditions which argue for the one or the other son as the *dhabīḥ*. In his *History* there are two narratives that make direct reference to Ishmael as the sacrifice. One of them relates that the Umayyad caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz was asked who the intended victim was; to solve the mystery, he called for a Jewish scholar, who had converted to Islam; the latter answered:

> 'Ishmael, by God, O Prince of the Believers! The Jews know that, but they are envious of you, O Arabs, because it was your father who was named in God's command and to whom God ascribed such merit for his steadfastness in obeying God's command. They reject that and claim that it was Isaac because Isaac was their father.' [73]

The other story, which suggests that Ishmael was the son prepared for sacrifice, reads:

---

[71] Edward Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals in Mohammedan Civilisation* (London, Macmillan&Co), p. 162.
[72] M. Elaine Combs-Schilling, *Sacred Performances: Islam, Sexuality, and Sacrifice* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 320-21.
[73] Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, trans. William M. Brinner as *The History of al-Ṭabarī* (State University of New York Press, 1987), Vol. 2 (Prophets and Patriarchs), p. 88.

"...We were with Mu'āwiyah b. Abī Sufyān and the subject of the victim, Ishmael or Isaac, came up. You have come to a person who knows the answer. We were with the Messenger of God when a man came to him and said, "O Messenger of God! Repeat to me the knowledge God has given you, O son of the two victims!" The Messenger of God laughed and they said to him, 'Who are the two victims, O Messenger of God?" He said, 'When 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib was ordered to dig Zamzam, he vowed that if God would make it easy for him, he would sacrifice one of his sons. The choice fell upon 'Abdāllah, but his maternal uncles prevented it, saying, "Ransom your son with one hundred camels!" So he did that, and Ishmael was the other victim."[74]

The first tradition, as Bashear remarks, is a polemical statement that expresses national concerns. It is obviously late as it belongs to the Umayyad period. National motives are also expressed in a few verses ascribed to Abu Sa'id al-Darir in which it is alleged that the merit earned by Ishmael on account of his self-offering was shared by the Arab prophet Muhammad[75].

As for the second tradition, although it is given on the authority of one of the prophet's companions, Mu'awiya Abi Sufyan, it contains a typical mark of a later addition; the narrative is about Muhammad's grandfather and 'only refers to Ishmael in the last sentence as a kind of afterthought'[76]. Concerning this tradition, Bashear makes mention of Ibn Kathir, Sibt b. al-Jawzi and Suyuti who assess its *isnād* as weak and, therefore, reject it[77]. A brief reference to the same tradition which simply states that the prophet said '*anā ibn dhabīḥayn*'[78] has similarly been characterized as strange[79]. What is more, this phrase is never seen when the story of 'Abd al-

---

[74] *Ibid.*, p. 83.
[75] Zurqānī, *Sharḥ al-Mawāhib* (Cairo, 1326 H.), Vol. 1, p. 99 cited in Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', pp. 266-67.
[76] Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice', p. 120.
[77] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Vol. 4, p. 18; Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-Zamān* (Beirut, 1985), Vol. 1, pp. 298-99; Suyūṭī, *al-durr al-manthūr*, Vol. 5, p. 281 cited in Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 245; the *isnād* is: [Isma'il b. 'Ubayd b. Abi Karima (an Umayyad *mawlā*, d.240 H)→ 'Umar b. 'Abd al-Rahim al-Khattabi (unknown) ) → 'Abdullah b. Muhammad al-'Utbi (a descendant of 'Utba b. Abi Sufyan) → 'Abdullah b. Sa'id al-Sunsbihi] cited in *ibid.*
[78] (I am the son of two intended sacrifices).
[79] Zurqānī (*Sharḥ al-Mawāhib*, p. 99) cites Zayla'i and Ibn Hajar as saying it is '*gharīb*' (strange), quoted in Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 245, n. 9.

Muttalib's vow is related on its own despite the fact that almost all the sources and authorities on the story have been reported as having at least one opinion as to the identity of the sacrificial victim[80].

### *b. The Isaac Dhabīḥ Narratives*

Of the pro-Isaac narratives, there are three that incidentally identify Isaac as the offering while relating a different story. In one of them, Joseph gives his genealogy to a king and uses the honorific title *dhabīḥ Allāh* for his grandfather Isaac[81]; in another, God explains to Moses why he is called the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; concerning Isaac, God says that he earned merit for offering to be sacrificed[82]. A third narrative reads: 'A certain man boasted to Ibn Mas'ūd, 'I am so-and-so son of so-and-so, son of noble elders.' And 'Abdallāh [Ibn Mas'ūd] said: 'This is Joseph b. Jacob, son of Isaac the victim of God, son of Abraham the Friend of God.''[83]

In regards to the pro-Isaac narratives in question, Firestone argues that, unlike the pro-Ishmael stories, these narratives are early. The proof of that is that they all share the same style (unlike the pro-Ishmael ones which are different from one another) which reminds us of the formulaic citation of the Israelite patriarchs 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob…' in the Jewish prayers. The difference between the Jewish recitations and these Islamic traditions is that the former cite the

---

[80] Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 246.
[81] Tabari, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, p. 86.
[82] *Ibid.*, p. 85.
[83] *Ibid.*, p. 84; Bashear cites a different version of the third tradition according to which, when asked about the most honourable person, Muhammad said: 'He is Yūsuf, son of Ya'qūb…son of Isḥāq, *dhabīḥ al-lāh*, son of Ibrāhīm…' quoted in Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 247. The author mentions, however, that this version has been discredited because according to its *isnād* it was transmitted from Ibn Mas'ud by his son 'Amir (Abu 'Ubayda) who was a kid when his father died, hence not capable of transmitting from him. *Ibid.*, pp. 248-49.

patriarchs starting with the eldest one because they provide a sacred history while the later begin with the latest descendant because they provide a genealogy. Also, the Islamic traditions use honorific titles: *khalīl Allāh* for Abraham and *dhabīḥ Allāh* for Ishmael or Isaac[84].

Finally, there is a legend that seems to originate with Ka'b al-Ahbar, which makes direct reference to Isaac as the sacrifice: as soon as Isaac is redeemed, God promises that He will grant him one wish; Isaac says:

> 'O God, I pray to you that you grant me [this]: When any person in any era who does not attribute any partner to You meets You [at the gates of Heaven], allow him to enter Paradise' (3/4); or 'Lord, I ask that you do not punish anyone who believes in You' (1/4) [85]

A different, allegedly prophetical version is given on the authority of Abu Hurayra;

> 'God allowed me to choose between having Him forgive half of the Muslim people, or having Him respond to my intercession on their behalf. I chose my own intercession, for I hoped [that would bring God's] forgiveness for most of the Muslim people. If a pious Muslim dies after me, then let my prayer hurry [on his behalf]. When God comforted Isaac from the terror of the Sacrifice, it was said to him: 'O Isaac, ask and you will be granted!' So he said: 'O He who has my soul in His hand, will You hasten it [into Paradise] before Satan incites it to evil? O God, whoever dies and does not associate any partner with You, forgive him and bring him into Paradise!'[86]

Concerning the second version and its *isnād* of authenticity ['Abd al-Rahman b. Zayd b. Aslam (d. 182 AH) → his father, Zayd (d. 136 AH) → 'Ata' b. Yasar (d.

---

[84] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 141.
[85] Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 23: 82-83 and *Ta'rīkh*, p. 294; Ibn Al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fī al-Ta'rīkh*, p. 110; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Vol. 4, p. 15 cited in Firestone, 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice', p. 114.
[86] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Vol. 4, p. 16; Ibn Kathir (14th c.) claims that the Islamic traditions portraying Isaac as the sacrificial victim lack reliability for they are all based on a single weak source, Ka'b al-Ahbar, the Muslim scholar who converted to Islam during the caliphate of Umar and according to Ibn Kathir was passing many corrupted traditions of Jewish origin (*Isrā'īliyyāt*) to the Muslims, Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Vol. 4, p. 17 cited in Firestone, 'Abraham's Son', p. 116.

103 AH) → Abu Hurayra], in view of the fact that the last two chains have been mentioned elsewhere as holding the pro-Ishmael view, Bashear asserts that the first two chains must have stretched the *isnād* backwards - in order words, Zayd b. Aslam and his son attributed the pro-Ishaq view to 'Ata' and Abu Hurayra[87].

Reuven Firestone holds that this Isaac tradition was born out of either the feeling that the anguish that the intended victim had to go through was unfair, hence, he should be recompensed or the feeling that the latter earned so much merit for having consented to the act that he deserved a reward[88]. The author categorizes this particular tradition as 'biblicist' on the grounds that none of its renditions mention Ishmael as the victim, that Isaac rather than Abraham is praised for the sacrifice and that the theme of atonement by means of voluntary sacrifice is Christian and Jewish[89].

***c. 'Umayya b. Abi al-Salt***

The theme of Abraham's sacrifice is also rendered in a poem attributed to a contemporary of Muhammad, 'Umayya b. Abi al-Salt:[90]

> Abraham, the one who carries out the vow to satisfaction, and the bearer of easy-burning firewood / For his firstborn, could not desist from him or see himself in a company of enemies. / "O my son! I have consecrated you to God as a slaughtered kid, but be steadfast; a ransom for you is ready. / Bind the fetters; I shall not turn from the knife the head of the manacled captive." For he has a knife which is quick in the flesh a cutting edge curved like a crescent moon. / While he was taking his garments from him his Lord ransomed him with the best of rams. "So take this and release your son; verily I do not dislike what you two have done." / A God-fearing father and the other, his offspring; they fled from him on hearing, "Do it!" / People often are unhappy about a thing which brings relief, like the untying of bonds.

---

[87] Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 248; the author mentions that some sources [he does not name the sources though] say that the poet Firazdaq has credited Abu Hurayra with the pro-Ishmael view. *Ibid.*, n. 24. According to the material Firestone has studied, on the other hand, Abu Hurayra appears to support only Isaac as the victim. Firestone, 'Abraham's Son', p. 128.
[88] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 133.
[89] *Ibid.*, p. 134.
[90] Tabari, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, pp. 96-97.

'Umayya b. Abi al-Salt was one of the *ḥunafā'*, i.e. the few monotheists who did not identify themselves as Christians or Jews. Although he was one of Muhammad's rivals and apparently never joined Islam, Muhammad is reported to have said that 'Umayya almost embraced Islam in his poetry[91]. What is most interesting about his poem is that before Abraham proceeds to perform the sacrifice, an assumption is made that Abraham's son will be freed[92]. Firestone who gives a different translation of the poem than that of William Brinner, translates the verse that describes the knife 'For he has a knife which is quick in the flesh a cutting edge curved like a crescent moon' as such 'Its blade reflected the flesh [of the] slave boy curved over like a crescent.' and notes that in the case that the poem is authentic, it shows that at least a few early sources thought of Ishmael as the near sacrifice[93]. On the other hand, Bashear's understanding of the verse is apparently different to Firestone's as the former characterizes Abi al-Salt's position as 'an uncommitted one' precisely because -as Bashear believes- the poet does not take a stand on the identity of the *dhabīḥ*[94].

### 2.3.3. Tabari's and Other Exegetes' Arguments

Tabari himself puts forward his arguments in support of Isaac; he notes that all qur'anic announcements of an impending birth of a child refer to Isaac; therefore verse 101 of sura 37 in which Abraham is given the good tidings of a son must also

---

[91] Uri Rubin, 'Ḥanifiyya and Ka'ba: an Inquiry into the Arabian pre-Islamic Background of din Ibrahim' in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, Vol. 13 (1990), pp. 94-96; see hadith in Muhammed Ibn Ismaiel Al-Bukhari, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans. Muhammad M. Khan, (Lahore, Kazi Publications, 1983-1986), Vol. 8, 73:168.
[92] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 127.
[93] *Ibid.*, p. 231, n. 54; for the full translation see *ibid.*, pp. 126-27.
[94] See Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 267.

refer to Isaac[95]. To support his case he points to Q.11:71 '...But We gave her glad tidings of Isaac, and after him, of Jacob.' He also notes that 'the good news of a boy ready to suffer and forbear' in Q.37:101 comes as an answer to Abraham's prayer in Q.37:100. That prayer was made when Abraham left his people to move to Syria, i.e. before he met Hagar and had Ishmael[96].

One of the arguments (given on the authority of Ibn Ishaq) cited in favour of Ishmael as the intended victim is that verse 37:112 at the end of the sacrifice narrative 'and We gave him the good news of Isaac -a prophet- one of the righteous' is an indication that Isaac was born only after the ordeal was over. Tabari, however, counters this argument claiming that verse 37:112 is not a birth announcement. It is, rather, a statement that Isaac was given prophetic status due to his perfect obedience[97].

According to another pro-Ishmael theory, Abraham had been promised that Isaac would have a son before he had his vision about the sacrifice[98]. Thus, if God had commanded for Isaac to be sacrificed, He would have contradicted His word which is theologically impossible. Therefore, the victim must have been Ishmael[99]. Tabari's not so convincing response to this argument is that since according to the Qur'an God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac when he was able to walk, 'it is conceivable that Jacob could have been born to him before his father was commanded to sacrifice him'[100].

---

[95] The same argument is still used today; Gilchrist, e.g., draws attention to the fact that when the Qur'an refers to a promised son to Abraham, this is always Isaac. John Gilchrist, *Millat-A-Ibrahim: the True Faith of Abraham* (Sheffield, UK, FFM Publications, 1992), p. 12.
[96] Tabari, *The History*, p. 89.
[97] Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Vol. 23, p. 289 cited in Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 136.
[98] See Q.11:71.
[99] Tabari, *The History*, p. 88.
[100] *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

Al-Suhayli (d. 1185AD) attempts to contradict the promise theory based on an interesting grammatical analysis. In accordance with the rules of the Arabic grammar, he argues that for Q.11:71 to have the meaning 'We gave her the good news of Isaac and after Isaac (We gave her the good news) of Jacob', the preposition (بـ) used before 'Isaac' should have been repeated before 'Jacob'; the fact that it is not repeated shows that the second part of the verse 'and after Isaac, Jacob' is in the accusative case and thus comprises a different sentence meaning 'We gave to Isaac Jacob'. Al-Suhayli then argues for the possibility that the two sentences have been two separate parts of revelation given at different times; the part concerning Isaac's birth before and the part concerning Jacob's birth after the sacrifice[101].

Al-Zamakhshari (d. 1143-4AD), in order to prove that the boy in the sacrifice story is Ishmael, ties the meaning of the word *ḥalīm* 'ready to suffer and forbear' in Q.37:101 to *min aṣṣabirīn* 'practising patience and constancy' in verse 102 of the same sura -both terms referring to the sacrificial victim- and points out that the last phrase occurs once more in the Qur'an in connection with Ishmael (i.e. in Q.21:85 'And (remember) Ismā'īl, Idrīs, and Dhu al Kifl, all (men) of constancy and patience') but never in connection with Isaac[102].

Finally, there is a tradition according to which the horns of the ram that was offered in place of Abraham's son were seen hanging inside the Ka'ba. To some Muslim exegetes, this tradition indicates that Ishmael was the victim since Isaac never entered the Hijaz. It is reported by Safiyyah bint Shaybah that:

'A woman from Bani Sulaym... asked 'Uthmān [bin Ṭalḥah], 'Why did the Prophet call you?' He said, 'The Messenger of Allāh said to me, "I saw the horns of the ram

---

[101] Cited in Ibn Kathīr, *Ta'rīkh*, p. 234 quoted in Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 138.
[102] Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf* , Vol. 3, p. 350, cited in Firestone, *ibid*., p. 137.

when I entered the House [i.e., the Ka'bah], and I forgot to tell you to cover them up; cover them up, for there should not be anything in the House which could distract the worshipper.'"[103]

Similarly, there is a statement that an old woman assured Ibn Jurayj that she had seen the two horns as well as a tradition in which Ibn Jurayj simply 'thinks' that 'Abd al-Hamid b. Shayba b. 'Uthman told him that his father had seen them[104]. Al-Sha'bi claims to have seen the horns of the ram hanging in the Ka'ba himself[105]. Furthermore, according to an Ibn 'Abbas tradition, not only the two horns but the entire head of the ram was hanging from the roof gutter of the Ka'ba and had become very dry[106].

With reference to such reports Tabari comments that there is no reason why the horns could not have been transferred from Syria to Mecca[107]. Actually, there is a testimony, coming from the family of 'Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammad b. Mansur b. Thabit who were from Jerusalem. It reads as follows:

'a unique pearl, the two horns of the kabsh of Ibrāhīm and the crown of Kisrā were hanging by a chain in the middle of the Dome of the Rock during the reign of 'Abd al-Malik. When the caliphate passed to Banū Hāshim [i.e. the Abbasids –S. B.] they transferred them to the Ka'ba'[108].

The absence of pre-Islamic references to horns hanging inside the Ka'ba together with the fact that the traditionists credited with these reports are not always

---

[103] Ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr*, p. 276.
[104] Al-Azraqī, Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Aḥmad, *Akhbār Makka* (Guttingen, 1275 H.), p. 156 cited in Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 274.
[105] Ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr*, p. 277.
[106] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Vol. 4, p. 15 cited in Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 274.
[107] Tabari, *The History*, p. 90.
[108] Shams al-Dīn, *Itḥāf al-Akhiṣṣā* (Cairo, 1984), Vol. 1, p. 224 quoted in Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 275.

early is enough to prove to Firestone that the account is Islamic (as opposed to old Arabic and biblicist)[109]

[109] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 143.

## Chapter 3: Modern Interpretations on the Evolution of the Sacrifice Narrative in Islam and the Identity of the Victim

### 3.1. Extra-Qur'anic Evidence of a Shift in the Identity of the *Dhabīḥ*

Having explored the aforementioned Tabari traditions as well as a large number of *dhabīḥ* traditions that are included in the works of other classical Muslim exegetes, Firestone concludes that originally in the Muslim world the intended victim was considered to be Isaac; tradition started shifting from the early second century AH- due to the importance that Ishmael was beginning to have and the realization that Isaac's figure was not indispensable to Islam. The new motif was firmly established by the end of the third century AH[1]. The scholar reaches his conclusion based on the following facts: Firstly, the first exegete who refers to the *dhabīḥ*, Ibn Hanbal (d. 855-6 AD), names Isaac as the intended victim[2]. Secondly, the exegetes' records which list the supporters of Isaac and Ishmael [the first one to make such a list was Ibn Qutayba (d. 889-90 AD)] show that 'thirty nine early traditionists are quoted 131 times as supporting Isaac in the role of intended Sacrifice. Twenty-nine are quoted 133 times in support of Ishmael. Ten famous and respected early traditionists…are quoted variously as believing it was Isaac and that it was Ishmael'. It is, thus, evident that Isaac is perceived as the offering by the majority of the early traditionists[3]. Thirdly, as it has already been noted, the legends that mention Isaac as the *dhabīḥ Allāh* are earlier than the legends that mention Ishmael. What is more, the context for the Isaac legends is most of the times analogous to the context of their counterpart in

---

[1] Firestone, 'Abraham's Son', p. 129.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 125; although Ibn Hanbal cannot be regarded as an early exegete and despite the fact that all the 'Abraham in Mecca' traditions he provides associate Abraham with Ishmael, he does not cite any pro-Ishmael sacrifice traditions. *Ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 126; see *ibid.*, p. 127 for Firestone's complete list of names.

the Bible and the Jewish commentaries[4]. Finally, while early exegetes take Isaac as the chosen one for the sacrifice, by Tabari's era, the view that Ishmael was the intended one has become predominant and after his death, exegetes -even the Shi'ite Tabarsi[5]- unanimously hold that Ishmael is the proper reading.

As for the fact that conflicting views on the matter are often ascribed to the same traditionist or Muhammad himself, Firestone offers the following explanation: an 'Isaac school' and an 'Ishmael school' formed and each one was trying to support its view by attributing it to the best respected early traditionists. It sometimes happened that both schools made use of the same traditionists[6]. To give an example, Ibn 'Abbas- the best respected authority- is credited with both traditions depicting Isaac as the victim and traditions depicting Ishmael as the victim[7]. Firestone argues that in all probability Ibn 'Abbas understood Isaac to have been the chosen son for the sacrifice as he was Ka'b's student but because of his reputation, Ishmael supporters attributed their traditions to him despite the fact that he was already on record as an Isaac supporter. Eventually, the Ishmael traditions ascribed to him outnumbered the Isaac ones by far (35 by 10)[8]. Ishmael supporters also selected authorities who were not ascribed any traditions concerning the *dhabīḥ*. 'They would therefore be immune from elimination for supporting both sons'. As expected, because of their prominence, these authorities were later credited with some Isaac traditions as well[9].

---

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 129.
[5] Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-Bayān*, Vol. 23, pp. 74-75 cited in Firestone, 'Abraham's Son', p. 115; in their majority, Shiite sources support the Isaac case.
[6] Firestone, *ibid.*, p. 126.
[7] Other traditionists cited as supporting both Isaac and Ishmael are: Sa'id b. Jubayr, al-Suddi, Mujahid, al-Hasan al-Basri, and 'Ali (Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 135).
[8] Firestone, 'Abraham's Son', pp. 126 and 128.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 128.

According to Doukhan, Firestone's position that Ishmael sacrifice legends are later than the Isaac ones can also be partly proven by the fact that Sa'adya Gaon (d. 942 AD), the Jewish contemporary of Tabari (d. 923 AD) who was often engaged in polemics, does not seem to know of any disputes concerning the identity of the sacrificial son[10].

Similarly, the absence of any disagreements concerning the identity of the son from the earliest works proves to Goldziher that it was a common belief among the first Muslims that Isaac was the victim. Accordingly, he believes that Muhammad intended Isaac in the qur'anic version of the sacrifice. Yet, the pro-Ishmael view 'eventually emerged victorious'[11]. Bashear, on the other hand, maintains that Goldziher's view about the prophet and the first Muslims holding Isaac as the offering could only be accepted if the sources he refers to belong to the period before the *dhabīḥ* traditions started being attributed to the prophet and other early authorities[12].

Finally, Caspi makes reference to an allegedly eighth century rabbinic source, *Pirke de R. Eliezer*, which relates a tradition according to which, knowing that Isaac was about to be slaughtered, Ishmael and Eliezer were fighting over who would inherit Abraham and another one in which Ishmael attempts to kill Isaac by shooting an arrow at him[13]. These narratives, says the author, could be indicative of the fact that around the eighth century Muslims had started speaking of Ishmael as the

---

[10] Jacques Doukhan, 'The Akedah at the "Crossroad": its Significance in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue' in Frederic Manns (ed.), *The Sacrifice of Isaac in the Three Monotheistic Religions*- Proceedings of a Symposium on the Interpretations of the Scriptures held in Jerusalem (Franciscan Printing Press, Jerusalem, March 16-17, 1995), p. 170.
[11] Goldziher, *Die Richtungen Der Islamischen Koranauslegung*, p. 79.
[12] Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 277.
[13] PDRE 31 and 30 cited in Caspi, *Take Now Thy Son: the Motif of the Akedah (Binding) in Literature*, pp. 89 and 90 respectively.

sacrificial victim, instigating, thus, a Jewish reaction[14]. Given, however, that the author lived under the Muslim rule,[15] it seems to me that such traditions are simply the expression of the author's resentment against the Arab occupiers through the negative presentation of Ishmael who is known as their father.

### 3.2. Arguments in Support of One of the Other Son as the Sacrifice based on Scripture

To support their case, those who argue for Ishmael as the sacrificed one, point to verse 112 of sura 37 'and We gave him the good news of Isaac -a prophet- one of the Righteous'[16]. The fact that Isaac's birth in sura 37 is for the first time mentioned in verse 112 gives the impression that the previous verses (100-107), which also talk about a son of Abraham who was to be sacrificed, refer to Ishmael[17]. And because sura 37 dates back to the second Meccan period, Paret claims that it would look as if the first Muslim community is aware of the connection between Abraham and Ishmael in the years prior to Hijra. This awareness could be further supported by Q.14:39, which belongs to the third Meccan period and in which Abraham gives thanks to God for giving him Ishmael and Isaac[18].

Beck does not take a stand on sura 37; he asserts, however, that Q.14:39 is a Medina insertion and hence, there is no link between Abraham and Ishmael during the Mecca years. He even understands the name of Ishmael to have been a later addition

---

[14] Caspi, *ibid.*, p. 90.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] See, for example, 'Amer Yunis, 'The Sacrifice of Abraham in Islam' in Frederic Manns (ed.), *The Sacrifice of Isaac in the Three Monotheistic Religions* (Franciscan Printing Press, Jerusalem, 1995); Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur-an: containing Arabic Text with English Translation and Commentary* (Lahore, India, Ahmadiyya anjuman-i-ishάat-i-Islam, 1920), p. 873; E. M. Wherry, *A Comprehensive Commentary on the Qur'an*, Vol. 3 (London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner&Co Ltd, 1896), p. 369.
[17] Bell, 'The Sacrifice of Ishmael', p. 29; Naudé, 'Isaac Typology in the Koran', p. 125; Paret, "Isma'il", Vol. 4, p. 184.
[18] Paret, *ibid.*

to verses 125 and 127 of sura 2 albeit chronologically these verses belong beyond doubt to the Medina period[19].

Likewise, Naudé asserts that because in the early middle Meccan period -when sura 37 was handed down to Muhammad- there are no other references in which Ishmael is related to Abraham, a reference to Ishmael would have been premature[20]. She argues for the replacement of Isaac by Ishmael once more value had been attached to the story seeing that it could be called upon to legitimize pre-Islamic Arabic sacrificial practices and because of the use of the word *aslamā* in Q.37:103. The prophet and the Arabs were said to be Ishmael's descendants. Therefore, it would be awkward and unexplainable that Isaac had played such a prominent part amongst them[21].

With regard to the significance of the sacrificial victim prior to the shift, Naudé believes that Isaac's sacrifice was not included in the Islamic scripture accidentally; on the contrary, it served a practical purpose from the very beginning of the Islamic religion. In particular, she suggests an Isaac typology in Q.4:157, the thematic of which is the 'fallacy' concerning the crucifixion of Jesus. According to a theory produced to account for the denial of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus in the Qur'an, in an effort to have those qualities of Jesus that were considered to be divine 'relativated', Muhammad kept referring to other prophets who were endowed with the same special gifts. As there was no antecedent in the Jewish and Christian traditions of an individual who had died as a martyr and had been brought back to life,

---

[19] Edmund Beck, 'Die Gestalt des Abraham am Wendepunkt der Entwicklung Muhammeds' in *Le Museon*, Vol. 65 (1952), pp. 80-83.
[20] Naudé, 'Isaac Typology in the Koran', p. 125.
[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 128-29.

the crucifixion and resurrection could not be 'relativated' and, thus, had to be denied[22].

Naudé draws on the theory but does not fully embrace it. According to her own hypothesis, Muhammad did find an antecedent of the crucifixion of Jesus in the sacrifice of Isaac. She argues that in the same way that Abraham's life prefigures Muhammad's life in the Qur'an, Isaac's life prefigures Jesus' life. What the Arab prophet has, then, in mind in Q.4:157 is the sacrifice of Isaac that never took place and the substitute that secured Abraham's progeny through Isaac. Likewise, the fact that the number of Christians increased rapidly after the alleged crucifixion was a proof to Muhammad that Jesus was not killed by the Jews[23].

The interrelation between the two men is, according to Naudé, further indicated in the parallel stories of the announcement of their miraculous birth by angels, the initial doubts that the mothers had and also in the common epithets given to them in different qur'anic passages (*ghulām*[24] –in the context of the miraculous birth-, prophet, servant of God etc)[25].

Richard Bell has suggested that verses 102-107 of sura 37, which comprise the actual sacrifice narrative, were added to the earlier Meccan verses 108-11 and that verse 101 'so we gave him the good news of a boy ready to suffer and forbear' was initially meant for Isaac but as Ishmael's figure became more prominent than his brother's during the Medina period, it was taken as referring to Ishmael and verses

---

[22] J. M. S. Baljon, 'Warrom verloochende de Koran Jezus' Kruisdood', pp. 337-42 quoted in Naudé, *ibid.*, p. 124.
[23] Naudé, 'Isaac Typology in the Koran', p. 124.
[24] Q.51:28; 15:53; 37:101. The term appears in the Qur'an to refer to only four figures: Joseph (Q.12:19), John (Q.3:40; 19:7, 8), Jesus (Q.19:19, 20) and Isaac (Q.15:53; 51:28).
[25] Naudé, 'Isaac Typology in the Koran', pp. 127-28.

112-13 were added. The omission of Isaac's name in 99-101, though, seems to have taken part unintentionally, as the style of verses is most probably Meccan[26].

The author bases his argument on a detailed analysis of the structure of the text. He maintains that there is enough evidence that hints at the supplementary nature of verses 102-7. First, the fact that Abraham's story is particularly long compared to the rest of the prophets' stories narrated in succession in sura 37 arouses suspicion about possible additions. What is more, verses 112-13 which end the account of Abraham's sacrifice are a reference to Isaac and, thus, do not harmonize well with the ordinary fashion that the stories of Noah, Moses and Aaron and Elijah close, i.e. by the following quatrain:

'We have left upon him among those of later times (the saying): "Peace be upon...." Thus do We reward those who do well; Verily he is one of Our servants believing.'[27]

Not only the typical quatrain shows up in verses 108-11 whereas it would come better after verse 101 but also, surprisingly enough, the blessing does not include the son although the preceding section deals both with Abraham and his son.

Finally, although throughout the narrative Abraham is simply referred to as a follower of Noah and not as a prophet, Isaac, in verse 112 is called a prophet. Bell asserts that the word *nabī* (prophet) was a loan from the Jews of Medina who are also

---

[26] Naudé, who as we saw clearly believes that the Arab prophet had Isaac in mind, calls attention to the fact that in the Qur'an, it is not uncommon to allude to a person without mentioning his name. Naudé, 'Isaac Typology in the Koran', p. 125. An example of Naudé's observation can be traced in N. Stillman, 'The story of Cain and Abel in the Qur'ān and the Muslim Commentators: Some Observations' in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol.19 (1974), pp. 231-39. Here, the author mentions that Cain and Abel in the Qur'an are simply referred to as Adam's two sons (p. 233).

[27] Bell's translation.

the people implied in verse 113, which reads: 'Of their posterity are some who do well, and some who wrong themselves manifestly.'[28]

According to Bell, the reason why the narrative in question must have been added to the initial episode was to legitimize the sacrifices that took place during the Hajj; Muhammad, no longer on friendly terms with the Jews and having ended his relationship with the Christians, found support in the 'religion of Abraham', which he believed was being practiced by the Arabs before the emergence of polytheism. In the process of restoring the Abrahamic faith, Muhammad connected the building of the Ka'ba and the pilgrimage to Abraham, who was through his first son the ancestor of the Arabs. Thus, here, the phrase 'When he had reached the stage of running with him'[29] seems to imply the running between Safa and Marwa as part of the rites of the pilgrimage, since the word used in verse 102 for 'running' is the technical word for the rite in question[30]. However, the verse is not necessarily a 'rather curious and unnecessary statement' as the author believes[31] but it could be a pointer towards the fact that the boy was old enough to decide for himself.

Some Muslim authors who hold Ishmael to have been the son selected for the sacrifice also draw on the actual text of Genesis in which Abraham is ordered to offer his 'only son' Isaac[32]. Accordingly, they claim that before its distortion, the Torah mentioned Ishmael as the sacrificial victim since *he* was the firstborn and Isaac the second son[33]; but the Jews substituted Isaac for Ishmael for the reason that Ibn Kathir

---

[28] Bell's translation.
[29] Q.37:102 (Bell's translation).
[30] Bell, 'The Sacrifice of Ishmael', pp. 29-31.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[32] Genesis 22:2, 12, 16.
[33] See Yunis, 'The Sacrifice of Abraham in Islam', p. 150; Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, p. 1150, n. 4101; Farid, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 968; Farid believes that except for the substitution in the Bible of Isaac for Ishmael, there was also a substitution of Marwah -one of the two hills near which

(d. 1373AD) mentions in his *tafsīr*: 'because he is their ancestor, while Ismā'īl is the ancestor of the Arabs'[34]. Counter-attack involves the following arguments: Isaac is called the 'only son' because Ishmael was not regarded as Abraham's son since he was not born by his legal wife, Sarah. Besides, when the patriarch received the command, Ishmael and his mother had already been driven out. Also, Isaac was the chosen one as it is specified that the covenant will flow only through his line[35].

Again, from the Muslim point of view, the biblical sacrifice story is not as reliable as the qur'anic one, because although Judaism does not accept the doctrine of abrogation (i.e. God can annul a law that He has imposed), the Genesis story implies that God can implement *naskh* (abrogation)[36].

The Jewish response to such an argument had already come from Saadia Gaon during the tenth century; Saadia affirms that the commandment was clearly a trial; God would never let Abraham sacrifice his son. 'This then is not abrogation, because the ruling was not intended to be implemented in the first place'[37].

In recent years and for the first time in Western scholarship, Firestone has suggested that the Genesis sacrifice story could be an amended version of an older

---

Hagar and Ishmael were left by Abraham- for Moriah. Also, unaware of the fact that Abraham's sacrifice has been incorporated into the Jewish and Christian liturgies, Farid claims that because 'no trace is to be found in the religious ceremonies of Jews and Christians of the supposed sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham' the fact that Muslims -Ishmael's spiritual descendants- commemorate Ishmael's sacrifice is a proof of the victim's identity in itself. *Ibid.*

[34] Ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr*, p. 272; see also Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, p. 1150, n. 4101.

[35] See Gilchrist, *Millat-A-Ibrahim: the True Faith of Abraham*, p. 11.

[36] See John E. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 112-14.

[37] Andrew Rippin, 'Sa'adya Gaon and Genesis 22: Aspects of Jewish-Muslim Interaction and Polemic' in William M. Brinner & Stephen D. Ricks (eds) *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions* (Altanta, Georgia, Scholars Press, 1986), p. 40; as far as the Muslim version is concerned, Al-Nahhas (d. 950 AD) seems to believe that the sacrifice story could be a case of 'abrogation'. Abu Ja'far al-Nahhas, *Kitāb al-Nāsikh wa'l-Mansūkh* (Cairo, Zaki Mujahid, 1938), pp. 210-12 cited in Rippin, *ibid.*, pp. 41-42. Doukhan asserts that the idea of 'abrogation' is not applicable to the qur'anic sacrifice story, since its account is said to be symbolic. Doukhan, 'The Akedah at the "Crossroad": its Significance in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue', p. 170.

passage that referred to Ishmael but did not mention his name. In terms of grammar and syntax, he notes that the continuing repetition of Isaac's name in a narrative that involves only two individuals (i.e. Abraham and Isaac) is unlike the biblical style. Similarly, in terms of content, since Ishmael is already banished from his home, the repetitive mention of Isaac's name following the designation 'son' is unnecessary and suspicious. Also, according to what we know from the Bible, the expected and truly meaningful sacrifice would be that of the firstborn male. If, on the other hand, the narrative is read at the end of chapter sixteen of Genesis, in which we learn about Ishmael's birth, the rest of Abraham's story makes absolute sense; the patriarch is announced the birth of a second son as a reward for accepting to sacrifice his only son, the covenant takes place only once, after Abraham has been tested, etc. The author concludes that if his speculations are correct, then, such a narrative must have referred to a completed sacrificial act. In this case, however, human sacrifice would be condoned; by adding Isaac's name to the passage, the practice of human sacrifice was denounced and Isaac, the Israelite patriarch, was ascribed the merit for readily accepting to be the victim[38].

If the above hypothesis proved correct, we would then be talking about a case of a double shift in the identity of the victim; the first one would be the early change that Firestone describes, i.e. from Ishmael to Isaac; the second one would be the shift in Arabia, from Isaac to Ishmael, a long time after Isaac had been established as the victim in Jewish literature.

---

[38] Firestone, 'Comparative Studies in Bible and Qur'ān: a Fresh Look at Genesis 22 in Light of Sura 37', pp. 169-84.

## 3.3. On the Deliberate Transposition of the Sacrifice from its Initial Locus in Early Islamic Tradition (a Mountain in Jerusalem or Syria) to the Central Muslim Sanctuary (the Ka'ba)

### 3.3.1. Introduction

Van Biema asserts that causing the Jewish patriarch, Isaac, to lose prestige by presenting Ishmael as the near sacrifice in his place came only to complete what the qur'anic statement about Abraham being Muslim rather than Jew or Christian started, i.e. disperse the Jews' right to hold Abraham as their forefather[39].

In the same line of thought, Naudé views Ishmael's transition from obscurity during the early years of revelation to eminence in the years that followed and ultimately to his great post-qur'anic status as the ancestor of the prophet, as a part of Muhammad's polemic tactics that connected Ka'ba -one of the most significant Arabian holy places- with the revered by all monotheistic religions figure of Abraham[40].

Most scholars, however, trace the shift in the identity of the victim later in Islamic history and specifically, during the reign of the 'Abbasids, the time when the oral traditions were collected and put to written form. At the time when Islam was being established as an independent monotheistic religion, the association of Abraham with the religion that allegedly had once been practiced around the Ka'ba provided Islam with a firm historical basis to declare that it was not an innovation that derived from Judaism and Christianity but the re-establishment of the Abrahamic faith.

---

[39] David Van Biema, 'The Legacy of Abraham' in *Time* (Vol. 30, September 2002).
[40] Naudé, 'Isaac Typology in the Koran', p. 122.

It is undeniable, Delaney states, that the deliberate transposition of the sacrifice from its initial locus to the central Muslim sanctuary was 'motivated by a desire to distinguish and reinforce the specifically Muslim character of the traditions'[41]. On the whole, the transposition of the sacrifice from Syria to Mecca served to account for the holiness of the Muslim centre and 'provide the unifying and politically powerful act of pilgrimage with a strong and effective monotheistic religious base…'[42].

The shift in the identity was, according to some scholars, simply a by-product of this effort, instigated or simply encouraged by the fact that Ishmael's figure was becoming more and more important to the new Arab Muslim community as their progenitor. According to other scholars, however, the shift in the identity of the *dhabīḥ* was intentional and meaningful per se.

### 3.3.2. The Time and Locus of the Sacrifice and its Connection to Abraham's First Pilgrimage

In the book of Jubilees[43] Abraham appears as the founder of the Temple of Jerusalem although in Chronicles[44] the Bible readers are informed that King Solomon was the one who built the Holy Temple on Mount Moriah, the mountain where Abraham once attempted to sacrifice Isaac[45]. Despite the fact that the location of Moriah is unknown, since the first century and maybe earlier it has been identified

---

[41] Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: the Social Legacy of Biblical Myth*, p. 176.
[42] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 151.
[43] Jubilees 22:23-24.
[44] 2 Chronicles 3:1.
[45] Shelomo Dov Goitein, 'Abraham -in Islamic Tradition-' in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, second edition by Fred Skolnik (Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House, 2007), Vol. 1, p. 286.

with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem[46] (which today is covered by the Dome of the Rock/al Haram al Sharif).

Possibly this is the story that Caspi has in mind when he notes that the Muslim sacrifice narrative was associated with Ishmael and Mecca was emphasized as the place of the offering because Mecca had to become 'Jerusalem' and Ka'ba had to become the 'Temple'- the supposed spot of Isaac's sacrifice[47]. No explanations are provided, however, as to why imitation was needed.

It is obvious from the legends cited above that in Islamic tradition the incident of the sacrifice is sometimes located in Mecca while other times takes place within the broader area of Syria or more specifically, Jerusalem. The traditionist Shu'ayb al-Jaba'i goes so far as to give the exact location of the sacrifice '...about two miles from Jerusalem'[48].

Regarding the traditions that place the sacrifice in Mecca, there seems to be great confusion as to the exact spot of the offering. The prime candidates seem to be the *manḥar* / the *manḥar* in Mina / the *manḥar* 'where the sacrifice is made today' / the *manḥar* 'where stones are thrown on the devil' / 'the rock of Mina' / 'the foot of Mount Thabir' / 'the location overlooking the mosque of Mina' / 'the maqām'[49].

Whether the two traditions, the one placing the sacrifice in Syria and the one placing it in Mecca co-existed in the early Islamic years is not known. What can be

---

[46] For the texts that equate Mount Moriah with the Temple site, see Robert Hayward 'The Present State of Research into the Targumic Account of the Sacrifice of Isaac' in *Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol. 32 (1981), pp. 132-33.
[47] Caspi, *Take Now Thy Son: the Motif of the Akedah (Binding) in Literature*, p. 94.
[48] Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, p. 273 cited in Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 144; the same piece of information is reported by Tha'labi on the authority of al-Sha'bi (Tha'labī, *'Arā'is al-Majālis*, p. 78 cited in *ibid.*, p. 145) and by Ibn al-Athir (*Al-Kāmil fī al-Ta'rīkh*, p. 111 cited in *ibid.*, p. 146).
[49] See Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', pp. 267-68.

said, however, is that although even before Tabari the Mecca-Ishmael legend was becoming the prevalent one, the Syria-Isaac legend survived due to the psychological power that the previous revelation (Torah and Gospel) had over the new Muslim community. What is more, the particular legend continued to spread as it was recorded during the first two Islamic centuries[50].

We have already seen that when located in Mecca, the near sacrifice is often found within the context of Abraham's first pilgrimage and on occasion in connection with the building of the Ka'ba[51]. Al-Zamakhshari gives a unique tradition lacking *isnād* that connects the sacrifice with the names that were given to the days of the pilgrimage ritual. According to it, when Abraham first had the dream concerning the sacrifice, he was thinking about it all day and he was trying to understand whether the vision had come from God or Satan; this is why that day was called the Day of Consideration (*yawm al-tarwiya*). The second day Abraham had a similar vision and he knew (*'arifa*) it was from God; so that day was called the Day of 'Arafa. Finally, the third day was called the Day of Slaughtering (*yawn al-naḥr*) as Abraham was agonizing about God's command to slaughter his son[52].

In a parallel Shi'ite tradition reported on the authority of Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765AD) it is said that the day of Tarwiya was given this name because on it Abraham drank and stored water (*tarawwā*) and that the day of 'Arafa was called as such

---

[50] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, pp. 150-51.
[51] In Ya'qubi, for example, the sacrifice episode takes place on one of Abraham's visits to Ishmael, during which the Ka'ba is built. Cited in Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', p. 383.
[52] Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, Vol. 3, p. 348 cited in Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 148; Bashear names a few sources -other than Zamakhshari- that include this tradition and attribute it to Ibn 'Abbas. Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 271.

because on it Abraham admitted his sins (*i'tarafa*) and learned the rituals (*'arifa*). On al-Nahr the moment of decision had arrived; he would offer his son in sacrifice[53].

Another tradition, attributed to Ibn 'Abbas, accounts only for the term *'arafa*; when angel Jibril had finished teaching Abraham the rituals, he asked him whether he knew (*hal 'arift*), hence the name[54]. This tradition also mentions the stoning of the devil and the offering of Ishmael[55].

There are traditions, however, which explain the origin of the name given to the day of 'Arafa or Tarwiya in contextual disconnection from the theme of Abraham's sacrifice. It is said, for example, that the day of Tarwiya was called as such because on that day the pilgrims used to drink and store water before setting off for Arafat[56].

In a certain tradition ascribed to 'Ubayd b. 'Umayr al-Laythi, Abraham instructs Ishmael and the people he has called to the pilgrimage in the various rituals of it, including the sacrificial ritual. However, no connection is there suggested between this sacrifice and Abraham's son's sacrifice[57]. Likewise, Tayalisi and Azraqi bring traditions which narrate how Jibril showed the rituals to Abraham, without mentioning his son's offering[58].

As regards the particular stage of Abraham's life in which the incident occurred, once more, opinions vary. Some sources place the episode of the sacrifice in a different section from the one that relates all other Abraham's adventures while

---

[53] Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, Vol. 2, p. 225 cited in Bashear, *ibid.*, p. 263.
[54] Ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, Vol. 1, p. 297 cited in Bashear, *ibid.*, p. 271.
[55] Bashear, *ibid.*, p. 272.
[56] Fākihī, *Tārīkh Makka* (Leiden), 435 (b), 516 (b)-517 (a), 525 (a) cited in Bashear, *ibid.*, pp. 272-73.
[57] Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, pp. 287-88 cited in Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 145.
[58] Ṭayālisī, *Musnad* (Haydarabad, 1321 H.), pp. 351-52 and Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, 402 cited in Bashear, *ibid.*, pp. 272 and 273, respectively.

other sources [Ibn Hanbal, Ibn Qutayba, Al-Asadabadi (d. 1025AD), and Ibn 'Arabi] are not concerned with issues of time and setting. Also, a number of exegetes [Ibn Sa'd (d. 845AD), al-Bukhari (d. 869AD)] do not mention the sacrifice at all[59]. Among the sources that do mention it, the ones that consider chronology matters belong to the era following the end of the ninth century AD[60].

Bashear aptly remarks that nowhere in the hadith chapters that treat the topics of sacrifice or stoning is there reference to Abraham's sacrifice[61]. There is one hadith that relates that when the Arab prophet was asked what sacrifice is, he replied: 'The way of your forefather, Abraham'[62]. However, it says nothing about the *dhabīḥ*.

Those traditions that treat the first *muslim* pilgrimage or sacrifice as part of the Hajj but do not mention Abraham's sacrifice prove that the association between the sacrificial ritual of the pre-Islamic pilgrimage and Abraham's sacrifice was a late development[63].

Interestingly enough, the lack of connection between the two sacrifices is reported as late as the early nineteenth century by Burkhardt; the latter mentions that only some of the faithful return to Mina, after they have completed the pilgrimage, in order to make a second sacrifice in commemoration of Abraham's sacrifice[64].

---

[59] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, pp. 144-46.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 150.
[61] Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 272.
[62] Hadith in Ibn Majah's compilation (2:1045) cited in Bashear, *ibid.* and Fazlul Karim, *Al-Hadis: an English Translation and Commentary on Mishkat-ul-Masabih* (New Delhi, Islamic Book Service, 1988), p. 491.
[63] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 149.
[64] Johann Ludwig Burkhardt, *Travels in Arabia*, Vol. 2 (London, Henry Colburn, 1829), p. 65.

### 3.3.3. Abraham's Sacrifice and Politics during the 'Abbasid Caliphate

Based on Islamic tradition, Bashear argues that the portrayal of Ishmael as the sacrificial victim was part of the process during which Mecca turned into the great Abrahamic-Islamic religious centre. That process began at the turn of the second century and reached its peak during the reign of the 'Abbasids- the time when the Hajj rituals were established and certain sites like the mosque of the ram were consecrated[65]. Of course, sanctifying Mecca as a place connected with Ishmael's sacrifice was a long lasting and problematic task and that is reflected in the rich diversity of opinion among the traditionists concerning the exact location in Mecca where the episode occurred, the kind of the ransom beast, the place where the animal was captured and offered etc[66].

It is not clear whether the author believes that the emphasis placed upon Mecca as a sacred land preceded the shift in the identity of the victim or that both ideas were being developed at the same time. However, since among the second century sacrifice narratives that take place in Mecca, there are not only those that depict Ishmael as the offering but also those that portray Isaac as the intended victim, it would seem that attention to Mecca as the Muslim ritual centre was drawn before traditionists started to disagree about the identity of the victim.

Similar to this understanding is Calder's notion that initially Muslims did not concern themselves with the identity of the victim. Quite the contrary, of great importance was the consecration of Mecca as well as the sanctification of certain rites that were being practiced in Mecca; justifying Ka'ba and its rites was what the

---

[65] Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', pp. 244, 265 and 277; that the sanctification of certain places in the Hijaz started to take place during the 'Abbasid caliphate was for the first time noted by Ignaz Goldziher in *Muslim Studies* (New York, 1971), Vol. 2, pp. 279-81 cited in Bashear, *ibid.*, p. 277.
[66] Bashear, *ibid.*, p. 267.

Meccan setting of the sacrifice narrative was aimed at. However, at the same time that the central Muslim sanctuary started being portrayed as the site of Abraham's sacrifice, Ishmael legends started being located in Mecca as well and although that was an independent process, it eventually influenced the sacrifice story and the identity of the victim, which shifted from Isaac to Ishmael[67].

Ishmael's growing prominence, as the genealogical link between him and the northern Arabs was becoming commonly accepted during the first two Islamic centuries, is acknowledged by Firestone as having contributed (to a certain degree) to the gradual modification of the legend under study[68]. Likewise, the fact that Abraham was associated with Mecca in the years prior to the advent of Islam[69] and all the more so, the confirmation of this association by the Qur'an, encouraged the development of more legends about the adventures of the patriarch in Mecca[70].

However, the scholar describes the change in the identity of the sacrificial victim predominantly as 'a case of reactive theology'[71]. His theory goes as follows: during the 'Abbasid empire, Muslims had become powerful conquerors and Islam had achieved pre eminence in all fields (military, science, arts etc) among the other nations. Still, according to the Jewish and Christian scriptures, Muslims were excluded from God's covenant as the latter included either only the physical or only the spiritual descendants of Isaac. Now, as the qur'anic version of the sacrifice did not make any reference to Isaac, the story could be used as a perfect basis for the Muslims' claim that God's covenantal relationship would exist neither with the Jews

---

[67] Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', p. 381.
[68] Firestone, 'Abraham's Son', p. 129.
[69] I will deal with this matter further on.
[70] Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 149.
[71] Firestone, 'Abraham's Son', p. 131.

nor with the Christians[72]. On the contrary, Ishmael, the progenitor of the Arabs, the former 'symbol of the rejected covenant'[73] would be presented as the true protagonist of the story- the one who offered his life in total submission to the divine will. Thus, he '...would reflect the true character of the Arab Muslims, whom God had chosen because of their excellent virtues'[74].

Likewise, Caspi and Cohen note that Islamic tradition views the fact that Ishmael is God's choice for the sacrifice as a sign that his descendants are chosen in preference to Isaac's in a similar way that Jewish tradition has perceived the covenant with Isaac as a covenant with his entire progeny[75].

Such interpretations sound very plausible; all the more so because Abraham's two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, have been used in ethnic and religious polemics more than once[76]. It is very interesting, e.g., how in the Persian-Arabic controversy, during

---

[72] *Ibid.*, pp. 130-31.
[73] *Ibid.*, p. 130.
[74] *Ibid.*, p. 131.
[75] They stress, however, that Islam does not place emphasis on the spiritual aspects of the sacrifice in contrast to the modern Jewish reading of the story 'as the embodiment of the self-sacrifice of the Jewish soul for his God, his culture, and his values: the Martyrdom' which has resulted from the shift of importance from the initial protagonist, Abraham to Isaac. Caspi&Cohen, *The Binding [Aqedah] and its Transformations in Judaism and Islam*, p. 122.
[76] In general, the Jewish traditions regarding Ishmael, are determined each time by the relations between the Jews and the Arabs and although in the ensuing years the theology of Israel as 'the chosen people' brings about hostility against the image of Ishmael that can be seen in certain Talmudic texts (Maxime Rodinson, 'preface' in R. Dagorn, *La Geste D' Ismael d'apres l'Onomastique et la Tradition Arabes* (Geneva, Librairie Droz, 1981), pp. v, vii and xxviii, n. 16), it does not seem as if the persona of Ishmael is denigrated in Genesis, where the angel tells Hagar that the son she will give birth to will be like 'a wild ass' and 'His hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him' (Genesis 16:12). As Rodinson indicates, what the Yahwist does here is to simply allude to the way nomads used to live in the desert (*Ibid.* iv) [The Pentateuch (i.e. the first five books of the Old Testament) is believed to be a compilation of four sources, the earliest of which is identified as the Yahwist because the name used in it to denote God is Yahweh or Jehovah. The other three sources are: the Elohist, the Priestly Writing and the Deuteronomy]. One should also take under consideration Seale's observation according to which in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry the phrase 'wild ass' is always laudatory when applied to a man and the Hebrew '*pere*' can thus be 'a by-name for a chief, a leader, a tribal head.' Morris S. Seale, *The Desert Bible, Nomadic Tribal Culture and Old Testament Interpretation* (London, Weidenfeld&Nicolson, 1974), pp. 88-89; Other scholars, however, interpret what they read in this biblical text as obvious hatred for the firstborn of Abraham (see, e.g., Kuschel, *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims*, p. 136 and LaHurd, 'One God, One Father: Abraham in Judaism, Christianity and Islam', p. 23; for Islamic traditions in which Ishmael is portrayed as superior to Isaac

the period of *Shu'ūbyya* (i.e. the Anti-Arab movement of Persian intellectuals), the Persians defended the Isaac thesis because they thought of themselves as Isaac's progeny while the Arabs defended the Ishmael thesis since they were allegedly descended from Ishmael[77]. Firestone suggests that it was possibly because of this very conflict that Arab exegetes who lived during the 'Abbasid empire saw the sacrifice legend as 'a source of support'[78].

The figures of Ishmael and Isaac have also been used as symbols in a polemic between Judaism and Christianity; St. Paul, comparing the Jewish dependence upon the Mosaic Law to human bondage, likens the law of the Jews to Hagar and the promise of God to Sarah. Here, Christians are identified with Isaac, the son of the free woman and Israel with Ishmael, the son of the slave[79].

Regardless of what came first in 'Abbasid politics, near the end of the second Islamic century the position of Mecca as a ritual centre is so well-established that it has become 'a kind of "primary cause" strong enough to "prove" that Isma'il is the dhabīḥ'[80]. It is, thus, related that Abu 'Amr b. al-'Ala' reproached al-Asma'i severely when the latter asked him if the *dhabīḥ* was Isaac because it was a well known fact that Ishmael and not Isaac had settled in Mecca and assisted Abraham in building the Ka'ba[81]. The same more of less belief is expressed by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, who

---

(in terms of *waṣiyya* and Ishmael's status as the ancestor of Muhammad), see Uri Rubin, 'Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shī'a Tradition' in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, Vol. 1(1979), pp. 61-62.

[77] See Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. C. R. Barber and Samuel M. Stern (London, Allen & Unwin, 1967), Vol. 1, p. 135.

[78] Firestone, 'Abraham's Son', p. 131.

[79] 'For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar...Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.' Galatians.4:22-31; see also Lewis R. Scudder, 'Ishmael and Isaac and Muslim-Christian Dialogue' in *Dialog*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (1990), pp. 29-32.

[80] Bashear, 'Abraham's Sacrifice', p. 264.

[81] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Vol. 4, p. 18, cited in Bashear, *ibid.*

argues that had the *dhabīḥ* been offered in Syria, the sacrifice on the day of *al-naḥr* as well as the rest of the rites that take place in Mecca (rites that commemorate certain incidents in the lives of Ishmael and Hajar who inhabited the area) would have been in Syria instead[82].

As expected and as a part of the anti-Islamic polemic, similar Jewish traditions emerged to defend the Isaac case[83]. One of them, the Targum of Genesis 22:1 found in *Targum Pseudo Jonathan*, reports that the two brothers had an argument regarding which one should inherit their father; to Ishmael's claim that he was the firstborn, Isaac responded that he was the son of the lawful wife and to his statement that, unlike Isaac, he was circumcised when he was old enough to resist, Isaac replied that he was now 36 and if God asked for all his limbs he would not hesitate. 'Immediately these words were heard before the Lord of the universe and immediately the word of the Lord tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham!' [84]

Despite the reactions, however, it is particularly interesting how the Muslim tradition on Abraham's sacrifice managed to find its way into the Jewish and Christian tradition through art.

***The Angel with the Ram***

Schapiro, comparing the early Western pictorial representations of the angel with the ram in the sacrifice of Abraham to the Muslim images of the same episode, aspires to detect whether the Muslim illustrations of sacrifice had an impact on the Western rendering of the incident or both Muslim and continental reproductions of the

---

[82] Quoted in Qāsimī, *Maḥāsin al-Ta'wīl* (Cairo, 1959), Vol. 14, pp. 5054-5 cited in Bashear, *ibid.*, p. 267.
[83] Doukhan, 'The Akedah at the "Crossroad": its Significance in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue', p. 171.
[84] Cited in *ibid.*, pp. 171-72.

theme had Jewish roots or, finally, whether the Western style was independent of any other trends[85].

Although a plethora of contradicting elements he encounters does not allow him to reach a reliable conclusion, Schapiro asserts that most likely, Western art was influenced by Islamic art. He draws his assumption based on the fact that in Muslim paintings of the sacrifice (although they are few in number) the motif of the angel carrying the lamb is the prevalent tendency while in the West as a rule, the ram in Christian and Jewish images appears in the bush or next to it[86].

Furthermore, although there is no angel mentioned in the qur'anic tale of the sacrifice, there are traditions the prominence of which could explain the constant motif repetition in Muslim works of art[87]. An additional element supportive of this case is the well-known theme in the Islamic tradition of angel Gabriel bringing prophets a godsend i.e. he carries the holy black stone to Abraham and the Qur'an to Muhammad[88]. Conversely, no angel arrives on the scene in the biblical version and although there are ancient Jewish traditions that refer to the angel, Jewish representations of the sacrifice overall tally with the Christian ones and in some cases the angel does not appear at all[89].

What is of special interest for our study is Schapiro's observation about the kind of theology that is reflected in the various ways that the sacrifice is rendered. In Western painting, the ram is very often depicted caught in a thicket - a very significant element for the Christian interpretation of the legend in the Middle Ages

---

[85] M Schapiro, 'The Angel with the Ram in Abraham's Sacrifice: a Parallel in Western and Islamic Art' in *Ars Islamica*, Vol. 10 (1943).
[86] *Ibid.*, p. 134.
[87] *Ibid.*, p. 135; Schapiro mentions Tabari and Al-Zamakhshari versions (*ibid.*).
[88] *Ibid.*, p. 136.
[89] *Ibid.*, p. 140.

for it symbolized the suspension of Christ on the cross. In Islam, on the other hand, the thicket is of no use and thus, absent from both the Qur'an and art[90]. The Muslim reading of the narrative is 'unsymbolic' -more rational- as opposed to the Christian one according to which the ram appears miraculously -in a non-natural manner- out of nowhere[91]. Therefore, the Western adoption of this iconographic detail seems to be an implication of 'a new attitude toward the basic text and its theological meaning…' that developed as a result of the embracing of twelfth century Arabic science and philosophy that was introducing 'secular knowledge and rational speculation'[92].

## 3.4. Calder on Narrative, Liturgy and Canonical Scripture

All the Islamic versions of Abraham's sacrifice quoted in chapter two -except for the poem that is attributed to 'Umayya b. Abi al-Salt- belong to the type that Calder describes as 'narrative'. Sacrifice narratives include only a few verses that are marked as qur'anic, i.e. verses that start with expressions such as *dhālika qawlu-hu* 'Hence (God's) words' and *li-dhālika yaqūl allāh* 'Hence Allah says'; these verses play a complementary role to what is a complete narrative; they either repeat an aya or comment on it. On the other hand, sacrifice narratives include verses that are not marked as qur'anic but are worded in exactly the same way as the qur'anic text (often the 'inform-accept' motif) or slightly different from it (e.g. the passive *nūdiya* 'there was a call' instead of the qur'anic *nādaynā-hu* 'we called out to him')[93]. What is more, verses such as 'Thus indeed do We reward those who do right' and 'For this was obviously a trial' -that Calder names 'qur'anic fillers'- are missing from the

---

[90] *Ibid.*, p. 143; a similar motif is found, however, in the Tafsīr. More specifically, a tradition that is reported under the authority of 'Ali has it that the ram was bound to an acacia tree in Thabir (Tabari, *The History*, p. 95).
[91] *Ibid.*, p. 147.
[92] *Ibid.*
[93] Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', p. 378.

sacrifice narratives in question. Other verses, e.g. *lammā aslamā* (When they both submitted) and *talla-hu li-'l-jabīn* (And he threw him down on the *jabīn*) occur in some versions while not in others; in the versions that it appears, the last phrase takes the shortened form *talla-hu* or *adja'a-hu* (both words have the same meaning)[94].

The sacrifice versions that belong to what Calder describes as the mixed type consist of scriptural phrases that are juxtaposed to glosses and narrative phrases. Although the next version does not provide the reader with new elements in terms of content, it is cited to promote comprehension of the mixed type:

0. **And of his followers Abraham /** the followers of Noah in his practice and his customs.
1. **He reached with him the sa'y /** he became a youth such that his striving reached that of Abraham in working.
2. **And when they both submitted /** submitted to what they both had been commanded.
3. **And he threw him down /** placed his face upon the ground.
4. i. And he said: Do not sacrifice me while looking at my face lest you feel compassion for me and fail to take my life. ii. And if I regret [my decision] and shrink [from the deed] and struggle against you, [then fear not]. iii. But tie my hands to my neck then place my face upon the ground.
5. When he moved his hand to sacrifice him, the knife had not yet reached [its mark] when
6. There was a call: Abraham, you have fulfilled the vision.
7. So he withdrew his hand.
8. Hence [God's] word: **We redeemed him with a great sacrifice /** a great ram / acceptable.[95]

Calder observes that if glosses and narrative phrases are removed, the scriptural text in itself is equivalent to a section of a litany in which various prophetic figures are recalled one after the other and for each one the reader provides some phrases that recount the most important events in his life. Hence, the author believes that the mixed type must have been born out of the interaction between story-telling

---

[94] *Ibid.*, p. 388.
[95] Attributed to Mujahid from Ibn 'Abbas, in Suyūṭī, *al-durr al-manthūr*, p. 280, lines 20ff, trans. by Calder, *ibid.*, pp. 389-90; (note that the slash that differentiates between scripture and commentary is Calder's. I have omitted information in round brackets and the highlighting in bold type is mine).

and cultic recitation. The scriptural verses, he remarks, 'serve as pegs for an ongoing narrative'; the liturgical frame, however, cannot always support the narrative and in this case 'The exegete, lacking a peg for his narrative, reverts to the story-telling style'[96]. In subsequent versions that have been edited to match the canonical text, the wording of the scriptural phrases is perfectly qur'anic and the narrative parts that could not be supported by the canonical frame, e.g. the 'last requests', have disappeared[97].

According to the author, the versions that exhibit narrative style must have preceded the liturgical ones because in order to understand the cultic recitations, the audience had to be previously acquainted with the narrative[98]. Based on the fact that the narrative versions of the sacrifice do not seem to presuppose an established canonical text that is used on a regular basis for prayer, Calder asserts that the qur'anic version is also secondary to those versions[99]. Specifically, he asserts that the qur'anic sacrifice story must have developed out of a long-lasting interaction between narrative and liturgical versions[100].

To further support his argument, the author points to the structure of the qur'anic sacrifice story; taking the fixed pattern of words away, i.e. the second part of verses 105 and 106 -which have the proper rhyme for the text- as well as verses 108 and 109 which 'function in this sura as refrains, imposing a patterned uniformity on the litany of prophets which is its subject matter' the text appears to be a narrative outline that is 'secondary to, possibly excerpted from some pre-existing forms'[101].

---

[96] Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', p. 390.
[97] The mixed type versions and the canonical ones are dealt with in *ibid.*, pp. 389ff.
[98] *Ibid.*, p. 396.
[99] *Ibid.*, pp. 388-89 and 396.
[100] *Ibid.*, p. 396.
[101] *Ibid.*, 395.

The 'last requests' and Abraham's attempt(s) to execute God's order, well-known motifs from the secondary Islamic literature, are missing and the rest of the motifs - except for the 'inform-accept' one- have been compressed into brief verses[102].

His conclusions are in harmony with John Wansbrough's controversial theory that it was not before the end of the eighth or the beginning of the ninth centuries that the Qur'an reached its present form[103]. Calder has embraced this theory arguing that 'such materials [i.e. scriptures] do not spring fully fledged into existence in their final form; they achieve a canonical form gradually over a period of time'[104].

### 3.5. On the Thematic Evolution of the Sacrifice Story prior to Its Incorporation in Islamic Exegesis; Caspi and Cohen's Theory

Caspi and Cohen claim to have spotted the actual process of transformation that the binding story underwent before it became part of the Islamic literature. In conformity with the findings of Western scholarship, they believe that the Islamic version of sacrifice has its roots in the Jewish tradition. They argue, however, that by the time that the story was presented as Islamic, it had been strongly influenced by -or rather filtered through- another story which is recorded in one of the prophetical traditions included in Muslim's (d. 821-875AD) hadith compilation. The hadith in question, 'The Story of the People of the Ditch, the Wizard, the Monk and the Youth' is the confluence of a number of stories that were inspired by the mass Christian martyrdom in Najran of South Arabia in 523 AD. Exactly because of the fact that this historical event had great impact on Christian and chroniclers who recorded it soon after its occurrence in the sixth century and up until the tenth century (either in a

---

[102] *Ibid.*, pp. 395-96.
[103] See Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation.*
[104] Calder, 'From Midrash to Scripture', p. 389.

historical form or in the form of a legend depending on the intentions of each script)[105], Caspi and Cohen are convinced that certain motifs of the Islamic version of Abraham's sacrifice must have derived from the tale of the martyrs of Najran[106].

Most importantly, they assert that the *ghulām* of the sacrifice story is intrinsically related to the *ghulām* of the hadith[107] and that his anonymity in the Qur'an is explained as part of the ambiguity that has always characterized this figure[108]. In particular, the character of the *ghulām* appears for the first time in the Ibn Hisham version of the martyrdom as Salih, the disciple of a Christian monk, Faymiyun[109]. The same figure is included in Al-Tabari's version but this time his name has changed to Ibn Darir or Ibn Thamir[110]. He is then missing from Al-Mas'udi's version[111] only to show up again in Muslim's hadith in which he has lost his name and is for the first time connected to the story which is recounted in the earlier Christian sources, of a mother and her son who encourages her in martyrdom.

Prior to considering the supposedly shared motifs between the Islamic sacrifice legend and the relevant hadith, however, it is essential that a summary of the

---

[105] The same event has been the basis for: a. 'the Letter of Simeon of Beth Arsham' composed by a member of the clergy soon after the martyrdom, b. a historical document known as 'the Book of the Himyarites' written by the same author a couple of years following the massacre, c. the Greek 'Martyrium Arethae', i.e. an official document of the Roman church written in the second half of the sixth century; the first non-Syriac account of the events and d. the Arabic version of the 'Martyrium Arethae'. It has also been treated in a. the historiographical work of Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham (*Sirāt al-Nabī*) composed in the 8th and 9th century in which for the first time the event is connected to the people of the *ukhdūd* (ditch) of Q.85:1-8, b. Al-Tabari's '*Annales*' (9th-10th century) and c. Al-Mas'udi's '*Murūj al-Dhahab*' (10th century). It was finally reduced to a parable in the hadith under study that is included in Muslim's compilation. For further information on these documents, see Caspi&Cohen, *The Binding [Aqedah] and its Transformations in Judaism and Islam*, chapter 2, pp. 54-94.

[106] See *ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

[107] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[108] *Ibid.*, pp. 64 and 96.

[109] See *ibid.*, p. 75.

[110] See *ibid.*, pp. 79-82.

[111] See *ibid.*, pp. 82-84.

hadith is given so that the reader can decide for him/herself on the degree of analogy between them.

The hadith having dispensed with names and religious milieu is purely allegorical, although, still recognizable as a version of the Christian martyrdom in Najran. By omitting the names and not identifying the populace of the kingdom as the Christians of Najran, Muslim's report acquires a universal meaning, becoming, thus, applicable to the Islamic standards[112].

For the most part, the story is built around three characters, a *ghulām* (young boy), a monk (the figure that represents the Christians of Najran) and a godless king (the figure that corresponds to the Jewish king who instigated the persecution) and only towards the end of the story, do the characters of a mother and her son appear.

To literally cut a long story short,

> a *ghulām* was sent to the king's old wizard to learn wizardry but on his way to the wizard he met a monk and enchanted by his personality, he became his student. Once it happened that he saw a beast blocking a path. He said: 'O Allah! If the authority of the monk is more dear to you than that of the wizard, then slay this beast so that the people may pass'. He then threw a stone and killed the beast. When he recounted the incident to the monk, the latter warned him that he will be tested. As he was healing people, he became known to the king who approached him and tormented him until he implicated the monk. The monk was asked to renounce his faith and because he refused he was tormented to death. The king then attempted to kill the *ghulām* who also refused to renounce his religion but his attempts were unsuccessful until the *ghulām* told him that he would only be killed when the king had gathered all the people in an open space, crucified him, pronounced his faith to his Lord (i.e. the *ghulām's* Lord) and shot him with an arrow. The king followed the instructions and the *ghulām* was finally killed but because of the way he died, all the inhabitants believed in his Lord. Seeing that, the king ordered for those who refused to renounce their faith to be thrown into a fire pit. The people would throw themselves in the fire… 'until a woman came, with her son; and she was reluctant to drop into it. Then the *ghulām* said to her: 'O mother! Endure-for you are in the right.'[113]

---

[112] *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

[113] Muslim, ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, trans. `Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, with explanatory notes and brief biographical sketches of major narrators (Lahore, Muhammad Ashraf, 1972-75), Book 42, Chapter 18, No. 7148.

First of all, Caspi and Cohen draw an analogy between the last words of the story and the words of Abraham's son to Abraham in Q.37:102: 'O my father! Do as thou art commanded; you will find me, God willing, among those who endure'[114].

Stress is laid on the fact that the *ghulām* of the hadith is addressed by the monk and the king in the same affectionate way that the *dhabīḥ* is addressed by Abraham, that is, 'ya buniyy inni' meaning 'O my son!'[115]

At the same time emphasis is given to the fact that rarely does the term *ghulām* appear in the Qur'an and when it does it refers to prophets or characters of miraculous origin[116]. The title *ghulām* would seem an inappropriate title for the infant of the tale and therefore, the *ghulām* that addresses the mother must be the already martyred *ghulām* who has taken up the role of the infant as the instigator of the mother's martyrdom[117].

Most importantly, a similarity is noted between the relationship of Abraham and the *ghulām* in al-Kisa'i and that of the monk and the *ghulām* in the hadith[118]. The authors assert that in both cases 'the lad appears as a vehicle, or object of the test, rather than the motivator'[119] and that the narratives are dialogues that take place in the first case between Abraham and God and in the second between the monk (who represents the monotheistic ideal) and the king (who represents the blasphemous) and later, between the king and the divine. In both cases, the *ghulām* is simply 'a vehicle

---

[114] Caspi&Cohen, *The Binding [Aqedah]*, p. 53.
[115] *Ibid.*, p. 91.
[116] *Ibid.* It has to be noted here that the authors' remark that Q.52:24 refers to the unnamed *dhabīḥ* of sura 37, is erroneous for two obvious reasons: a. the verse in question is a reference to the bliss that the righteous will enjoy after death and b. the term *ghulām* is in the plural (*ghulamān*), i.e. it refers to more than one young men.
[117] *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.
[118] The authors also compare the interaction between God, Abraham and Isaac or the *dhabīḥ* with the interaction in the Arabic Martyrium between the mother, the infant and God who, speaking through the infant, asks for their martyrdom. See *ibid.*, p. 73.
[119] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

for dialogue'[120]. Other more obvious common images that are marked between the hadith and al-Kisa'i's narrative are the images of sacrifice, fire and the test of faith.

Although the possibility of some influence cannot be ruled out, to my opinion the similarities seem to be restricted to the use of common phrases and images[121] rather than the use of same ideas for in terms of content, the differences are numerous and important. In particular, while the mother hesitates, Abraham accepts his and his son's fate without the slightest hesitation. What is more, in the sacrifice story, the son supports his father's decision to obey the divine command but nothing happens at his own instigation as is the case with the speaking infant or the martyred *ghulām* who beyond the grave encourages the mother in martyrdom.

Furthermore, while Isaac in Kisa'i's narrative could indeed be seen as having the role of a passive medium between two authorities, the *ghulām* of the hadith has an active role in the instigation of the conflict between the sorcerer and the monk[122], the dissemination of the monk's religious beliefs and possibly the martyrdom of the mother.

In regards to the term *ghulām*, although rare, as the authors note themselves, it *does* appear in connection to some qur'anic characters. Similarly, the motif of fire cannot be seen as a unique motif shared only by the two narratives that are being compared here since, as the authors mention themselves, fire is a very common image in the Qur'an[123].

---

[120] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
[121] It could be suggested that it was the qur'anic story that influenced the wording of the hadith and not the other way round. Similarly, in regards to the trial with the beast it could be argued that it was the motif of stoning the devil that found its way into Muslim's hadith.
[122] The authors' remark, *ibid.*, p. 87.
[123] See *ibid.*, p. 77.

# Chapter 4: The Link between Abraham, Ishmael and the Ka'ba in the Qur'an

## 4.1. Introduction

We have seen by now how several researchers, based for the most part on extra-qur'anic Islamic literature (Firestone, Bashear, Calder) but also studying the syntax of the sacrifice ayas (Bell) or looking into non-Islamic literature (Caspi & Cohen), have attempted to account for the evolution of the story of Abraham's sacrifice as well as the form in which it appears in the Qur'an. Research has shown that there has been a gradual development in the narrative content. Scholars speak of the narrative modifications [mainly the shift in the identity of the victim and the connection of the sacrifice story to the Muslim pilgrimage] as the result of the emphasis that was placed upon Mecca as the Islamic ritual centre during the reign of the 'Abbasids combined with the growing awareness of the relationship between Abraham and Ishmael that had started to develop in the years following the Hijra and, even more importantly, the emergence of Ishmael as the father of the Arabs. When not seen as a by-product, the shift in the identity of the *dhabīḥ* is seen as a deliberate move, part of Muhammad's (or subsequent generations Muslims') polemics that aimed at the denigration of the Jews or from a slightly different perspective, a move that intended to secure a feeling of exclusivity for the downgraded by the other monotheists Muslims. Concerning the thematic progression of the narrative as a whole, it has been seen as part of the 'Abbasid politics that aimed at the legitimization of the Hajj rituals in general or the legitimization of the sacrifice festival in particular.

In order to confirm the argument concerning the growing importance of Ishmael in comparison with Isaac once the first Muslims had organized themselves

into a religious community based in Medina (a largely Jewish town) as well as the argument for the intentional establishment of a link between the prophetic figures of Abraham and Ishmael and the Meccan pilgrimage, we will first take a brief look at the qur'anic portrayal of Isaac and Ishmael in both the Meccan and Medinan periods of revelation; following that, we will examine the only qur'anic passage that gives an account of an incident from Abraham's life that involves Ishmael, i.e. the verses which describe the building and purification of the Ka'ba. Today, Ishmael is thought of as the intended sacrifice by most Muslims partly because according to the Qur'an he was the son who assisted Abraham in building the Ka'ba[1].

Examining the Abraham-Ka'ba verses closely will enlighten us about the knowledge that the qur'anic audience seems to have in regard to the relation of the prophet Abraham to Isaac, Ishmael, the Ka'ba and the Hajj; this sort of knowledge will help us reach a conclusion as to whether the sacrifice story in the Qur'an was meant to hint at the pilgrimage or any other Ka'ba traditions. Since 'the building of the Ka'ba' is mostly about its monotheist founders and its purification, this chapter will also address two questions that are intrinsically linked both to the Ka'ba verses and the 'Abbasid politics: why was there a need to sanctify the Islamic rites and how could the sacrifice narrative provide the sanctification needed.

## 4.2. Isaac and Ishmael in the Qur'an

When Isaac appears in the Qur'an, it is always in connection to Abraham. In the early middle Meccan period of revelation, Abraham is given -by God- the good news about the impending birth of a blessed son and prophet, Isaac[2]. The same theme is repeated in Q.51:28 [E.Mec.] and 15:53 [L.Mec.] in which there is reference to a

---

[1] Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: the Social Legacy of Biblical Myth*, p. 171.
[2] Q.37:112-13.

young man (*ghulām*) whose name is not mentioned[3]. In Q.6:84 [L.Mec.], 11:71 [L.Mec.][4], 19:49 [L.Mec.][5], 21:72-73 [M.Mec.][6], 29:27 [L.M.Mec.], 12:6, 38 [L.Mec.] and 38:45-47 [E.M.Mec.][7] Isaac is mentioned together with Jacob who in the first five verses indicated does not appear as Abraham's grandson but as another son of his.

For the first time, the relationship between Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac is clearly stated in the late Meccan sura titled 'Ibrahim'[8]. Ishmael appears having a prominent role next to his father in the part of the revelation uncovered in Medina[9]. Except for verses 2:125 and 127 (where reference is made only to Abraham and Ishmael and the building of the Ka'ba) the two brothers are mentioned side by side and Ishmael's name always comes first. In regards to Q.2:133 in which Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac are called Jacob's fathers, Naudé suggests the possibility that Isaac is considered to be Ishmael's son[10].

There is only one verse in the Qur'an which clearly states that the prophets Abraham and Ishmael raised the foundations of the first sanctuary dedicated to the One God[11] and only one verse that refers to the purification –but not the construction- of the House by the two prophets[12]. Any other occasions of communication between father and son are omitted, the exception being an allusion to Ishmael and the Ka'ba

---

[3] The same term (*ghulām*) appears once more in Q.37:101 [E.M.Mec.].
[4] On the good news of Isaac's birth and later Jacob's given to Sarah.
[5] Here, Isaac and Jacob are prophets.
[6] Both are leaders, righteous men and they have received inspiration.
[7] In this verse, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are said to have been bestowed with spiritual power; they had knowledge and taught about the hereafter; they were of the company of the Good.
[8] Q.14:39.
[9] Q.2:125, 127, 133, 136, 140; 3:84; 4:163.
[10] Naudé, 'Isaac Typology in the Koran', p. 122.
[11] Q.2:127.
[12] Q.2:125.

in a verse that depicts Abraham praying for the protection of some of his offspring that he has made 'dwell in a valley without cultivation, by Thy Sacred House'[13].

That several more references are made to Isaac rather than Ishmael in the Qur'an[14] is an extraordinary fact considering the significance the latter is given by Muslims from the early Islamic years and on. However, a possible explanation for the absence of any other references to incidents from Abraham's life that involve Ishmael is that the account of incidents which are narrated in extra-qur'anic literature would have little or nothing to add to the qur'anic message. A cursory reading of the Qur'an shows that Islamic scripture is intended neither as the religious history of a people nor as the biography of a prophet but as a guide to eternal bliss in heaven; so that the believers are enabled to perceive the will of God and act according to it, the Qur'an seems to reveal only those pieces of the prophets' lives which can communicate a moral message to its receivers[15].

For a full understanding of the importance of those qur'anic verses that refer to the Ka'ba as an old monotheistic centre associated with the figures of Abraham and Ishmael, one first needs to be familiar with the prevailing religious and sociopolitical circumstances in sixth century Arabia.

---

[13] Q.14:37.
[14] Ishmael is mentioned only twelve times while Isaac is referred to by name seventeen times.
[15] What is also interesting about the qur'anic prophetology is that the Qur'an mentions numerous Hebrew prophets having Isaac as their ancestor and only three prophets of Arabic origin (Q.7:65-93; 26:123-140; 46:21-26) namely Hud, Ṣalih and Shu'ayb, who are not referred to as Ishmael's offspring. Thus, Stieglecker is right to say that 'Muhammad means as much in the history of revelation as all the other prophets from the family of Abraham put together' (Hermann Stieglecker, *Die Glaubenslehren des Islam* (Munich, Paderborn, Viena, 1962) p. 202.

## 4.3. The Religion of Arabia in Pre-Islamic Times

The religion of the Arabs in the age of *jāhilīyah*[16] was Sabaenism, a type of star or planet worship, which had its roots in Chaldea, originally uncomplicated in form but then elaborated to incorporate several more new deities and rites. It would seem that the ritual of making the circuit of a holy shrine, for instance Arab women's procession around a deity named Duwar in the pre-Islamic era, goes back to this sort of planetary worship[17].

In due course, each clan and tribe had their own patron deities. Additionally, there was a chief god- al-ilah (the shortened form of which gives the word Allah) - common to all tribes[18]. Each tribal group used to preserve two shrines: one for its patron god and one for al-ilah[19] the first one serving as the focal point for the solidarity of the group[20]. As for the offerings, those dedicated to Allah were distributed among the needy and the strangers while those of the patron deities were intended for the priests[21]. The Qur'an condemns this attitude in Q.6:137. According to Watt, the expression 'Lord of this House' in Q.106:3 suggests that those who had a somewhat higher degree of faith were worshipping God in the Ka'ba[22].

Belief in the existence of jinns -good or evil beings that inhabited trees and rocks- was instigated by the strange and easily changeable natural phenomena in the

---

[16] *jāhilīyah* is a qur'anic term which is translated as 'the days of ignorance' and refers to the time before the emergence of Muhammad (see Q.5:50; 48:26).
[17] Edward H. Palmer, *The Qur'an*, Part 3, series: *The Sacred Books of the East*, Friedrich Max Müller (ed.) Vol. 9 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1880), pp. xi-xiii.
[18] Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, pp. 27-28.
[19] Palmer, *The Qur'an*, p. xii.
[20] Francis E. Peters, *The Hajj: the Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 20.
[21] Palmer, *The Qur'an*, p. xii.
[22] Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, p. 26.

dessert. Jinns were worshipped so that they offer help or restrain themselves from harming men[23].

Among the Arabian pantheon, Naila and Isaf, two idols that rested on the mountains Marwa and Zafa respectively, were cherished to such an extent that even after Muhammad had ordered for their destruction, paying visit to Marwa and Zafa remained a part of the Islamic pilgrimage[24].

Stone worship was an old type of Semitic cult, rife in pre-Islamic Arabia. Among the Arabic deities, Manat and Hab were goddesses worshipped by numerous tribes in the form of large sacrificial stones[25]. Historical sources coincide as to the status that the holy black stone that is located at the wall of the Ka'ba used to have in pre-Islamic times; it appears that the adoration of this stone was a frequent practice. Only after Muhammad's intervention, did the adoration of the stone give way to its veneration. Again, here, we can see the Islamization of an idolatrous praxis that is too deep-rooted to be cast off[26].

On the basis of the aforementioned, one may reach the following conclusion: for the most part, religious practice in Arabia after the dominion of Islam over polytheism remained the same and only those rites constituting an affront to pure monotheism were seized. Followers of the newly introduced religion were not asked to part with their age-old customs -such a requirement would have been a great barrier

---

[23] Palmer, *The Qur'an*, p. xii.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
[25] *Ibid.*, pp. xii and xiii.
[26] Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, *Judaism and Islam* (London, New York, Thomas Yoseloff, 1961), p. 15; for legends about the black stone, see Emel Esin, *Mecca, the Blessed, Madinah, the Radiant* (London, Elek Books, 1963), pp. 59, 134 and 169 and Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Some Religious Aspects of Islam: a Collection of Articles* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1981), pp. 28, 30, 32, 35, 112, 115-16 and 120-27; for more information on pre-Islamic Arabian deities, the reader is referred to Nöldeke's classical study 'Arabs (Ancient)' in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1908).

to conversion- but instead were guided as to what the spiritual context of their acts should be. In other words, change took place in terms of creed; while Muslims kept on observing their old rituals, a new meaning was attached or -according to the Qur'an in which the new creed is presented as the creed of Abraham and Ishmael - reattached to all those well-known and popular procedures causing the passage from polytheism to monotheism to be smooth.

Monotheism, of course, was not totally unknown in young Muhammad's Arabia. Before the latter's mission went public, some Arabs had already started to show interest in the monotheistic idea represented by the Christian empire of Byzantium and the large Christian population of the Persian Empire the Arabs were in contact with, as well as by the great number of Jews in Medina[27]. However, despite the conversion of several individuals - especially to Judaism as it was closer to the Arabic life style- neither Christianity nor Judaism caused a sensation, the first owing to its perplexing Trinity dogma and the second because of its exclusivity and the large number of its restrictions[28].

That was the time when the *hanīfs* emerged. According to Palmer, the *hanīfs* were of two types: those discontented with the religious situation in Arabia who were in an individual spiritual search and also a monotheistic sect that defined itself as Abraham's religion. Muhammad himself at the outset of his mission is introduced as a *hanīf* and later on, as a Muslim[29].

---

[27] Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, p. 27.
[28] Palmer, *The Qur'an*, pp. xv.
[29] *Ibid.*, pp. xvi; for a different understanding of the *hanīfs* see Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, pp. 162-64.

### *The Ka'ba*

Palmer asserts that introducing the Islamic religion, Muhammad's initiative to have Mecca as his starting point was a masterstroke for the reason that only Mecca could possibly become an element of 'centralisation' for the various tribes that were always in conflict with one another and impossible to unite under sovereign power for the Arab temperament would never go well with submission to a master. Muhammad knew that the Ka'ba could be a binding factor -and thus lead to the empowerment of the Arabs- as it was the place where the national collection of idols was held, the yearly fairs were taking place and the common to all Arabs religious and historical traditions were preserved. Mecca, as Palmer puts it, represented: 'what we may call their [i.e. the Arabs'] common religious feeling, but which really meant…common interests, common customs, and common superstitions'[30].

In the same line of thought, Palmer maintains that abolishing the ancient customs people were sentimentally attached to or depended their profit on -Quraysh and their prosperity due to the pilgrimage being an apt example- would have been a total disaster to the establishment of Islam especially since 'the one thing which gave them (the various tribes) even the shadow of a national feeling' were those customs circulating around the Ka'ba[31].

As far as the spiritual role of the Ka'ba in the years prior to the establishment of Islam is concerned, it seems that it had little or no significance at all and that the idols, sacrifices and the pilgrimage were preserved solely for political and commercial

---

[30] Palmer, *The Qur'an*, p. xlv.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. liii.

reasons[32]. The office, for instance, of the Meccan sanctuary guardian was hereditary and it belonged to the Quraysh, the superiority of whom over the other tribes lay on this very fact[33].

Watt also notes that the old religion was on the wane[34]. However, he holds a dissimilar to Palmer's view not only as to the existence of a feeling of unity among the Arabs but also as to the theory according to which, trade in Mecca in Muhammad's time was entirely dependent on the Ka'ba. He maintains that the sense of unity 'based on a common language…a common poetical tradition, some common conventions and ideas, and a common descent' was already there in Muhammad's time, still not as elevated as it came to be in Medina. He also asserts that the visits to the Meccan temple by nomads were not of vital importance to the trade any more[35].

## 4.4. Ka'ba and Abraham: Qur'an 2:125-127, 3:97 and 22:26

### *a. The House and its Purification*

'Remember We made the House a place of assembly for men and a place of safety; and take ye the Station of Abraham as a place of prayer; and We covenanted with Abraham and Ismā'īl, that they should sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or use it as a retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein in prayer)' (Q.2:125)

Ka'ba is known from time immemorial as *bāit Allāh* (the house of God). It is also referred to in the Qur'an as 'the sacred house' or 'the ancient house'[36]. Ka'ba

---

[32] *Ibid.*, p. xv; Mecca was at the crossroads of the ways from Yemen to Syria and from Abyssinia to Iraq. It, thus, grew to be an important trading and financial centre and also an object of constant conflict between the Persians and the Byzantines, both of whom aspired to exercise control over those trade routes.
[33] Palmer, *ibid.*, p. xlix.
[34] Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, pp. 23-24; see also Nöldeke, 'Arabs (Ancient)', p. 659.
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[36] Q.5:97 and Q.22:29, 33 respectively; Peters argues for the antiquity of the sanctuary in Mecca as follows: the existence in Mecca of a holy shrine can be the only explanation for the fact that an uncultivable land became the object of endless conflicts for its occupation and won a place in history. Normally, a barren land would not be inhabited but 'a holy place…requires little beyond the sanctity of the site, a sanctity connected with a spring, a tree, or a mountain'. Peters, *The Hajj: the Muslim*

meaning 'the cube' was named after its square shape that was made of unhewn stones and is said in the Qur'an to have three main qualities: a. it is a location where men congregate, b. it is recognized as an asylum and c. it is a sacred place for prayer.

In the pre-Islamic years, Ka'ba used to be the prime quarter that all Arab tribes would visit in order to exchange goods, participate in poetry contests and worship. Its surroundings were sacred and venerated by everyone. Killing animals (excluding the sacrificial offers) and holding arms were not allowed in its limits and at certain periods of time any kind of conflict within its boundaries was banned[37].

Addressing the prophet and the Muslim community in the Qur'an, Allah for the most part communicates His message in first person plural. The same pattern can be observed in Q.2:125 except for the part in which Allah calls Ka'ba 'My House'[38]. According to Yusuf Ali, the intention of this expression is 'to emphasise the personal relation of Allah, the One True God, to it, and repudiate the polytheism which defiled it before it was purified again by Muhammad'[39].

In addition to the standard translation of Q.2:125, Baidawi offers a metaphorical interpretation. Instead of *mathābatan* (a place of assembly) he reads *thawāb* (a place of reward) and, therefore, translates the verse as follows: 'those who will visit the House will be rewarded in heaven'. He explains his own translation saying that the House is called a place of safety because those who take the

---

*Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places*, p. 10; it was also the very sanctity of the place in connection to sociopolitical and economical reasons that led to the establishment of a city there (*ibid.*).

[37] See Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, p. 52, n. 125 and Palmer, *The Qur'an*, pp. xvi.

[38] In Q.52:4 reference is made to a 'much frequented House', presumably the celestial archetype of the temple of Ka'ba that is the place of worship of God in the heavens.

[39] Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, p. 52, n. 125.

pilgrimage are safe from Allah's punishment since visiting the House wipes out previous sins[40].

In his philological evaluation of the passage, Beck asserts that Muhammad considered the Meccan shrine to be older than Abraham. To support his argument, Beck points to verse 125 of sura 2 and verse 26 of sura 22 in which reference is made solely to the House as a place of assembly and an asylum that Abraham and Ishmael purified -after they entered into a treaty of loyalty with God- for its pious visitors. Only later, in Q.2:127, are Abraham and Ishmael represented as the co-founders of the House. Similarly, Q.3:97 makes direct mention of the antiquity of the House and no indication is there as to Abraham's role in its construction. The latter's name is only peripherally referred to in the phrase '*maqāmu Ibrāhīma*'[41]. Abraham is, thus, under an assignment to reform a cult – a task that thousands of years later Muhammad will be carrying out[42].

Purification of the sanctuary is required so that the believers may perform the prescribed by Allah rites. The latter involve going around the sacred realm, withdrawing to the sacred house for prayer and meditation[43] and inclining one's body or prostrating oneself on the ground in prayer. The technical terms *tawāf*, *i'tikāf*, *rukū'* and *sujūd*, used today, have derived from the roots of the words used in the Arabic text to describe those who undertake the aforementioned rites[44].

---

[40] ited in Gätje, *The Qur'ān and its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations*, pp. 100-101.
[41] Beck, 'Die Gestalt des Abraham am Wendepunkt der Entwicklung Muhammeds', p. 77.
[42] *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.
[43] In Q.22:26 the term *qā'imīn* –those who stand up- occurs instead of *'ākifin*. Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, p. 828, n. 2798.
[44] Beck, 'Die Gestalt des Abraham', p. 77.

The nature of the purification that needs to be undertaken is not mentioned in Q.2:125. However, drawing a parallel between this verse and verse 26 of sura 22, where is stated: '*ān 'lā tūshrik bi shaīān*'[45], it is evident that 'sanctification' in verse 125 mainly refers to the act of clearing out God's temple from any traces of the polytheistic cults that were present in Abraham's time[46].

***b. The Station of Abraham***

The most popular belief concerning the station of Abraham is that the station refers to a stone that the prophet stood -and left his footprint on- either in order to call all people to the pilgrimage or for the building of the Ka'ba.

Beck claims that the phrase 'Station of Abraham' has a broader meaning than that of an item that carries Abraham's traces on. To his understanding: 'der Ausdruck bezeichnet somit den ganzen heiligen Bezirk'[47]. The expression '*maqāmu Ibrāhīma*' in Q.3:97, as he asserts, cannot be an apposition to '*āyātun bayyinātun*' since the first is in singular form and the second in plural. On the contrary, accepting a. '*maqāmu Ibrāhīma*' as a predicate of an elliptic sentence in which the missing subject is 'the Meccan Sanctuary' and b. that '*waman dahalahū*' refers to the station of Abraham, is in alignment with the phrase '*bawwa' na li-'Ibrāhīma makāna l-bayti*' in Q.22:26 and also with the meaning of the verse 2:125: '*wattahidū min maqāmi Ibrāhīma muṣallan*'. Here, due to the preposition 'from' the verse should be translated as follows: 'take a place to pray from the Station of Abraham and not 'take the Station of Abraham as a place of prayer'. To those who take '*min*' as pleonasm and consider '*maqāmi Ibrāhīma*' and '*muṣallan*' to be of the same meaning, Beck's response is

---

[45] 'Associate not anything (In worship) with Me' (Beck, *ibid.*).
[46] See also Baidawi's interpretation in Gätje, *The Qur'ān and its Exegesis*, p. 102.
[47] 'the expression designates thus the whole holy district'. Beck, 'Die Gestalt des Abraham', p. 77.

that there are no other verses in the Qur'an that may give one the impression of '*muṣallan*' and '*maqām*' being identified, while the preposition '*min*' is found elsewhere[48] in the Qur'an giving the meaning of 'partiality'[49].

Finally, Baidawi mentions that the station has sometimes been identified with the stone and other times with the *ḥaram* or the stations of the pilgrimage but also provides us with an unusual translation of the first part of verse 2:125, attributed to Nafi' and Ibn 'Amir. The latter read *wa-ttakhadhū* instead of *wa-ttakhidhū* (i.e. they read the verb in the past tense), connect the phrase 'And take ye the Station of Abraham as a place of prayer' with the previous sentence and translate it as such: '(And When We appointed the House to be a place of visitation for the people, and a sanctuary) and (when) the people took the so-called station of Abraham, that is the Ka'ba, as the orientation point for the direction of the prayer (*qibla*)'[50].

***c. The Prayer***

The theme in verses 127-129 of sura 2 is 'Abraham and Ishmael's prayer'. The prayer consists of four parts: a. the humble dedication of the temple to Allah, b. an invocation regarding their and their offspring's steadfastness in true faith and correct worship, c. an appeal for forgiveness and finally, d. a request for the elevation of a prophet among their descendants, who will remind the latter of God's will and provide them with spiritual guidance. Here, Abraham appears to be prophesizing the future advent of Muhammad, the last one in a row of prophets. The content of the prayer coincides for its most part with Abraham's prayer in Q.14:35-41, the difference

---

[48] Q.16:68.
[49] Beck, 'Die Gestalt des Abraham', p. 77; Kuschel in accord with Beck, identifies the station of Abraham with the place on which Ka'ba stands. Kuschel, *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims*, p. 153.
[50] Cited in Gätje, *The Qur'ān and its Exegesis*, p. 101.

being that in the reading under discussion, Ishmael, who is now an adult, joins his father to prayer.

Torrey asserts that verse 128 illustrates the origins of the name that was adopted for the Islamic religion; the term Islam, he states, was chosen by Muhammad 'because his two noted ancestors, Abraham and Ishmael, yielded and surrendered themselves to the divine will'[51], expressed in Arabic by the term *salama*. As for the plea for mercy in the same verse, that is interpreted by Yusuf Ali as the product of 'a prophetic vision' that caused Abraham to envisage corruption among Ishmael's and Isaac's progeny[52].

### 4.5. The Connection of Abraham and Ishmael with the Ka'ba and the Possibility of the Perception of Ishmael as the Father of the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times

Given that the notion of Abraham as the builder of the Meccan sanctuary appears exclusively in Medina revelation, it is not to our great surprise that the majority of Western scholars have interpreted the narrative in question as well as the Abraham-Mecca and Abraham-Ishmael links in general as a formation of religious polemic leveled at the negative response Muhammad's prophetic mission received from the Jewish community in Yathrib soon after his and his followers' settlement there.

---

[51] Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*, p. 101; Goitein associates the name Muslim(s) with Q.2:131 'Behold! his Lord said to him: "Bow (thy will to Me)" He said: "I bow (my will) to the Lord and Cherisher of the universe.' or with Q.22:78 '...it is the cult of your father Abraham. It is He Who has named you Muslims...' Goitein, 'Abraham', p. 286; Yusuf Ali considers the subject of the last phrase to be Allah and not Abraham. See Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, p. 842, n. 2863; Van Seters, on the other hand, argues that Abraham's identity as a *muslim* is primarily related to his submission when God orders him to sacrifice his son. Van Seters, 'Abraham', p. 17.

[52] Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, p. 54, n. 129.

The Dutch orientalist C. Snouck Hurgronje was the first to express this view in his doctoral dissertation *Het Mekkaansche Feest*[53]. However, the particular notion that the connection between Abraham and the building of the Ka'ba was the making of Muhammad -i.e. the notion that Hurgronje drew upon to write his thesis- is originally Aloys Sprenger's[54].

Kuschel objects to the idea that the connection between Abraham and the Meccan Sanctuary (not the connection in regards to the foundation of the Ka'ba though) was Muhammad's invention and argues that if this belief was not a part of the tradition of Muhammad's tribe but instead the product of a strategy, there is no explanation for Q.14:37 that reads: 'O our Sustainer! Behold, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley in which there is no arable land, close to Thy Sanctified Temple (i.e. the Ka'ba), so that, O our Sustainer, they might devote themselves to prayer'[55]. He argues, however, that those traditions which linked Abraham, Ishmael and the Mecca sanctuary were made use of later, in the process of establishing Islam as the oldest monotheistic religion and that the association was probably made in 'deliberate parallelism' to Jewish traditions according to which, the Jerusalem Temple was built by Abraham and Isaac[56].

That Q.14:35-41 attests to the link between Abraham and Mecca, an idea which did not arise suddenly as a calculated move but was later developed (the

---

[53] C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Het Mekkaansche Feest* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1880); see also, Julius Wellhausen, *Reste Arabischen Heidentumes*, Vol. 3 of his *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten* (Berlin, Georg Reimer, 1887), pp. 64-65; *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 vols. (New York, London, Funk&Wagnalls, 1901-1906), Vol. I, p. 87; Rudi Paret, 'Der Islam' in Ulrich Mann (ed.), *Theologie* und *Religionswissenschaft: der Gegenwärtige Stand ihrer Forschungsergebnisse und Aufgaben im Hinblick auf ihr Gegenseitiges Verhältnis* (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973), p. 146; Francis E. Peters, *Children of Abraham* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 198 and Jan Hjärpe, 'Abraham IV' in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Vol. 1 (Berlin and New York, 1977), p. 38.

[54] Aloys S. Sprenger, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Moḥammed*, 2nd ed., (Berlin, Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1869, 1st ed. 1861-1865), Vol. 2, p. 270.

[55] Kuschel, *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims*, p. 154.

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 152.

development was indeed encouraged by the attitude of the Jews and the Christians) to also include Ishmael, had been noted a few decades earlier by Edmund Beck[57]. As for Ishmael, apart from a brief allusion in Q.14:37, there is no verse that associates him with the Arab tribes in the Qur'an. It is only later that Muslim historians and chroniclers look at him as the ancestor of the northern Arabs[58].

Having studied the early Muslim traditions as well as various Arab genealogical works, Dagorn asserts that there is no mention of Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael in the pre-Islamic Arab tradition and, thus, to him, the spread of the idea of an Abrahamic spiritual and racial ancestry of the Arabs is clearly the work of Muhammad[59].

However, a tradition, which already existed before Muhammad, relates to the special status that the Quraysh tribe used to enjoy -most significantly, they controlled Mecca and the Ka'ba- on the plea of being the noblest of Ishmael's descendants. The German Arabist Tilman Nagel notes that the Quraysh claimed Ishmael as their forefather a long time before the rise of Islam, the reason being that they wished to unite all Arabs under their own rule. The author is positive that even Muhammad was convinced about the genealogical link between Ishmael and his tribe[60].

What is more, Ka'ba, the principal sanctuary in Arabia, is said to have contained 365 idols in Muhammad's time among which, images of Abraham and Ishmael holding divining arrows. If one accepts that, the last piece of information is an indication that the figures of Abraham and Ishmael must have been well known in

---

[57] Beck, 'Die Gestalt des Abraham', pp. 80, 86-87 and 93-94.
[58] Paret, "Isma'il", pp. 184-85.
[59] René Dagorn, *La Geste D'Ismael d'apres l'Onomastique et la Tradition Arabes* (Geneva, Librairie Drozk,1981), chapter 1.
[60] Tilman Nagel, *Staat und Glaubensgemeinschaft im Islam*, Vol. 1 (Zürich und Münich, 1981), p. 27.

Mecca. However, Guillaume argues that since the person responsible for the decoration of the Ka'ba in its reconstruction was a Copt, the figures recognized by the Muslims as Abraham and Ishmael could have been Zacharias and Joseph and the supposed arrows, the rods which the high priest used for the selection of the latter. This image is according to the author taken from the apocryphal infancy gospels and portrayed in Byzantine iconography[61].

In order to refute the argument according to which, disproportion between the Meccan and Medinan Abrahamic references for the most part illustrates a change in the relationship with the Jews, Bijlefeld puts forward his own interpretation; Islam, he suggests, was a universal religion and Ibrahim was not to be regarded exclusively as the father of the Arabs. Therefore, if his bond with the Arabs was stressed in the years before Hijra i.e. before the first Islamic community was established, Islam might have been mistakenly linked to the Arabic descent[62].

The author reaches his conclusion drawing upon two sources; the first is a remark made by Wajdi in the Arabic version of *Encyclopedia of Islam* (as a response to those who hold that the link between the Arabs and Abraham was a politically motivated move) according to which, the mention of the Abrahamic background of the Arabs would have brought more successful results in Mecca rather than in Medina where the tribes came from Yemen[63].

The second one is a statement by Youakim Moubarac concerning Abraham being 'the father of the faithful' and not 'the father of the Arabs' that the former based

---

[61] Alfred Guillaume, 'The Pictorial Background of the Qur'an' in *Annual of Leeds University Oriental Society*, Vol. 3 (1961-2), pp. 39-59.
[62] Bijlefeld, 'Controversies around the Quranic Ibrahim Narrative and its Orientalist Interpretations', p. 94.
[63] Muḥammad Farīd Wajdī, *Dā'irat al-ma'ārif al-islāmiyya*, trans. and ed. Ibrahim Z. Khurshid, 14 vols. (Cairo, 1352/1933), Vol. I, pp. 28-29 cited in Bijlefeld, *ibid.*, p. 86.

on ayas such as Q.14:36[64] which put emphasis on faith -and not ancestry- as the common characteristic of Abraham's children[65]. As regards the 'evolution of the figure of Ibrāhīm' in the Qur'an, Moubarak observes: 'The Qur'ān does not appeal to Ibrāhīm in order to make Islam independent from the Jews and the Christians, but it takes distance from them because it has discovered in Ibrāhīm a perfect model of a true believer, predating the Judaeo-Christian revelation which ultimately distorted his figure.'[66].

Bijlefeld also draws a comparison between the scarcity of Abrahamic references in the Meccan period and the absence of the name of Abraham in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament noted by Vriezen[67] and commented on as such: 'It is remarkable that in the prophetic writings the patriarchs play such a subordinate part or even no part at all (Abraham). The message of the prophets emphasizes God's mercy, not the noble descent of the people'[68].

Lidzbarski argues that the Arabs of the pre-qur'anic era were acquainted not only with Abraham but also with Ishmael as a biblical figure through the intervention of their contemporary Jews, since it was to the latter's interest to be known as cousins of the Arabs. With regard to the names of the central characters in the narrative, he assumes that the Arabic version of the name Abraham 'Ibrahim' was formed after the pattern of the name 'Isma'īl' since adaptation of one name to the pattern of another

---

[64] '...he then who follows my (ways) is of me, and he that disobeys me- but Thou art indeed Oft-forgiving, most Merciful'.
[65] Youakim Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran. L'Histoire d'Abraham dans le Coran et la naissance de l'Islam* (Paris, J. Vrin, 1958), pp. 68-69 and 71 cited in Bijlefeld, 'Controversies around the Quranic Ibrahim Narrative and its Orientalist Interpretations', pp. 91 and 94.
[66] Moubarac, *ibid.*, pp. 54-55 cited in Bijlefeld, *ibid.*, p. 89.
[67] Theodorus C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, 2nd ed. (Newton, MA, Charles T. Branford Co., 1970, 1st Dutch ed., 1949), p. 81 quoted in Bijlefeld, 'Controversies around the Quranic Ibrahim Narrative', p. 94.
[68] Vriezen, *ibid.*, p. 314, n. 2 quoted in *ibid.*

was a common practice in the process of forming Arabic names for biblical characters especially when the latter were somehow related[69].

It is indeed well known that Judeo-Christianity had penetrated into the Arabian Peninsula -especially in the periphery and the south- a long time before the advent of Islam and thus, some scholars argue for the possibility that Muhammad came across and adopted the idea of the Arabs' Abrahamic origin from his environment[70].

In relation to the above, Watt suggests that the reason that the Arabs' descent from Ishmael is not particularly emphasized in the Qur'an is because its audience is already acquainted with this notion owing to the biblical tradition current in Arabia according to which some north Arabic tribes were descendants of Ishmael[71].

What is more, except for Genesis[72] the Arabs are also referred to as Ishmaelites in the Talmud,[73] the Babylonian version of which was produced around 600 AD.

Concerning the historicity of the tradition, Eph'al, having studied the Arabic genealogies appearing in the biblical and extra-biblical sources, notes that all biblical references to the 'Ishmaelites' or 'Ishmael' stop by the mid-tenth century BC and also that there is no mention of this tribe in any other extra-biblical source of the biblical period (e.g. Assyrian, Greek, Latin, old Arabic- all dealing with the nomad tribes of

---

[69] Mark Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer*, (Giessen, Alfred Töpelmann, 1905-1915), XXVI, p. 73 and *Ephemeris für Semitische Epigraphik* (Giessen, A. Töpelmann, 1900-1915), V. 2, p. 44 quoted in Joseph Horovitz, pp. 156 and 160. The name Ibrahim appears in the early Meccan period while the name Ishmael first appears in the late Meccan period.

[70] See, e.g. Rodinson, 'preface', p. xix and Francis E. Peters, *Judaism, Christianity and Islam: the Classical Texts and their Interpretation*, Vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 25.

[71] Genesis 25:12-18, Montgomery W. Watt, *Der Islam* (Stuttgart, Mainz, 1980), Vol. 1 (Mohammed und die Fruhzeit), p. 124.

[72] Genesis 37:27 and 39:1.

[73] Sukkah 52b, Kiddushin 72a, Shabbath 11a, Sanhedrin 91a, Yevamoth 77a, Mo'ed Katan 24a in *The Babylonian Talmud*, trans. into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of Isidore Epstein (London, Soncino Press, 1952).

the Arabian peninsula). On the other hand, the term 'Arab(s)' appears in the biblical and Assyrian sources from the mid-ninth century BC on. Thus, 'the biblical terms 'Arabs' and 'Ishmaelites' are not used concurrently, and the term 'Arab' was clearly introduced only after 'Ishmael' had become obsolete'[74]. Therefore, the author asserts that the list of the twelve generations of Ishmael's sons presented in Genesis is a later amendment.

## 4.6. Ethnocentricity or Universality?

The Abraham-Ka'ba ayas embrace two themes that call for attention; first, a kind of an 'initial covenant' made between Allah and his earliest devotees and also Abraham's invocation for Muhammad's prophetic mission among the community of believers that would rise from him and his son Ishmael.

Peters correctly observes that the Islamic religion does not invalidate the Jewish professed Abrahamic origin, but it rather proclaims that God's promise was fulfilled in Abraham's Muslim progeny[75].

In the same line of thought we could say that the fact that Ishmael and not Isaac is the 'chosen one' by Allah to assist Abraham in constructing 'God's House' entails that the former is given some kind of preferentiality over the latter already in the Qur'an. Thus, the originally Jewish concept of the 'chosen people' is adopted by the Qur'an, which disinherits the Jews from this prerogative and applies it to Ishmael. In this case though, it seems that choice is made on grounds of submission and not lineage: the promise includes only the faithful descendants of Abraham. God's promise comes as an answer to Abraham and Ishmael's prayer for the fortification of

---

[74] I. Eph'al, '"Ishmael" and "Arab(s)": a Transformation of Ethnological Terms' in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (1976), p. 227.
[75] Peters, *Children of Abraham*, p. 197.

their faith and instruction as to their religious duties. God makes the Ka'ba a refuge for all men who will accept Abraham's faith, that is pure monotheism. The same idea of predilection on the basis of commitment is expressed previous to the narration of the building of Ka'ba, in Q.2:124 in which the answer to Abraham's appeal to God for His blessing of all his offspring is: '...but my promise is not within the reach of evil-doers'[76].

Wansbrough justifiably remarks that prophetic mission in the Qur'an very often appears to be of ethnocentric nature[77] and that the case of Abraham is a unique example of a shift from an ethnocentric to a universal character of the qur'anic prophetology[78]. Yet, the narrative of the foundation of the Ka'ba sustains this view only partly that is, it refers to Abraham as 'an imam to the nations'[79] and the builder of a sanctuary that is intended for all believers[80] only to go back to the model of ethnically orientated prophecy on the occasion when for the sake of the spiritual guidance of his and his son's offspring, Abraham prays for the emergence of a prophet among themselves[81].

Kuschel does not perceive the Medina suras referring to Ishmael as an element which clashes with the professed Islamic universality. His own interpretation is that Medina is the place where the qur'anic message undergoes an Arabizing process

---

[76] In Christianity the new covenant has, likewise, an exclusive character; eligibility for a special relationship with God is determined by faith in Jesus and the atoning nature of his self-sacrifice. See Peters, *ibid.*, pp. 198-99.
[77] See e.g. Q.10:47; 13:7; 28:75; 35:24.
[78] John E. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 53-54; he refers e.g. to the well-known verse 3:67: 'Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian; But he was true in faith...'; cf. Goitein, 'Abraham', p. 286; on universality related to a. the fact that there were neither Jews nor Arabs when Abraham became a believer and b. the yearly Feast of Sacrifices, see LaHurd, 'One God, One Father: Abraham in Judaism, Christianity and Islam', p. 23.
[79] Q.2:124.
[80] Q.2:125-26.
[81] Q.2:129.

[which has very little to do with 'provincialization', as is obvious from the verses referring to the pilgrimage[82]] resulting to Ishmael's representation as 'Abraham's favourite son'[83]. To support his case, he quotes certain Meccan verses in which: a. Ishmael appears individually and unconnectedly to Abraham, b. Isaac and Jacob are referred to as Abraham's sons and c. (again in isolation) Ishmael is mentioned as a prophet and an apostle sent to guide his people in prayer and charity[84].

## 4.7. Conclusion

Peters in the epilogue of his book *Children of Abraham* argues for the incorporation of two Abrahams in the Qur'an, a biblical and sporadically midrashic one as well as a later conceived character of a man named Abraham who left his country accompanied by his wife Hagar and son Ishmael to inhabit Mecca, where he built Ka'ba and established a number of rituals that later became part of the Islamic pilgrimage[85].

However, nowhere in the Qur'an is there mention of Abraham's emigration to Arabia or settlement in Mecca -reference is made only to a journey- and Hagar is never mentioned as his wife. Besides, Peters' argument is not aligned with the fact that there is no indication in the Qur'an of one Abrahamic version contradicting another. Biblical legends may be well known among the qur'anic audience; still they do not fully repeat themselves in the Islamic scripture, so as to create a second image. Therefore, we are more likely to be on firm ground, if we accept that there has been a steady progress in the figure of Abraham within the various stages of the revelation, as

---

[82] Q.22:27f. (Kuschel, *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims*, p. 154).
[83] *Ibid.*, p. 151.
[84] Q.6:84; 6:86; 19:49; 19:54; 21:72; 21:85; 38:45-48 quoted in *ibid.*
[85] Peters, *Children of Abraham*, p. 197.

this was unfolding to meet with the needs of Muhammad's prophetic mission and the development of the Muslim community[86].

Guthrie notes, correctly, that Q.21:52ff and Q.37:81-113 in which Abraham confronts his pagan people, indicate the beginning of a process of parallelism between Abraham and Muhammad while the highest level of identification of the two is reached later in Medina, when attention is called to the patriarch's association with the Ka'ba[87].

Since there is no indication of any link between the sacrifice verses and the Ka'ba verses in the Qur'an, Bell's assessment of Q.37:102-107 as a Medinan amendment on grounds of grammar is not entirely convincing. We could accept the sacrifice story as a Medina addition (part of the so obvious in Islamic tradition effort to legitimize the previously idolatrous practice of offering sacrifices at the Ka'ba) if there was the slightest hint of connection between the sacrifice ayas and the pilgrimage or the Ka'ba ayas. On the contrary, it seems to me that the sacrifice ayas fit the *Meccan* portrayal of Abraham.

As is well-known, a great part of the Meccan revelation refers to the fierce opposition that Muhammad meets with, once -having overcome the initial feelings of doubt and uncertainty- his prophetic mission becomes known to his tribesmen. Abraham, who acts as Muhammad's prototype throughout the Qur'an, in the Meccan phase of revelation is -just like Muhammad- a sacrificing figure; a man who has found God and is ready to sacrifice 'anything' that stands between him and total submission to the divine will, whether it be fixed ideas, his homeland or his family. Such a

---

[86] The task of filling in the gaps and interpreting obscure verses was left to the Muslim tradition, which traces the beginning of Ka'ba back to the creation of the universe or even earlier and relates in detail the occasions that led Abraham, Hagar and his son Ishmael from Palestine to Mecca.
[87] A. Guthrie, 'The Significance of Abraham' in *The Muslim World*, Vol. 45 (1955), p. 117.

depiction of Abraham makes perfect sense in the Meccan period of revelation when the new converts are encouraged to draw strength from the prophetic stories so that they do not succumb to the harsh persecution launched often by their own families. Only later, when -having survived the persecution- the new Muslims have organized themselves in a faith community in Medina, is the figure of Abraham used in the Qur'an to instruct the new devotees as to where and how to worship God.

An investigation into Abraham's figure in the Qur'an and the hadith traditions will hopefully show how the sacrifice story was meant as part of the Meccan portrayal of Abraham as a sacrificing figure and how outside its qur'anic context, in the hadith literature, this aspect of Abraham's personality is naturally de-emphasized.

## Chapter 5: Abraham in the Qur'an and the Hadith

### a. Abraham in the Qur'an

### 5.1. Introduction

From a very first reading of the Qur'an one becomes aware of the fact that Abraham holds a particularly prestigious place in the 'mother of the book' (*umm al-kitāb*) as a great believer whose prophetic mission acted as a catalyst for God's revelation to humanity. Abraham's name (Arabic version: *Ibrāhīm*) appears in 65 ayas in a total of 25 Mecca and Medina suras, one of which (the 14th) is titled 'Abraham'.

The qur'anic account of Abraham is one of a sound-hearted man whose lucidity of mind allowed him to (a) conceive the Oneness of God even though he was raised in a polytheistic environment, (b) be assigned as a prophet in a line of prophets sent by God to warn those who persist in false belief and evil ways about the consequences, (c) cut off ties with his unbelieving people (among whom was his father) and emigrate with his nephew Lut who believed and followed him, (d) receive blessing in the form of long life, children and prosperity and finally, (e) be the first to introduce the true religion (*islām*) and establish the Islamic pillars (belief in the Oneness of God, prayer, pilgrimage and charity)[1].

According to the Qur'an the truth that was revealed through the prophet Abraham was gradually forsaken and distorted by his descendants[2] and from a long line of prophets deriving from his family, sent to remind -each one to his own people-

---

[1] See e.g. Q.21:73; the fast during the month of Ramadan was established in commemoration of the divine revelation given to the prophet Muhammad and through him to all humanity; therefore, in the case of Abraham, reference can only be made to four out of five Islamic pillars.
[2] See Q.19:58-59.

of '*millat Ibrāhīm*', Muhammad was the last one with the task to teach all nations. Muhammad's mission was the most successful one as he managed to re-establish Abraham's true religion among the offspring of the latter's firstborn son, Ishmael.

In the course of my analysis of the Abrahamic figure, it will hopefully become clear that Abraham's persona in the Qur'an is not only celebrated as such but also acts as a prototype for Muhammad, prefiguring his life, his mission and most importantly, his self-sacrificing nature.

## 5.2. Abraham, the Friend of God

There is a plethora of honorary titles Abraham is addressed by or referred to in the Qur'an. In particular, he is repeatedly called 'the sane in faith' or 'the true in faith' (*hanīf*)[3], an 'imam' (*imāmān*)[4] and 'a prophet' (*nabī*)[5]; he is said to be 'devoutly obedient to God'[6], one 'of the righteous' (*min aṣṢalihīn*) and 'a man of truth'[7]; Abraham is also described as 'tender-hearted, forbearing'[8], 'compassionate and given to look to God'[9] and he is mentioned as 'a model' (*ummatan*)[10]. Together with his progeny, he is praised in the Qur'an as one of the believing servants of God[11], a possessor of power and wisdom[12] and one 'of the company of the elect and the good'[13]. As a reward for his virtues he is saluted with the typical Islamic greeting: 'Peace upon Abraham!' (*salām ala Ibrāhīm*)[14].

---

[3] Q.2:135; 3:67, 95; 4:125; 6:161; 16:120, 123.
[4] Q.2:124.
[5] Q.19:41.
[6] Q.16:120.
[7] Q.29:27; 19:41
[8] Q.9:114; 11:75.
[9] Q.11:75.
[10] Q.16:120.
[11] Q.37:111.
[12] Q.38:46.
[13] Q.38:47.
[14] Q.37:109.

Most importantly, Abraham is the only qur'anic figure to be given the title 'the friend of Allah' (*al-khalīl*)[15]. Needless to say, nowhere in the Qur'an is it implied that Abraham attained non-human extraordinary characteristics. Undoubtedly, this title was granted to him on account of his exemplary strong faith, loyalty and submission to God. The various ayas, however, which make up Abraham's story in the Qur'an give the impression that there is a special closeness between Abraham and his Creator. Thus, one comes across an unusually casual (for qur'anic standards) encounter between the two in one passage as well as an informal dialogue between Abraham and God's angels in another. In the first narrative, Abraham asks God to show him how He gives life to the dead, not in order to believe but as a personal favour, in order to 'satisfy his heart'; God does not refuse his request and reveals in a miracle -using four birds- His authority over life[16]. The second informal dialogue takes place between Abraham and God's angelic messengers; when the angels tell Abraham not to despair because he will be given a faithful son, the prophet replies with a remark that shows nothing but confidence in the divine plan: 'And who despairs of the mercy of his Lord, but such as go astray?'[17]

### 5.3. *Millat Ibrāhīm* (the Way of Abraham), the Prophets and how They are all linked to the Mission of the Prophet Muhammad

With regard to Abraham's religious identity, the Qur'an stresses that Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian since the Torah and the Gospel were revealed long after his death; on the contrary, we are told that Abraham 'bowed his will to Allah'; this last phrase is expressed by the Arabic *muslima*, which derives from the same root

---

[15] Q.4:125; mention of Abraham as the 'friend' of God can also be found in the Old Testament (Isaiah 41:8 and 2 Chronicles 20:7).
[16] Q.2:260.
[17] Q.15:55-56.

as the word *muslim*[18]. Abraham's (and Ishmael's) *muslim* identity is clearly stated in two qur'anic verses. In the first one, he and his first-born son pray to God to make them *muslims* (literally, to help them bow their will to Allah)[19]; in the second, when he is ordered to become a *muslim* by Allah, Abraham answers that he bows his will to Him (in other words, he responds by saying that from that moment on, he is a *muslim*)[20].

But why is Abraham regarded as the first *muslim* considering that there were messengers before him? Revelation has it that the first to be chosen above all people was Adam[21]. Noah is also said to have been a prophet to his people[22] and to have received the same revelation as Muhammad and the rest of the prophets[23] in some form of inspiration[24]. However, the Qur'an portrays Abraham as the first man to make full surrender to Allah and mankind is advised to follow his way despite the fact that Abraham followed someone else's way, namely Noah's[25].

A possible explanation as to why Abraham is emphasized as the first muslim in the Qur'an is that although there were messengers before Abraham (e.g. Noah, Ad and Thamud), those messengers revealed the divine word to people who denied the truth, prosecuted them and as a result were destroyed by God[26]. True religion was, therefore, accepted by very few people but never established in a community. Abraham's message was, likewise, denied and Abraham faced hostility and persecution but in the end he managed to establish *islām* by building -with the aid of

---

[18] Q.3:65-68; see also Q.2:140.
[19] Q.2:128.
[20] Q.2:131.
[21] Q.3:33; 19:58-59.
[22] Q.3:33; 19:58-59; 9:70; 57:26.
[23] Q.42:13.
[24] Q.4:163.
[25] Q.37:83.
[26] See Q.7:59-79, 85-93.

his son- the first temple for the worship of One God and by teaching his descendants the *islamic* practices.

Another possible explanation is related to the particular period of Muhammad's prophetic mission when Abraham's *muslim* identity is revealed; the part of revelation that emphasizes Abraham's *muslim* identity[27] belongs to the years following the Hijra, the time when Muhammad's contemporary Jews have clearly denied his message. To the Jews who claim that Abraham is their father via Israel (Jacob) the answer is that God chooses his people on grounds of commitment rather than lineage and thus Abraham's only true followers are true believers, i.e. *muslims*[28]. In the same line of thought one may assume that what makes Abraham's revelation more 'significant' to Muhammad's universal message than the revelation given to the prophets preceding Abraham is that Abraham is revered and claimed as a father both by Jews and Christians and this fact may be a reason for them to be interested in the qur'anic message.

In direct relation to the above, Muhammad's place at the end of a continuous prophetic line is a theme often repeated in several Medina suras[29]. It, therefore, seems that all these suras function as an indication to the true nature of the mission entrusted to the prophet, i.e. to confirm the teachings of the earlier prophets. Moreover, the verses suggest that Muhammad was not introducing a new faith but he was rather restoring the creed of Abraham according to God's message which was mainly addressing Muhammad[30] and the new believers but also Medina Jews[31].

---

[27] Q.2:128, 131.
[28] This statement appears to be made by Abraham himself in Q.14:36: '…he then who follows my (ways) is of me, and he that disobeys me, but Thou art indeed Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful'.
[29] Q.2:133, 136; 3:33-34, 68, 84; 4:163; 9:70; 57:26-28.
[30] See Q.16:123; 22:78; 6:161.

At this point it should be noted that there are striking differences between the ayas revealed in Mecca and those revealed in Medina as to the individuals who compose the prophetic line, the most important difference being that in the part of the message uncovered in Medina it is clearly stated that all prophets were of the same family -offspring one of the other[32]- having Abraham as their patriarch. Furthermore, when the prophetic line is mentioned in Medina verses it is more detailed, including names such as: Job, Jonah, Aaron, Solomon, David[33], 'Ad, Thamud and the men of Midian[34] who are omitted in Mecca revelation[35]. Also, Ishmael as Abraham's first-born child is mentioned next to Abraham and before Isaac[36]. Finally, when Abraham is mentioned separately as Muhammad's forefather[37], it is beyond question that both ancestry and spiritual ties are implied.

On the contrary, in Mecca revelation[38] despite the fact that the prophetic line seems to stem from the same family, the prophet Muhammad is not mentioned as a 'member' of this family. What is more, no reference is made to the names of those prophets who descended from Abraham via Ishmael; reference is made exclusively to the Hebrew prophets who descended from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob and whose line ended with Jesus. As for Ishmael, he is mentioned isolated four times; in Q.6:84 [L.Mec.] next to Elisha, Jonah and Lot who are said to be of those guided by God, (while Isaac and Jacob are mentioned earlier in the same verse as blessings given to Abraham); in Q.38:48 [E.M.Mec.] next to the Hebrew prophet Elisha and

---

[31] See Q.3:95; 4:125.
[32] Q.3:34.
[33] Q.4:163.
[34] Q.9:70.
[35] The exception is Q.53:42 in which Ad and Thamud are mentioned, not in a prophetic line, though.
[36] Q.2:133, 136; 3:84; 4:163.
[37] Q.22:78.
[38] Q.6:84; 12:6, 38; 19:58-59; 29:27; 42:13; 38:45-47.

Dhul-Kifl, all three of 'the company of the good', (while in verse 45 the names of Isaac and Jacob stand next to Abraham's name and all three are praised as 'possessors of power and vision' and those 'of the company of the elect and good'). He is mentioned again in Q.21:85-86 [M.Mec.] together with Idris and Dhul-Kifl, all righteous men of constancy and patience and finally, in Q.19:54-55 [L.Mec.] in which there is a special reference to Ishmael as a man who was 'true to what he promised', 'a messenger and a prophet' and also as a good religious leader who urged his people to pray and practice charity.

It seems that Muhammad's mission in a largely monotheistic city, Medina, is legitimized by the fact that he belongs to a line of prophets sent by Allah to preach the Oneness and Uniqueness of God. Also, in the same way that information about Muhammad having followed the true religion established by Abraham is very significant for his monotheistic mission in Medina, it is also very important to inform the Jews of Medina who having a sectarian attitude (believing that they are the chosen ones through a covenant that God made with their father Abraham) reject Islam, that God's message conveyed to Muhammad is a universal one. It is not addressing only one nation but all mankind, that is, both Abraham's sons' offspring.

## 5.4. Abraham's Early Stages: Turning to Monotheism

### *a. Abraham's Environment*

While information about the time and place of Abraham's birth or death is absent from the Qur'an, the scenes from Abraham's childhood are the most frequently repeated among all Abrahamic narratives. The passages in question belong to the Meccan era and are indeed of major theological importance to the newly formed and still weak Muslim community for as we shall see, they have an inspiring and

empowering function for the few Mecca companions of the prophet who are called to take action for the sake of their faith under Allah's guidance.

The data we get from the Qur'an about the religion that was prevailing in Abraham's time is that his contemporaries used to carve idols (probably giving them the shape of celestial bodies) which they worshipped. According to the relevant ayas, this practice used to be carried out long before Abraham's time and the latter's people preserved it as a tradition without questioning it or being able to reason it[39]. However, when Abraham repeatedly asks his father[40] and people not to deify and adore anything else together with God[41] it is implied that his generation is not unaware of the existence of a God but they go wrong in that they ascribe partners to Him, committing a sin that is expressed in Arabic by the term *shirk*.

It is in such a polytheistic environment and despite his young age that Abraham is chosen by God to receive revelation. Initially he is bestowed with some sort of insight[42] that makes him question the adoration of idols, which is the prevalent practice among his people. He soon realizes the Oneness and Uniqueness of God and after going through a stage where he cannot perceive the transcendental nature of God's existence, through careful observation of the natural phenomena Abraham becomes conscious of the fact that Allah cannot possibly be of this cosmos as the skies and the earth are His own creations[43].

---

[39] Q.21:53; 26:74.
[40] The only information we get about Abraham's father in the Qur'an is his name, 'Azar' (Q.6:74), and his being totally devoted to idolatry as is obvious from his fierce reaction to Abraham's warning (Q.19:46).
[41] Q.6:78, 79, 80, 81; 19:48, 49; 21:66, 67; 29:17, 25.
[42] Q.6:75; 21:51.
[43] Q.6:76-79.

### *b. Revelation*

The question that is raised at this point concerns the nature of the revelation that Abraham receives after he has recognized the Unity of God. Is there an allusion to a godly sent book like the one that Muhammad and before him Moses and Jesus received? While the Qur'an does not include an account of God presenting Abraham with a holy scripture, verses 18-19 of sura 87 read: 'And this is in the books of the earliest –the books of Abraham and Moses'[44]. The same theme, slightly different, is repeated in Q.53:36. Finally, verse 54 of sura 4 refers to a book given to the people of Abraham. It is most likely that the scripture implied here is the Torah that was sent to the people who descended from Abraham's youngest son, Isaac. Unfortunately, only speculations can be made on this matter since we do not come across any other information in the Qur'an neither about the content of the book nor about a possible name of it[45].

The only piece of information that we get about Abraham's revelation concerns him being blessed with some kind of knowledge in the form of inspiration that gives him the ability to see the truth[46]. It also appears that he is familiar with some parts of the previous revelation as his preaching and prayer indicate[47].

---

[44] Yusuf Ali's translation; Muhammad Asad translates the term *ṣuḥuf* as 'revelations'. See Appendix A.

[45] The Qur'an names all the previous books given by God: the Torah, the *Injīl* (the Gospel) and finally the mother of the books, the Qur'an. Gibb suggests the possibility that Abraham's scriptures refer to the non-canonical Christian text *Apocalypse of Abraham*. Hamilton A. R. Gibb, 'Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia' in *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (1962), p. 274, n. 4.

[46] Q.19:43 'O my father! To me hath come knowledge which hath not reached thee…'; see also Q.21:51.

[47] See Q.29:18 where Abraham makes reference to the negative response that earlier prophets received from their people and Q.29:25 where he describes scenes that will take place on the Day of Judgement; see also Abraham's prayer (Q.26:85-102).

### *c. The Course of Abraham's Prophetic Mission*

Having received divine revelation, young Abraham is required to preach the truth to his people. Thus, he declares the Oneness of God, chides his father for believing in idols and warns him and his people about the consequences for those who reject the message[48]. Neither his father nor his people welcome his message about the Unity of God[49] and the Qur'an recites an episode in which Abraham smashes their idols, leaving intact only the biggest one to see if men are going to turn to it, exposing, in this way, their narrow-mindedness[50].

A verse of great interest is Q.21:57 that refers to the aforementioned incident: 'And by God, I have a plan for you and your idols- after ye go away and turn your backs…'. There is a twofold question regarding this verse: why did Abraham reveal his plan to his people and why did the latter not react to it? The first thing that comes to mind is that this was probably a thought Abraham made to himself. However, according to the passage, when his people find the idols destroyed, some of them recall Abraham talking about them[51]. Hence, a possible explanation is that Abraham tells his people that he is waiting for them to leave, simply to show that their idols are helpless without them being around; his people, on the other hand, do not pay any attention to his words, either because they think he has lost his sanity or because it is unthinkable for them that there can be such an 'impious person' that will attack 'the gods'.

---

[48] Q.6:79-82; 26:71-82; 37:85-87; 43:26-27; 19:41-45; 29:16-18, 25.
[49] Q.19:46; 21:52-57.
[50] Q.21:58-67; see also Q.37:91-93 in which Abraham mocks the idols and Q.2:258 where Abraham disputes with a man whose identity is not revealed (because of his statement that he can give life and death, it is presumed that this individual is a king) and proves the latter's weakness before God.
[51] Q.21:60.

Following this incident, Abraham is prosecuted. The Qur'an mentions that his people wish to punish him by throwing him into the fire but God protects him[52]. Q.21:69 'We said: O Fire! Be thou cool, and safety for Abraham!' suggests that Abraham is indeed cast into the fire and is miraculously saved. Nevertheless, there is no account of such an incident[53]. To save his life, Abraham flees to another land[54] followed by his brother's son, Lut[55], the only person to greet Abraham's message with faith.

It is quite evident that Abraham in his youth prefigures Muhammad's life and mission. The qur'anic story of Abraham's persecution communicates a very important message to the first Muslims; the latter are called to leave behind everything that keeps them away from God, including unbelieving members of their family and follow the right path in the same way that Muhammad and before him Abraham did. As a reward they will receive God's blessings.

### *d. God's Blessings to Abraham*

Allah's blessing follows Abraham's immigration and his having been tried by God 'with certain commands'[56]. Divine blessing is given only after faithful Abraham has denounced everything that is related to polytheism- the idols as well as those who worship them.[57] Abraham shows no sign of hesitation in following Allah, even though he has to desert his father in order to be able to stay in the right path. To reward him, Allah blesses the land he inhabits for the nations[58], gives him Isaac and

---

[52] Q.21:69-70.
[53] See also Q.29:24; 37:97-98.
[54] Q.19:48; 43:28.
[55] Q.21:71; 29:26.
[56] Q.2:124.
[57] 'When he had turned away from them and from those whom they worshipped besides God, We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, and each one of them We made a prophet.' (Q.19:49).
[58] Q.21:71.

Jacob[59] and they all became great leaders (imams and prophets)[60] and establish regular prayers and charity[61]. The Qur'an tells us that Abraham is rewarded both in this life and after his death[62].

## 5.5. Abraham in Old Age

While there is considerable information in the Qur'an about Abraham as a young man and Abraham at an older age, no report is given concerning the time after Abraham has left his land of birth and before he is given the news about a son who is to be born to him. Because of some information omitted, like the name of Abraham's wife and reference to Ishmael's mother, it is presumably presupposed that all these stories are already well known to the recipients of the Qur'an. What is more, as is typical of the disjointed form of the qur'anic revelation, there is not enough information for someone to speculate the chronological sequence of the narratives. What makes such a task even less realistic is that the Qur'an does not mention the name of the son that Abraham is ordered to sacrifice.

### *a. Abraham's Sacrifice*

The Qur'an praises Abraham's willingness to take his son's life as proof of his love for God. The narrative is a short one and is recited once, in Q.37:99-113, straight after the narrative of Abraham's dispute with his father, his persecution and immigration, when he asks God for a righteous son[63]. Here, one may suggest that the two stories are linked in content as such: since his father is not willing to join

---

[59] Q.19:49; 21:72; 29:27.
[60] Q.2:124; 19:49; 21:27.
[61] Q.21:73.
[62] Q.29:27.
[63] Q.37:100.

Abraham's true religion and there is nothing that the latter can do about it, he asks to be blessed with a pious son.

As we have seen there is a lot of ambiguity as to which son is almost sacrificed. There are also significant differences from the well-known biblical version. According to the qur'anic version, Abraham informs his son of a vision he has in which God demands from him to sacrifice the former and asks for his opinion. It is made clear that his son is not in a very young age (he has already started to work with his father), which implies that he can make rational decisions of his own and that he is accountable for his own deeds without being forced by anyone. When both father and son have submitted to God's will (the word used is derivative of the word *islām*), at the last minute before the boy is sacrificed, he is saved from God.

***b. Abraham's Encounter with God's Messengers***

Not only the scene of the sacrifice but also the scene of the three angels visiting Abraham in the shape of young men is well known from the Bible[64]. Once more, there are noticeable differences between the biblical version and its qur'anic counterpart. According to the three Meccan suras in which the story is narrated, when the angels arrive at Abraham's house he starts feeling afraid for, although they greet him with the common Islamic salutation (peace!), they do not eat from the food offered by him[65], something that Abraham probably takes as refusal of his hospitality and makes him think that his visitors have hostile intentions.

More significant in the narrative is the revealed message and the reaction to it by Abraham and his wife. The message includes Isaac's birth and the destruction of

---

[64] Genesis 18:1-16
[65] Q.51:25-29; 11:69-70; 14:52.

Lut's people. Abraham's wife, although does not show disbelief, laughs with astonishment and joy[66] for despite her being old and barren she will give birth. She laughs again when she hears about the imminent punishment on Lut's people, perhaps because she knows that these people are wrong-doers[67], hence responsible for their own destruction. Abraham, on the other hand, does not express any surprise[68] for the good tidings of a son -evidently because of his deep knowledge of God's power- but starts pleading with God for Lut's people as he had once done for his father. The Qur'an states that Abraham should not pray for the sinners and also that there is nothing he can do to change God's plan[69].

***c. Abraham's Forgiving and Loving Nature***

As mentioned above, Abraham's loving nature leads him to ask Allah for the forgiveness of people who have sinned and are doomed to be punished. Thus, although he has to leave his father, who is as intolerant towards his son as the rest of his people[70], Abraham salutes him gently and tells him that he will pray for his forgiveness[71]. We come across his prayer in Q.26:83-89; in it, Abraham asks from God to grant him 'wisdom', accept him among 'the righteous'[72], make him be commemorated in the later generations of the faithful[73] and accept him in the 'garden

---

[66] Q.51:29.
[67] Q.11:71.
[68] See Q.15:56.
[69] Q.11:74-76.
[70] Q.19:46.
[71] Q.19:47.
[72] Q.26:83.
[73] Q.26:84; according to M. Asad's translation he is asking for strength in order to pass the message to his followers. See Appendix A; in Q.19:50 and Q.16:122 (Ali's translation), Abraham's prayer for 'honorable mention' and a place among 'the righteous' is answered by God.

of bliss'[74]. After that, he prays for the forgiveness of his father[75]. In Q.14:41 Abraham seeks forgiveness for himself, his parents and the believers.

These suras, however, belong to the Meccan period. In the part of the Qur'an that is revealed in Medina on the other hand, the fact that Abraham pleads with God for the forgiveness of sinners is mentioned as a bad example of what should be the Muslims' attitude towards their unbelieving relatives; in the case of an unbelieving family, Abraham is an example to be avoided. It is clearly expressed that Muslims should follow Abraham in that he rejected his people because of their infidelity but not in that he prayed for his father's forgiveness[76]. Nonetheless, Abraham is excused for what he did since his prayer was a promise that he should keep and also because he had not yet realised that he could not pray for infidels as they are the enemies of God[77].

In another sura, of uncertain chronology, it is stated that when the divine messengers announce the destruction of the place where Lut lives, Abraham rushes to ask about Lut's safety[78]. Here, Abraham appears to be concerned only with the believer and not with the unbelieving inhabitants of the town.

***d. The Foundation of the Ka'ba by Abraham and Ishmael***

The narrative of the erection of the Ka'ba is one of the most important Abrahamic narratives, for it acts as an indicator of the time when Islam and its pillars were officially established. First, Abraham is ordered to build the Ka'ba and make

---

[74] Q.26:85.
[75] Q.26:86.
[76] Q.60:4-6.
[77] Q.9:144.
[78] Q.29:32.

sure that it is purified from any other worship but God's[79]. This is how the first pillar of Islam '*la ilaha illa Allah*' will be taught to people. Then, he is assigned to proclaim the pilgrimage in commemoration of God's name as a duty of all believers so that they express gratitude to God for the benefits they receive[80]. In the same qur'anic passage we get information about the establishment of some rites that take place during the pilgrimage, for instance the circumambulation of the house of God[81] and cattle sacrifice[82] the practicability of which is the feeding of the poor people. That brings us to the establishment of the second Islamic pillar, i.e. charity[83]. Regular prayer is already said to have been established by Abraham in the Meccan part of revelation[84].

Regardless of the clash between the Muslims and the Jews, one of the main reasons that the qur'anic verses concerning the Ka'ba are revealed in Medina must be that the newly formed religious community is in need of guidance as to where and how God should be worshipped. The Qur'an points to the station of Abraham (*makam Ibrahim*)[85] as a place of prayer. That is the sanctuary in Mecca that is said to have been built by Abraham and Ishmael. The Meccan verse that links Abraham and 'some of his offspring' with the sacred house[86] shows that Arabs must have been familiar with traditions that linked the monotheist Patriarch with the ancient sanctuary in Mecca. Of course, the sectarianism of the Jewish community in Medina and the rejection of Muhammad's prophethood by the Jews encourage the emphasis on the

---

[79] Q.2:125, 127; 22:26.
[80] Q.22:27; Reuven Firestone in his article 'Abraham's Association with the Meccan Sanctuary and the Pilgrimage in the Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Periods' attempts to show that in Q.22:26-27, God is addressing Muhammad rather than Abraham pp. 386-87.
[81] Q.2:125; 22:26, 29.
[82] Q.22:28.
[83] Q.22:28.
[84] Q.14:37.
[85] Q.2:125; 3:97; 22:26.
[86] Q.14:37.

Arabian sanctuary as the main place of worship for the new community that now wishes to draw the line between Islam and other forms of monotheism. In contrast to the temple in Jerusalem the erection of which was intended only for Jews, it is announced that the first temple ever dedicated to the adoration of One God is the sanctuary of the Ka'ba, which has been built for all mankind.

## 5.6. Conclusion

The Qur'an constantly hints at the substantial relation between Muhammad, the last prophet who was sent to convey a universal message to all nations and Abraham, the first *muslim*, who preached to his own people but was also the father of a line of prophets who were sent to all nations and most importantly, a prophet who asked God to send an apostle to the *muslims* deriving from Ishmael's line in order to repeat the revelation and guide his offspring on the right path[87].

Abraham's life and mission appears very similar to that of Muhammad's. Both prophets receive revelation in the form of inspiration and in a similar way that Abraham goes through a stage when he cannot identify God, for some time after he has received the first revelation, Muhammad is unsure about his prophetic call. Also, God sends His angels to Abraham to convey him a message and He later sends angel Gibril to recite the Qur'an to the prophet Muhammad. Both prophets, despite being forgiving in nature, cut off ties with their infidel people (Abraham with his father and people and Muhammad with his tribesmen, the Quraysh) and sacrificing the love and support that their families can provide become fugitives for the sake of faith. Finally, in the Medinan phase of revelation, Muhammad is ordered to proclaim the pilgrimage

---

[87] Q.2:129.

as 'a duty that men owe to God'[88] and re-establish all those Islamic practices that were first introduced by Abraham. In general, during their prophetic mission, both prophets meet up with harsh opposition, they are persecuted and led by their faith to sacrifice relationships[89] and personal comfort every time they are called to fight spiritual battles.

## b. Abraham in the Hadith Literature[90]

### 5.1. Introduction

As regards Abraham's story, it is quite obvious that the hadith are complementary to the Qur'an; studying the Islamic traditions rarely do we come across accounts already given in the Qur'an and when that happens, additional data is brought in. For the most part, the hadith literature that deals with the figure of Abraham presents the believer or the researcher with information that can be classified under three general types. First, certain hadith fill in the gaps that have arisen from the qur'anic accounts on Abraham's life and his relationship with his family; the same traditions also uncover the origin of most of the rituals that take place during the Hajj. The second type of information that we retrieve from the hadith traditions concerns the renovations to the Ka'ba following Abraham's death. Lastly, a fascinating and entirely new theme that a number of hadith introduce is Abraham's condition and rank among the other prophets in the afterlife.

---

[88] Q.3:97.
[89] One of the times that the qur'anic Abraham has to give up a close relationship is when he makes some of his offspring [the implication here is on Ishmael] dwell in a valley without cultivation, near the sacred house so that they devote themselves to prayer (Q.14:37).
[90] My analysis of the Abrahamic figure as it appears in the Islamic tradition is based on the two most authoritative hadith collections, those compiled by Bukhari and Muslim; See Appendix B; in particular, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* is considered to be the most important religious text after the Qur'an.

As is the case with the Qur'an, Abraham's character in the hadith epitomizes Muhammad's figure. Here, the similitude between the two prophets is not only confined to matters of virtues but also expands on physical resemblance.

## 5.2. Abraham's Sunna followed by the Arab Prophet

The hypothesis formulated earlier during the assessment of the Abrahamic character in the Qur'an that Abraham's personality acts as the epitome of Muhammad's persona applies to the hadith literature as well since the actions and statements of the Arab prophet in the Islamic traditions often echo Abraham's deeds and words and in most of the cases it is Muhammad himself who appears to underline the equivalence.

Thus, repeating Abraham's act of making Mecca a sanctuary and asking for God to bless the town and its inhabitants with prosperity, the Arab prophet makes Medina a sanctuary and asks for the blessings of Allah in its measures – the *Mudd* and the *Ṣa'* [91]. Again, in the same way that Abraham used to pray for his sons' (Ishmael and Isaac's) well-being and protection from evil, Muhammad is praying for the safety of his grandchildren (Hasan and Husain) using the very same invocation as the former[92]. Similarly, when Muhammad and his companions are warned about an opponent army that is moving towards them, they repeat Abraham's testimony when

---

[91] Bukhari, Vol. 3, XXXIV, 339; the blessing on the units of measure may as well refer to trade honesty.

[92] See *ibid.*, Vol. 4, LV, 590; notice the implication to the belief in the existence of the 'evil eye'; this hadith is the only one in Bukhari's collection that makes reference to an incident from Isaac's life with his father. Isaac's name is mentioned once more together with the names of Joseph, Jacob and Abraham only to point out Joseph's -the central person in the narration- origin from this line of prophets (*Ibid.*, Vol. 4, LV, 596 and Muslim, 4383).

he was thrown into the fire: 'Allāh is Sufficient for us, and He is the Best Disposer (of affairs for us)'[93].

In a different tradition, Muhammad tells his companions that Abraham's request for a miracle so that his faith is increased would be more suitable for him (i.e. Muhammad) and his followers[94], possibly meaning that since Abraham had a very close encounter with God, he was not in need of such a miracle.

Furthermore, circumcision, a rite that was first practiced by Abraham 'with an adze at the age of eighty'[95], is adopted by Muhammad and the *umma*; however, the Muslims are advised to be circumcised at an early age[96].

Apart from keeping his deeds and sayings in line with those of Abraham, when asked about the way that Muslims should pray for him, the Arab prophet instructs his people to ask for Allah to bestow His mercy and blessings upon him and his family, like He bestowed His mercy and blessings upon Abraham and his family[97].

## 5.3. *Hunafā'*: Followers of the Abrahamic Faith prior to Qur'anic Revelation

The qur'anic statement concerning Abraham's religious identity, i.e. although there is much dispute about it, Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian[98], is -in a slightly but meaningfully different way- repeated in a narrative that describes how one

---

[93] Bukhari, Vol. 6, LX, 86.
[94] Bukhari, Vol. 4, LV, 594.
[95] *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, LV, 575.
[96] Circumcision is not mentioned in the Qur'an and although strongly advised in the hadiths, it is not compulsory in Islam.
[97] Bukhari, Vol. 4, LV, 588; it seems that the analogy between the two prophets is a well-established idea in the early Muslim community as even when Aisha is unhappy with the prophet and responds to one of his questions, she does not address him by his name using one of her typical expressions, i.e. 'No, by the Lord of Muhammad' but instead, she replies saying: 'No, by the Lord of Abraham' (*Ibid.*, Vol. 7, LXII, 155).
[98] Q.3:67.

of Muhammad's companions (before the former was assigned with his prophetic mission) gets acquainted with and becomes a follower of the religion of *hanīf* in the course of his quest for a true religion. In a hadith that implies the deliberate distortion of pure monotheism by the Jews and the Christians, it is a Jew and a Christian who provide Zaid bin 'Amr bin Nufail with the information that 'hanif is the religion of Abraham who was neither a Jew nor a Christian, and he used to worship None but Allāh'[99]. As we have already seen, this piece of information together with new information about Abraham's *muslim* identity is later conveyed to the prophet Muhammad during the qur'anic revelation[100]. Clearly, the contradiction between the two sources lies in the fact that while according to the Qur'an, Jews and Christians erroneously claim Abraham for themselves, in the hadith under discussion, the Christians and the Jews appear to be well aware that they follow a different to their "father's" way.

We have also seen that the incident that the hadith in question describes allegedly takes place before the prophet has received any divine inspiration. This is indicative of another issue: the fact that in the "days of ignorance" some people are aware of Abraham's religion (*hanīf*) suggests that there *are* people practicing it. Whatever the number of the *ḥunafā'*, the narrative implies that Abraham's religion was never completely forsaken and that Islam has not come to re-establish a religion whose traces have entirely vanished; a purely monotheistic faith is still there, among some people who do not comprise an *umma* but practice individually and who, presumably, not having a set of guidelines are not able to practice Abraham's faith as God once ordered.

---

[99] Bukhari, Vol. 5, LVIII, 169.
[100] Q.3:67.

## 5.4. Abraham in Life

Very little information is retrieved from the hadith concerning Abraham's life before he flees from his birthplace. In particular, while in the Qur'an there is ambiguity as to whether Abraham was indeed thrown into the fire and miraculously saved or whether the relevant qur'anic verse merely refers to an attempt, in Islamic tradition it is clearly stated that Abraham was thrown into the fire both in a narrative that recites what Abraham said 'when he was thrown into the fire'[101] as well as in a hadith which reports that 'Allah's Apostle ordered that House Lizards should be killed and said, 'It (i.e. House Lizard) blew (the fire) on Abraham''[102]. Reference is also made to Abraham's two misleading statements.

### 5.4.1. The False Statements

It is said that Abraham lied only three times throughout his life and that the first two lies were told for Allah's sake. The related hadith[103] recites the two untrue statements, cut off from the rest of the episode, presupposing, this way, previous familiarity with the relevant qur'anic verse. According to the verse in question, Abraham lied twice, at a very young age -while still among his people- first by saying 'I am sick' in order to drive people away and get the opportunity to smash their idols and later on, when his people found the broken idols, by claiming that 'the big idol did it' in order to expose their narrow-mindedness[104].

Fear for his life led Abraham to his third and last misleading statement[105]. Sarah is for the first time mentioned by name in a hadith tradition that appears in two

---

[101] Bukhari, Vol. 6, LX, 87.
[102] *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, LV, 579.
[103] *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, 578.
[104] Q.21:58-67.
[105] Bukhari, Vol. 7, LXII, 21.

slightly different versions: while on a journey or on their way to their place of immigration, Abraham and Sarah pass by the province of a tyrant[106] who is charmed by Sarah's beauty. Abraham -presumably in order to avoid the danger of being murdered so that the tyrant gets hold of his wife- conceals Sarah's true relation to him and presents her as his sister[107]. It is particularly interesting how inventive Abraham deals with the infidel combining prayer with intellect and not leaving his and his wife's safety entirely to God's hands, as he had once done, before his first immigration i.e. when he was thrown in the fire.

With reference to Abraham's third lie, a hadith reports Muhammad saying: 'He meant his sister in Allāh's religion.' No blame is put on Abraham; on the contrary, Muslims are advised to follow Abraham's example, if they find themselves in similar danger; after all, the person in danger will not be really lying because every Muslim's wife is his sister in religion[108].

Yet, despite the fact that Abraham is not held accountable for his untrue statements, those will cost him the privilege to intercede for the Muslims on the Day of Judgement[109].

### 5.4.2. Abraham's Family in the Hadith

#### *a. Sarah*

To proceed with the role that Sarah plays in her encounter with the tyrant, it appears to be quite active in one of the two narratives while more passive in the other. In hadith 420 of Vol.3 in Bukhari's collection, God's intercession -of bringing the

---

[106] The identity of the tyrant is not revealed, however, should we take under consideration the narration's counterpart in the Bible, we may assume that the person in question is king Nimrod.
[107] Bukhari, Vol. 3, XXXIV, 420 and Vol. 4, LV, 587.
[108] *Ibid.*, Vol. 7, LXIII, Chapter 10.
[109] Reference is made, further on.

infidel in a state of agitation and immobilization when the latter attempts to overpower Abraham's wife - follows Sarah's having performed ablution and prayer. In the same hadith, Sarah also takes the initiative to ask Allah not to take the tyrant's life for in that case she will be accused of murder.

Reading the second version of the same incident, one gets the impression that Sarah is delivered solely as the result of Abraham's prayer at the time when she is brought at the tyrant's residence. Furthermore, in the second version of the narrative, it is the infidel who asks Sarah to intercede with God on his behalf so that he recovers from the state he is in[110].

The two versions are in complete agreement as to the conclusion of the episode; the tyrant - not being able to explain what it is that is causing him agitation and being convinced that the woman brought to him is actually a devil - releases Sarah after having offered her a female servant, Ajar (Hajar)[111]. At this point, for the first time the believer gets to know how the mother of the Arabs, Hajar, ended up living with the prophet Abraham and his wife.

The hadith literature does not provide us with any more information as regards Sarah, the only exception being the implication that the latter driven from jealousy attempted to murder Hajar[112] and that after Hajar's death, Abraham used to take Sarah's permission to visit Ishmael[113].

---

[110] Bukhari, Vol. 4, 578; that people in Abraham's time are aware of the existence of God but at the same time worship other deities is also suggested when the tyrant asks for Sarah to pray for him to Allah.
[111] In all probability, the tyrant offers a gift with the intention of escaping the 'demon's' wrath.
[112] *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, LV, 583.
[113] *Ibid.*, 584.

### *b. Hajar*

While revelation about the Arabs' descent from Ishmael in the Qur'an is indirect except evident, any information about Ishmael's mother is inexplicably withheld. Considering, however, Hajar's importance as the mother of the Arabs, it comes as no surprise that Islamic tradition provides its Muslim readers with a detailed description of Hajar's life after Abraham -following God's will- takes her and their newborn child to Mecca, an uninhabited and uncultivated at that time place.

Hajar is depicted as a lively, full of dynamism and initiative woman who excels in faith and submission to God. Although left alone with hardly any supplies in the desert, once told that this is God's will, she stops complaining and after she has run out of water, she starts running between the mountains Safa and Marwa looking for help. When she has reached Marwa for the seventh time an angel springs up before her 'digging the earth with his heel, till water flowed from that place'. Referring to this part of the narrative, Muhammad calls upon God to bless Hajar for, had she not tried to control the flow of the water, 'Zam-zam would have been a stream flowing on the surface of the earth'. Following the angel's promise that Allah will not desert her and her son, Hajar resides and spends the rest of her life near the water spring, where later on, some people from the tribe of Jurhum pass by and ask for her permission to settle nearby. Hajar, wishing to be in the company of others, accepts the request and in another demonstration of her dynamic personality, she demands to be reassured that the water spring will always be recognizable as hers. These people

among whom Ishmael is brought up and taught the Arabic language comprise the first community in Mecca[114].

The hadith that describes Hajar's life closes with the following words coming from one of the prophet's companions addressing his people: 'That is your mother, O Banū Mā- As- Samā!'[115].

### *c. Ishmael*

While any information on Isaac's life as an adolescent is absent from the hadith anthology, there is sufficient information about Ishmael at an early age. The latter appears to be a particularly charismatic young man who receives the love and admiration of his people because of his virtues and who is always ready to submit his will to God and his father. His submission is portrayed in three important incidents that follow his mother's death, one being the episode when Abraham pays a visit to Ishmael's quarters following the latter's marriage to a woman from the tribe of Jurhum.

Departing without having seen Ishmael, who at the time of his visit is in search of food, Abraham leaves a coded message with Ishmael's ungrateful and ill-tempered wife for his son. When Isaac takes the message 'Change the threshold of the gate', seeing that the metaphor in his father's words is to divorce his wife, acts accordingly. The second time Abraham calls on Ishmael's house and finds his new wife who is grateful and God-fearing, he asks God to bless their food and leaves his daughter in

---

[114] *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, LV, 583.
[115] *Ibid.*, 578 and Vol. 7, LXII, 21.

law with a message for Ishmael to 'Keep firm the threshold of (his) gate', an advice that Ishmael takes notice of[116].

Abraham's third call on his son takes place after he has received revelation for the building of the Ka'ba. Soon after he greets his father, Ishmael becomes acquainted with the news about Abraham's task and agrees to help him. In a repetition of the same narrative[117], Allah commands both father and son to build the sanctuary and so in this case Ishmael is obeying God's orders. In both stories, Abraham builds the Ka'ba with Ishmael's assistance whose task is to provide him with the stones. Both of them during the sanctuary's construction walk around it and praise Allah[118].

## 5.5. The Alteration of the Building of the Ka'ba in the Course of Time

Tradition has it that the first person to build the Ka'ba was Adam and not Abraham. The Qur'an hints in that direction when it mentions that Abraham was asked to "purify"[119] the sanctuary from any other worship but God's[120]. That is also confirmed by a certain hadith which describes how Abraham, having left Hajar and Ishmael in Mecca, faces the Ka'ba and prays for their prosperity and wellbeing[121]. With regard to the location of the House of Allah it is noted: 'The House at that time was on a high place resembling a hillock, and when torrents came, they flowed to its right and left'[122].

---

[116] *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, LV, 583.
[117] *Ibid.*, 584.
[118] *Ibid.*, 583 and 584.
[119] And not to 'build'.
[120] Q.2:125, 127; 22:26.
[121] Bukhari, Vol. 4, LV, 583.
[122] *Ibid.*

It is very interesting how the future re-building of the Ka'ba by Abraham and Ishmael is first revealed to Hajar and years later to Abraham[123]. The description of the building of the Ka'ba has already been given. At this point it should only be noted that not only the building but also the location of His House, 'a hillock higher than the land surrounding it', is indicated by Allah[124]. The implication here is that Abraham built the House of God on the exact spot where Adam had once built it whereas, the Quraysh, rebuilding the sanctuary, did not follow his example[125]. As for the material that Abraham and Ishmael used for the construction of the Ka'ba, one of the prophet's companions reports that he was shown the original foundations "which were of stones resembling the humps of camels."[126].

A number of hadith that look at Muhammad's first visit to Ka'ba acquaint the reader with details about the way that the Quraysh, in the pre-Islamic days, reconstructed the sanctuary that was originally built by Abraham and his son Ishmael. Alterations involved both the external surface of the Ka'ba and the interior of the building. Apparently, because of lack of money[127] the outside part was modified to become smaller and it was, thus, somewhat removed from the exact spot where the foundations were laid by Abraham[128], leaving out a part of the initial construction[129] - a round wall near the Ka'ba[130].

According to Muhammad's description, not only the size of the Ka'ba was reduced but also its level and architecture were transformed. The sanctuary that was

---

[123] *Ibid.*
[124] *Ibid.*
[125] See Bukhari, Vol. 2, XXVI, 653 and 655.
[126] *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, XXVI, 655 and 656.
[127] *Ibid.*, 654.
[128] It is mentioned that traces from the original foundations were seen at about six cubic metres from Al-Hijr. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, XXVI, 656.
[129] *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, XXVI, 655 and 656.
[130] *Ibid.*, 654.

once at ground level[131] was elevated so that the Quraysh could accept whomever they wished and deny entrance to others[132]. Moreover, while in Abraham's time entrance is said to have been possible both from the west and east wings[133], during its reconstruction, only one front door was built[134].

Radical changes were also brought to the inside of the building that was decorated with idols and pictures some of which depicted Mary, the mother of Jesus and other Abraham in the company of his son Ishmael performing a ritual that involved the use of arrows to foretell the future[135].

## 5.6. Abraham in Life after Death

The unfolding of some prophets' life in the hereafter is one of several fascinating aspects of Muhammad's *mi'rāj* (journey to heaven) and visions. Certain elements about afterlife (that are passed over in silence in the Qur'an) are exposed to the Arab prophet during divine inspiration and recorded in the hadith anthology. Thus, we obtain information about Abraham's physical appearance, his dwelling in heaven and his rank among the messengers of God. Moreover, we are given an account of a dialogue that will take place on the Day of Resurrection between Abraham and God. The nature of the revelation that Muhammad receives is sometimes obscure, as one cannot tell whether reference is made to a dream or a vision. However, it seems that there is no substantial distinction between the two considering 'Ubaid bin 'Umair's words that 'the dreams of Prophets were Divine

---

[131] *Ibid.*, 656.
[132] *Ibid.*, 654.
[133] *Ibid.*, 656.
[134] *Ibid.*, 655; one of Muhammad's companions, 'Abdullah bin 'Umar, reports that the fact that the Ka'ba was rebuilt on other than its original foundations stopped the prophet from touching its two corners. *Ibid.*, 653.
[135] Bukhari, Vol. 4, LV, 570 and Vol. 2, XXVI, 671; apart from the fact that illustrating Abraham and Ishmael practicing idolatrous practices was blasphemy, the use of pictures is *ḥarām* in Islam because of the belief that angels do not enter a house in which there are pictures. *Ibid.*

Inspiration'[136], a belief that the latter bases on Abraham's dream that he was sacrificing his son[137].

Starting with Abraham's physical appearance, the information that we get from the hadith is that Abraham bore such a great resemblance to Muhammad that looking at the latter was the same as looking at Abraham[138]. When in his vision, accompanied by two angels, Muhammad passes by Abraham, the latter is of supernatural height[139]. This can be interpreted as a symbolism of his strong faith.

***a. Abraham's Status and Abode in Heaven***

Abraham's special place among the messengers of Allah is highlighted in several hadith. There, for example, he is repeatedly referred to as 'Allāh's Khalil', the title he was honoured with by God[140].

The fact that Abraham enjoys a particularly high status among the other prophets in the hereafter is made evident from the description of his abode in heaven. During his night journey, Muhammad meets Abraham on the sixth[141] or in a somewhat different version, on the seventh heaven[142] that is the highest level where a prophet can reside. In the narrative that depicts Abraham in the sixth heaven, Moses is on the seventh heaven for he had once talked directly to God[143]. Because of the different versions of the narrative it is uncertain whether the one or the other prophet holds the greatest position; however, it is Abraham who is seen 'reclining against Al-

---

[136] *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, IV, 140.
[137] *Ibid.*
[138] *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, LV, 574 and 607 and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 251.
[139] Bukhari, Vol. 4, LV, 573.
[140] *Ibid.*, 572, Vol. 5, LVIII, 635 and Vol. 6, LX, 3 and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4383; it is amusing how, when the relevant qur'anic verse is recited in a prayer, a man exclaims in enthusiasm: 'How glad the mother of Abraham is!'. Bukhari, Vol. 5, LVIII, 635.
[141] Bukhari, Vol. 1, VIII, 345.
[142] *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, LIV, 429.
[143] *Ibid*, Vol. 5, XCIII, 608.

Bait Al-Ma'mur (Allah's House) and there enter into it seventy thousand angels every day, never to visit again'[144].

In the description of heaven according to the prophet's night journey, each apostle of God resides on a different level of heaven and thus it appears as if the prophets live in isolation without coming in conduct with each other or with the rest of the believers in paradise. However, in one of his visions, Muhammad finds himself in an assembly between all the messengers of God and leads them in prayer[145].

Furthermore, in one of Muhammad's dreams, Abraham is seen in a beautiful garden, sitting at the base of a huge tree in the company of some children, 'the offspring of the people' while Malik, 'the gatekeeper of Hell-fire' who is kindling the fire is at a very close distance from him[146].

***b. Intercession for Infidels and Believers on the Day of Judgement***

Among the most vivid scenes that one comes across in the hadith are two short dialogues that take place on the Day of Resurrection; one between Abraham and his father Azar and another between Abraham and Allah. The first dialogue occurs when Abraham meets his father for the first time after he fled from his birthplace. Abraham reprimands Azar for not complying with his advice to serve only one God and this time Azar -whose face has been darkened and covered with dust- promises obedience. Abraham turns to God in words of petition only to receive as an answer that paradise is forbidden for the infidels. Since Abraham is not allowed to intercede for an

---

144 *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 234.
145 *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 251.
146 Bukhari, Vol. 2, XXIII, 468.

unbeliever, Azar cannot escape the punishment of Hell. He is transformed into an animal and cast into the fire before Abraham's eyes[147].

Apart from not being able to intercede for a non-believer and although on the Day of Resurrection, when the creation is repeated he is given the honour to be the first to be addressed[148], Abraham is not fit for acting as a mediator for the believers. Thus, when Muslims plead with him for intercession, Abraham recalls his lies and cries out in agony: 'Myself! Myself!'[149] meaning that he himself is in need of someone to intercede for him with his Lord. After that, he addresses the believers to Moses, judging that the latter is in a more advantageous position to intercede since he enjoyed the privilege to speak directly to God and receive the Torah[150].

## 5.8. Conclusion

In conclusion, one may say with some certainty that compared to qur'anic revelation, Islamic tradition puts even more emphasis on Abraham, who acting as Muhammad's prototype bears witness to the latter's prophetic status. Among the traditions that clearly point in that direction, are traditions that describe Muhammad's encounter with Abraham and other well-known messengers in heaven. In two of those traditions the implication is that Muhammad is the greatest of all prophets[151].

We may also conclude that a great number of the hadith traditions that refer to Abraham and his family are there to provide evidence for the monotheistic background of the Ka'ba and the rituals that take place around it. The rite of *tawāf* (i.e. walking around the Ka'ba seven times), for example, is a ritual that appears to

---

147 *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, LV, 569.
148 *Ibid.*, 568.
149 *Ibid.*, 581.
150 *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, LX, 3; although the Qur'an makes mention of some 'scrolls' given to Abraham (Q.87:18-19), the implication here is that he never received written revelation.
151 See *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 251 and *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, Vol. 6, LX, 3.

have derived from and commemorate the event of the construction of the Ka'ba for as mentioned earlier, the way that Abraham and Ishmael built the sanctuary was circular; according to tradition, they were both going around the foundations adding stones and praying to Allah. Similarly, the *sa'y* (i.e. running or walking the distance between the mountains Safa and Marwa seven times), is instantly recognizable as a custom that was established in remembrance of Hajar's endeavor to find help for her son who was dying. Offering an animal in sacrifice during the Hajj as an expression of gratitude to God for His blessings is said to have been Abraham's *sunna*[152]. Finally, throwing stones at the devil is a ritual that celebrates an incident in Abraham's life, namely Abraham's stoning of the devil when he appeared to him three times right before Abraham would offer his son in sacrifice obeying God's order[153].

The ritual of offering two *rak'āt* at the rear of *maqām Ibrāhīm* (the station of Abraham) during the Hajj was according to Islamic tradition established later, when, after 'Umar bin Al-Khattab (the second Caliph (634–644) of the *umma*) had expressed a wish for the establishment of such a rite, its practice came as an order from God during Muhammad's divine inspiration[154].

What is most interesting about the hadith representation of Abraham is that in contrast to the Qur'an that is interested in Abraham the prophet, the hadith literature is for the most part interested in Abraham the man. As a result it exposes his 'weak' side. Abraham in the hadith appears to be less self-sacrificing and daring than the Abraham that we have come across in the Qur'an. Except for the fact that the hadith literature in Bukhari's and Muslim's anthologies is silent about his son's sacrifice, in

---

[152] See hadith 760 in Fazlul Karim, *Al-Hadis: an English Translation&Commentary on Mishkat-ul-Masabih.*
[153] See hadith 306sq in Ahmad ibn Hanbal (Cairo), 1313.
[154] Bukhari, Vol. 1, VIII, 395; see also Vol. 2, XXI, 283.

a certain case, Abraham seems to be afraid of the power of an earthly king and as he is not willing to risk his life, he attempts to get himself out of a dangerous situation by lying. It comes as no surprise that the Qur'an has chosen to omit these stories and present its readers with the more 'heroic' side of the prophet, for the purpose of the Qur'an is not to familiarize its audience with the lives of its protagonists but inspire the believers to follow the example of the prophets in what they have done well.

The consistency of Abraham's self-sacrificing quality in the Meccan suras as well as the fact that the same element is almost missing from the Abrahamic character in the hadith (which are clearly concerned with the needs of an organized faith community rather than the needs of a persecuted religious minority in embryonic stage) is, I believe, a further indication that the sacrifice ayas were meant not as a Medinan complement to the Ka'ba verses but as part of the Meccan portrayal of Abraham as a sacrificing figure- a man whose spiritual progress is ever interconnected with some act of sacrifice. And while scholars have often been intrigued by the evolution of the sacrifice story in Islamic tradition that they sometimes use as their basis in order to account for the occurrence of the sacrifice story in a Meccan sura, the question still remains as to why qur'anic Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son and what exactly this kind of sacrifice has to do with Islamic submission[155].

---

[155] Firestone who has worked on the Abrahamic traditions as they appear in the *tafsīr* observes that 'the Qur'ān passage itself is unavoidably problematic'. Firestone, 'Abraham's Son', p. 131.

## Chapter 6: Reading Abraham's Story in its Qur'anic Context

### 6.1. Introduction

The Muslims' holy book recounts Abraham's willingness to take his son's life as proof of his submission to God in a narrative which acknowledges the equivalent in the Torah but introduces notable changes. Among all qur'anic references to Abraham, the account of the sacrifice is the most extensive one. It appears together with the extra-biblical legends of Abraham's breaking of the idols and persecution as one of a series of stories that recount the prophets' acts and rewards as well as the punishment of those who ignored their warnings.

There are several discrepancies between the biblical and the qur'anic versions of the sacrifice, the most notable being that in the latter, the son is informed about the vision and Abraham proceeds to carry out the divine command only after he has made sure that he and his son are of the same mind. Here, the son does not seem to be the passive figure that appears to be in the Genesis account. Quite the opposite, the freedom of choice is strongly emphasized[1].

The qur'anic story also differs from the biblical one in the following points: firstly, no reference is made to the site of the sacrifice or the time when the incident occurred; the only piece of information given in the Qur'an is that the sacrifice took place some time after Abraham's *hijra* from the land of his father; secondly, there is no mention of the paraphernalia used for the sacrifice (fire/wood/knife); thirdly, there is a description of the way the son was positioned to be slaughtered -he was laid

---

[1] Rippin observes that Sa'adya Gaon, in his Arabic translation of the Bible, translates Genesis 22:12 'You have not withheld from me your son' as 'You [Abraham] have not hindered [or alienated] your son from me', suggesting that Isaac accepted to be sacrificed and Abraham did nothing to discourage him from his choice. Rippin, 'Sa'adya Gaon and Genesis 22: Aspects of Jewish-Muslim Interaction and Polemic', p. 39.

prostrate on his forehead/face - and lastly, the idea of a divine promise is missing and blessing is restricted to Abraham and Isaac; as to their progeny, it is only stated that some of them will be righteous and some not[2].

Apart from Q.37:99-113 no other explicit mention of Abraham's son's sacrifice is there in the Islamic sacred scripture. However, because of verse 106 'for this was obviously a trial', it has been suggested that the same legend is also alluded to in Q.2:124 which reads: 'And remember that Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain commands (*kalimāt*), which he fulfilled…'. According to an interpretation of the term *kalimāt* attributed to al-Hasan al-Basri, Abraham was tested with the stars, the sun, the moon, the fire, his emigration, the sacrifice of his son and circumcision, and every time he remained steadfast[3]. The second part of Q.19:55 '…and he was most acceptable in the sight of his Lord' which refers to Ishmael has also been read as an indirect reference to the *dhabīḥ* and in particular to the fact that Ishmael was an acceptable sacrificial offer[4].

In exegetical literature, as we have seen, discrepancy has occurred as to the identity of the sacrificial victim but also the site of the sacrifice (was it Jerusalem, Syria or Mecca) and the time it took place (was it before or after the building of the Ka'ba, the institution of the Hajj, Ishmael's marriages). In regards to the theological meaning of *dhabīḥ Allāh*, however, the vast majority of exegetes have been in

---

[2] Q.37:113.
[3] Tabari, *History*, pp. 103-104; cf. Jubilees 17:17. Most of the times the term *kalimāt* -literally 'words'- has been interpreted by Muslim exegetes as a. the laws of Islam, b. ten rules concerning the purity of the body or c. the acts of the pilgrimage. Tabari, *History*, pp. 97-105; Yusuf Ali, on the other hand, takes Q.2:124 as the summary of the following verses in which reference is made to the construction and purification of the Ka'ba by Abraham as well as the submission of his will to the divine will. The fulfilment of the *kalimāt* in verse 124 is, thus, identified with the accomplishment of the abovementioned tasks by Abraham. Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, p. 52, n. 123; see also Van Seters who takes Q.2:124 as a clear reference to the sacrifice episode. Van Seters, 'Abraham', p. 17.
[4] Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, p. 755, n. 2507; another -more plausible- interpretation of the verse is that God was pleased with Ishmael, see Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: a Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*, p. 111.

agreement: the story is about the first *muslim*, Abraham, whose faith was not shaken even when God asked him to sacrifice his son.

As for modern scholarship, the classic reading of the story as a political move -encouraged by the subsequent association of Abraham's sacrifice to the Ka'ba traditions in extra-qur'anic Islamic literature- seems to have convinced most of the modern scholars of Islam that there must not be anything more in the sacrifice ayas than what we already know from the Bible.

On the whole, looking at past and present readings of the story, apart from a completely different reading that Ibn 'Arabi has presented us with and two new readings suggested by John Kaltner[5] and Jacques Doukhan[6], deviation from the standard interpretation is only noted as to the protagonist(s) of the story. Specifically, because of the active role that the son has been given in the qur'anic sacrifice story, Doukhan views the sacrificial victim as the central character of the narrative[7]. The dynamic personality of the *dhabīḥ* is likewise remarked on by Caspi and Cohen who, nonetheless, see the trial as a double sacrifice; both father and son sacrifice themselves since the Qur'an reveals that 'they…both submitted their wills (to Allah)'[8]. Accordingly, the authors link the two men's readiness to stand the trial to the epithet *ḥalīm* 'ready to suffer and forbear' that is used to describe the sacrificial victim in Q.37:101 and Abraham in Q.9:114 and 11:75[9]. Kaltner observes that the Qur'an does not make it clear '*who* is being tested'. Nevertheless, 'by interpreting his

---

[5] See Literature Review.
[6] Doukhan, 'The Akedah at the "Crossroad": its Significance in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue'. Reference to this reading will be made later on.
[7] *Ibid*., p. 169.
[8] Q.37:103.
[9] Capsi&Cohen, *The Binding [Aqedah] and its Transformations in Judaism and Islam*, p. 100.

father's dream as a command from Allah, Abraham's son took the initial leap of faith…and…passed the test first.'[10]

Contrary to the aforementioned views, I consider the sacrifice as more of a trial of Abraham than of his son. One may reach the same conclusion via different lines of thought. The fact, for example, that the sacrificial son is not named could be telling us that the story is about Abraham and not about the boy. Of course, this last assumption could easily be countered on the basis of previous familiarity of the audience with the story and hence the needlessness in mentioning the name of the sacrificial victim.

Nonetheless, it is not the son who is shown the way to self-sacrifice. It is the father who is commanded to slay his son and again it is him who God addresses to say: '…O Abraham! Thou hast already fulfilled the vision!…'[11] That Abraham is the true protagonist of the qur'anic account could be also underlined by the fact that, after the catharsis of the drama, only Abraham receives God's blessings[12].

Except for the fact that the meaning of the qur'anic version of the sacrifice story has been neglected and despite the theological interpretations that tend to see in Abraham, his son, or both of them, the perfect example of devotion to God, the negative criticism that the story has attracted in the fields of philosophy, anthropology and sociology -both in past and recent times[13]- is a reminder to us that there are still critical questions calling for elucidation; questions that should be of prime concern to

---

[10] Kaltner, 'Abraham's Sons: how the Bible and the Qur'an See the Same Story Differently', p. 45.
[11] Q.37:104-105.
[12] Q.37:108-109.
[13] See Kant, *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy: a Preface to Future Jewish Thought*, p. 34 and Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: the Social Legacy of Biblical Myth*.

the students of theology if we are to prove that the sacrifice story has been mistakenly connected to violence and immorality.

Some of the most significant questions to look at relate to God's motive for making such a dreadful request. Is God actually testing Abraham's obedience? If so, why does He need to be convinced about Abraham's loyalty given that He already knows how the story ends? Is the trial, then, an extreme for the human standards example that serves to teach an important lesson?

An equally weighty obstacle to deal with when attempting to interpret Abraham's sacrifice is to comprehend what is it that makes a father go through with such an order. Should we be looking at Kierkegaard's suspending of the ethical? Is Abraham above the standard moral law? Is his faith '… a paradox which is capable of transforming a murder into a holy act well-pleasing to God'?[14] Does he take 'a leap of faith' and still has hope or is he endowed with the perspicacity that enables him to see a deeper purpose in God's request?

---

[14] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness unto Death*, p. 64.

## 6.2. The Didactic Nature of the Prophets' Stories

It takes little if no effort at all to see the point of the prophets' and messengers' stories in the Qur'an; they all serve didactic purposes. For the most part they demonstrate how God instructs, guides and rewards those who prove to be devoted while He punishes those who have no regard for His will. Unlike the Old Testament, which is the religious history of a people, qur'anic revelation does not provide us with the complete biographies of remarkable individuals but mentions only those episodes in the lives of the prophets that may promote the spiritual growth of the Muslim community. One of these episodes is Abraham's sacrifice.

The Islamic way of looking at a prophetic character - as the perfect example of the appropriate conduct the faithful should adhere to - is epitomized in Crow: 'The treatment of the prophets in Muslim tradition is not overly concerned with their historical reality as much as with the trans-historical significance of their lives as exemplary models and actors in the divine drama of hiero-history'[15]. Accordingly, while the Bible offers plenty of information about the characters it presents, the Qur'an omits details in order to avoid creating empathy or admiration for these characters and, thus, gives an impulse to the observation of the broader message the narratives carry[16]. Detachment or generalization is also achieved by the linking of a reward to a certain prophet with the rewards that all righteous people receive[17].

Looking at the sacrifice narrative per se, the first sign of its didactic nature is that while it brings human reactions into focus, it lacks detail. And despite the fact

---

[15] Douglas K. Crow, 'The Amplification of Abraham in Islam' in *Face to Face: an Interreligious Bulletin*, Vol. 12 (1986), p. 27.
[16] Waldman, 'New Approaches to "Biblical" Material in the Qur'an', p. 54; see also Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature*, trans. M. Robertson (Richmond, Curzon, 2002), p. 17.
[17] Waldman, *ibid.*, p. 57.

that of all missing elements, the anonymity of the victim has attracted the greatest attention, Western scholarship has typically taken the omission to be either an oversight or a calculated political move on the part of Muhammad.

An exception is Caspi and Cohen's case for the intentional omission of the victim's identity for the reason that the qur'anic account of Abraham's sacrifice is meant to be 'universal'[18]. More specifically, the authors examine the various ways in which the same historical event of the sixth century -the Christian martyrdom at Najran- has been depicted by men of different faith and era and observe that when a narrator is interested in giving a historical account of the event, he makes sure to provide the names of kings, martyrs and key locations as 'History requires names; it demands the identification of political players'[19]; on the contrary, when the intention is the fortification of faith, the name of a great martyr tends to be left out 'avoiding the narrowing involved in identifying an exemplar of this sort with an actual individual'[20].

The didactic nature of the prophets' stories in Islam as well as Caspi and Cohen's abovementioned argument can be confirmed on the basis of Rumi's poetry. The great Persian poet and mystic Jalal ad-Din Rumi (d. 1273AD), touching on Abraham, makes extensive use of allegory to serve his poetic cause that is to illustrate some spiritual truth via giving the prophet 'a timeless, paradigmatic quality'[21]. The

---

[18] Caspi&Cohen, *The Binding [Aqedah] and its Transformations in Judaism and Islam*, p. 108; in a subsequent authorship Caspi hints at the possibility of Muhammad avoiding naming the *dhabīḥ* in the qur'anic verses so that the new religion appeals to Jews and Christians. See Caspi, *Take Now Thy Son: the Motif of the Akedah (Binding) in Literature*, p. 90; another exception is Kaltner, who notes that the Qur'an does not name the victim 'because his identity is insignificant'; what matters is that the *dhabīḥ* is a 'model Muslim'. Kaltner, 'Abraham's Sons', p. 18.

[19] Caspi&Cohen, *ibid.*, p. 93; see also *ibid.*, p. 78.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 68; see also *ibid.*, pp. 69 and 89.

[21] John Renard, *All the King's Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation* (State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 47.

moral of his poetry is that the prophet's life should be taken as an example for every true seeker of God. When it comes to the sacrifice story 'Rumi focuses entirely on the sacrifice theme's implications for spiritual growth'[22]. He, thus, takes the opportunity to encourage the believers to arm themselves with patience in trials and says that in the sacrifice story '...the body is like Ishmael, the spirit like Abraham, who pronounces the funeral takbir (Allahu akbar).'[23] In regards to Abraham, who is illustrated as the model of prayer, the mystic notes: '...the foundation of prayer is the abandonment of the body and the abandonment of sons, like Abraham, who was offering his son as a sacrifice in order to perfect his prayer and giving up his body to Nimrod's fire'.[24] As for Ishmael, he is the true believer who is not concerned about the perpetuation of his body[25] and approaches death in the most appropriate way[26]. 'Rumi sees him as the epitome of indifference, the body who willingly dies for the spirit.'[27] Ishmael is able to brave death because he partakes in the prophetic legacy of the 'light'[28]. He merits praise predominantly on account of his 'willingness'; at the same time he somehow knows that the knife is not going to harm him[29].

Being predominantly a poet and a mystic rather than a theologian, Rumi's style is neither to systematically analyze qur'anic passages nor to treat qur'anic

---

[22] John Renard, 'Images of Abraham in the Writings of Jalāl Ad-dīn Rūmī' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 160, No. 4 (1986), p. 635, n. 6.
[23] Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Maulana, *Mathnawi*, ed. Reynold Nicholson (London, Luzac, 1925-40), V:2505, III:2145 quoted in Renard, *All the King's Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation*, p. 49.
[24] Rūmī, *Mathnawi*, V:1265 quoted in Renard, *ibid.*, p. 56.
[25] Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Fīhi Mā Fīhi*, trans. Arthur J. Arberry as *Discourses of Rūmī* (New York, 1972), p. 238 quoted in Renard, *ibid.*, p. 49.
[26] Rūmī, *Mathnawi*, II:283, III:4101, 3884 cited in Renard, 'Images of Abraham in the Writings of Jalāl Al-Dīn Rūmī', p. 635.
[27] Renard, *ibid.*
[28] Rūmī, *Mathnawi*, II:914 quoted in *ibid.*
[29] Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Dīwān-i Shams* (Furuzanfar's Persian edition, Tehran, 1351/1970), 1183:5/2347:4, 1665:12/2204:10, quoted in *ibid.*

figures separately and extensively[30]. As may be expected, the identity of the offering is not so much of the mystic's concern. Actually, it is not clear whom Rumi holds to be the sacrificial victim[31]; Ishmael and Isaac take turns in appearing as the intended victims who willingly submit to their father and are not harmed by the knife[32] and in a certain verse, the mystic even refers to both brothers as 'sacrificial victims.'[33]

Besides the missing identity of the *dhabīḥ*, the fact that unlike its Jewish and Christian counterparts, the qur'anic version of the story does not include the 'near-death' motif and omits reference to any objects that Abraham would use to perform the sacrifice (e.g. fire, wood and knife) is, I believe, a further indication that the qur'anic text does not want us to focus on ritualistic sacrifice.

Studying, however, the sacrifice story on its own is no more than a useful starting point for its elucidation; in order to facilitate the understanding of the narrative and thus confirm its didactic nature, the text needs to be read in its broader qur'anic context. Therefore, the story will first be examined within the context of the rest of the Abrahamic accounts in which the ideas of sacrifice, reward and submission (*islām*) occur. Following that, the passage will be read in the context of its sura. Subsequently, a comparison will be made between the narrative at issue and the qur'anic references to literal sacrifice (animal and human). As regards extra-quranic sources, since the narrative is about a father's attempt to sacrifice his son, the qur'anic account will be contrasted with similar sacrifice stories narrated in works of literature

---

[30] See Renard, 'Images of Abraham in the Writings of Jalāl Al-Dīn Rūmī', p. 633.
[31] Renard, *All the King's Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation*, p. 50.
[32] Rūmī, *Dīwān-i Shams*, 1792:7, 2092:15, 151:3, 6:9, 2092:20, 2213:3 and 2375:5 quoted in Renard, *ibid.*
[33] Rūmī, *Dīwān-i Shams*, 738:5 quoted in *ibid.*; because Isaac is only mentioned in one of Rumi's anthologies, the *Dīwān*, it is assumed that at some later stage in his life, the poet decided that Isaac's personality was overshadowed by Ishmael's and, thus, reference to Isaac ceased. *Ibid.*

and it will also be evaluated in comparison to what we know about the practice of human sacrifice among the ancient peoples.

## 6.3. The Sacrifice of the *Dhabīḥ* as Abraham's Highest Level of Submission to the Will of God

### 6.3.1. Sacrifice and Reward in Abraham's Life

Once the different pieces of the Abrahamic legend are put together, it immediate becomes evident that the sacrifice is the ultimate test of Abraham's faith which seals a series of earlier trials. At a very tender age Abraham receives the divine call that gives him no option but to disobey his father and cut himself off from society. Sacrifice starts at this very moment; in denying his father and people's polytheism, Abraham is simultaneously deprived off the security and love he used to enjoy in his father's house and his native land[34]. Later on, sacrifice becomes virtually synonymous with the figure of the patriarch. In Q.53:37, for that matter, he is introduced as *wafi* i.e. the one 'who fulfilled his engagements'.

Looking carefully at the qur'anic passages that recount Abraham's struggle against the idolatry of his people and the near sacrifice of his son, a pattern can be identified: following the narration of a sacrifice, reference is made to the rewards that come soon after it. Thus, the news about Abraham's posterity goes along the narrative of his exile to indicate that God recompensed him for having to part from his family. Because of his steadfastness in hardships, Abraham was bestowed with sons and grandsons who were honored prophets[35], righteous men and leaders[36] and

---

[34] Again, even though there is no clear reference to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael in the Qur'an, an allusion is made in Q.14:37.
[35] Q.19:49-50 and Q.29:27.
[36] Q.21:72-73.

receivers of revelation[37]. Additionally, Abraham who was once directed to an unknown land[38] is now among the righteous in heaven[39]. In sura 37 the pattern is repeated twice. After a sacrifice comes a blessing[40] and later on, the account of a greater sacrifice[41] which is followed once more by the allusion to the reward[42].

The very fact that Abraham's denouncing the religion of his people is related in connection with his son's sacrifice alludes to the sacrificial character of his first act. It can, hence, be inferred that these two stories are cited together as Abraham's *hijra* from his country to an unknown land is the beginning of his trials while the divine command to 'sacrifice his son' is the climax of the trials that he has to endure.

### 6.3.2. *'ilm* (knowledge), *īmān* (faith) and *islām* (submission)

In the introduction of a study that deals with the rise of Twelver Shi'ite externalism during the Safavid dynasty in Iran, Colin Turner argues that a crucial contributing factor to a. the -intentional or not- rise in importance of the external acts of faith over personal belief, b. the supremacy of the jurist over the religious scholar and c. the fact that despite the qur'anic references to the knowledge of God and His signs, the term *'ilm* (knowledge) came to be exclusively related to jurisprudence, is that *islām* i.e. the internal-personal submission of a believer has been constantly identified with the observance of the rules and regulations of the religious community known to us as Islam[43].

---

[37] Q.29:27.
[38] Q.21:71.
[39] Q.29:26-27.
[40] Q.37:101.
[41] Q.37:102-106.
[42] Q.37:107-113.
[43] Colin Turner, *Islam without Allah? The Rise of Religious Externalism in Safavid Iran.*

Of particular interest to our study are the following observations made by the author: firstly, the qur'anic notions of *'ilm* (knowledge), *īmān* (belief) and *islām* (submission) are inextricably linked, the first being a requisite for the second and the second a precondition for the realization of the third and secondly, according to qur'anic revelation there are different stages of *islām*, the attainment of which rests on the level of *īmān*.

With regard to *'ilm*, the Qur'an readers are notified that the universe abounds with 'signs' that point to a Creator and also that an individual starts believing in God through the contemplation (*tafakkur*) of these 'signs', i.e. using his intellect, a man starts sensing that everything that constitutes this world is a sign that indicates the existence of its Creator[44]; 'If he submits to the knowledge he has acquired concerning the Creator of the cosmos, he will have entered the initial stages of *islām* (submission)'[45].

The notion that *īmān* is not fixed, but rather '...susceptible to increase and decrease...' is clearly expressed in the Qur'an when the believers are invited '...to examine themselves and their belief constantly...'[46]. Likewise, in Q.8:2 and Q.9:124 we are informed that faith can be 'strengthened' - 'increased' and in Q.8:4 that some believers attain a higher grade of belief than others[47].

That *īmān* is different from *islām* is obvious in Q.2:208 in which *the believers* are called upon to '...Enter into Islam Wholeheartedly...'[48]. According to Turner, in this verse the believers are notified that *īmān* is perfected only when *islām* is

---

[44] *Ibid.*, pp. 2 and 4.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

complete[49]. The term *īmān* seems to connote '...the internal response to, and affirmation of God's revelation to man...'[50]. Comparing verses that suggest the occurrence of theoretical submission that lacks real faith with verses in which *islām* cannot but refer to the inner state of a believer, *islām* (with a small i) can be said to describe '...the submission of the whole inner self...or the selfless worship of God'[51].

Pondering over the meaning of the terms *'ilm*, *islām* and *īmān* as well as the possibility that those apply to the parts of the Abrahamic legend that the Qur'an has provided us with, one ultimately realizes that the Abrahamic story verifies the aforementioned connotations of the terms in question and even more importantly for the purposes of this study, that the terms under discussion are enlightening about the meaning of the sacrifice narrative.

### 6.3.3. *islām* as a Changing Quality and Abraham's Sacrifice Story as an Example of its Perfection

In Q.2:131 we come across what could be described as Abraham's verbal declaration of faith (*shahāda*); when God invites Abraham to submit (*aslim*), the prophet readily declares: 'I bow (my will) To the Lord and Cherisher Of the Universe'. Given that submission in this verse is connected to the prophet's recognition of God's dominion over the world and in view of the aforementioned observation by Turner that according to the Qur'an the acknowledgement of God's authority resulting from the act of contemplation (upon the signs of the creation) is the

---

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 38, n. 31; the notion of *islām* as the perfection of *īmān* is also expressed by Sayyid Muḥammad Husayn Tabātabā'ī, *Tafsīr al-Mizan* (Tehran, 1364 Sh./1985-86), Vol. 1, p. 418 quoted in *ibid.*

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 10; the ayas cited as examples of reference to phenomenological submission are 49:14 (The desert Arabs say, "we believe." Say, "Ye have no faith; but ye (only) say, 'we have submitted our wills to Allah,' for not yet has faith entered your hearts) and 4:94. The ayas quoted as examples of reference to real faith are 2:112 and 31:22. *Ibid.*

entry into a state of *islām*, it would be appropriate to suggest that verse 2:131 is a description of Abraham's *islām* in its early stages.

In the same manner, based on the fact that according to the Qur'an *īmān* -the very basis of *islām*- is of variable quality, one may deduce that verses 128 and 260 of sura 2 portray Abraham at different stages of *islām*. More specifically, in verse 128 which is a part of the prayer that Abraham and Ishmael say during the building of Ka'ba, both father and son ask God to help them become *muslim*[52]. However, as is suggested by the content of Q.2:126[53] and the gravity of the task the two men have been entrusted with, Abraham and Ishmael have already achieved a high level of *islām*. Accordingly, there are two possible explanations; the first one can be found in Turner's comment that Abraham's request in this verse must refer to 'the safeguarding of the submission he had already made'[54]. The second is that Abraham and Ishmael are praying for total submission– in other words for the perfection of their faith. Verse 260[55] could either indicate one of the early stages of Abraham's spiritual journey or simply describe Abraham's constant search for knowledge in order to have his faith strengthened.

Coming to the sacrifice narrative, as has been already mentioned, Ibn 'Arabi seems to suggest that Abraham went through different stages of spiritual growth, the

---

[52] 'Our Lord! make of us Muslims, bowing to Thy (Will)…'; it goes without saying that the terms Islam and Muslim (as have been defined by Turner) cannot be applied to the stories of the prophets prior to Muhammad. That does not mean that the external acts of piety performed by Muslims since the establishment of Islam are missing from the lives of the prophets but that religious acts such as prayer and charity have not yet become the standard practices of an organized religious community. For prayer and pre-Muhammad prophets, see Q.10:87-9; 14:37, 39-40; 19:31, 55; 20:14; 21:73; 31:17. For charity and pre-Muhammad prophets, see Q.19:31, 55 and Q.21:73. According to Turner, there are '*at least* two modalities of *islam* adumbrated by the Koran'. Turner, *Islam without Allah?*, p. 1 (the emphasis is mine).

[53] 'And remember Abraham said: "my Lord, make this a city of peace, and feed its people with fruits- such of them as believe in Allah and the last day..."".

[54] Turner, *ibid.*, p. 18.

[55] 'Behold! Abraham said: "My Lord! Show me how Thou givest life to the dead." He said: "Dost thou not Then believe?" He said: "Yea! But to satisfy My own understanding."'.

sacrifice episode being an isolated incident of failure during some stage of his life before his final transformation into a 'perfect' man. Conversely, I feel that the sacrifice occurs during the time when Abraham has reached the highest possible spiritual level. For, should Abraham have misunderstood the divine command, we would expect him to receive an admonition -as is the case in the Sodom-Gomorra story- rather than a blessing[56]. Additionally, the fact that Q.37:99-113 relates how Abraham achieved the highest possible level of *islām* can be inferred both from the fact that verse 103 is the only bit of the qur'anic revelation in which it is clearly stated that Abraham submitted -not as a verbal testimony coming from the prophet but as a fact revealed to us by the Word of God and also from the fact that Abraham's submission in this episode is presented as the product of him having experienced and withstood a great trial.

### 6.3.4. Submission by Choice or Blind Obedience?

In a monograph which argues for the 'Christian' identity of Abraham, John Gilchrist, a South African Catholic apologist, compares the biblical and qur'anic versions of the sacrifice story and points to what he sees in the Qur'an as a passive devotee who rushes to fulfil God's bewildering request without a second thought. In the bible, Gilchrist says, Abraham is not rewarded because, in agreeing to sacrifice his son, he has done something well pleasing to God but because of his unshaken belief that God will never do something that is against his good nature (therefore he will not let Isaac vanish) and also that God will never fail to keep His promise (therefore, Abraham will somehow be blessed with innumerable descendants through Isaac). Quite the contrary, in the story's counterpart in the Qur'an, the element of trust in

---

[56] Q.37:108-13.

God's faithfulness is missing[57]; while the biblical Abraham submits to a God that he totally trusts, the qur'anic Abraham bows to a deity that he does not know. In a very non approving way Gilchrist compares the reaction of the qur'anic Abraham to that of a dog that has been taught how to follow orders. He notes: 'We cannot accept that God simply said to him Aslim!- "Submit!"- in the way a dog-trainer will command a dog "Heel!". If the dog does so respond, we will not say he has faith in his master, rather that he has been programmed into responding appropriately to the command[58]. To his understanding, Abraham is portrayed in the Qur'an as a man who does not use his ability to reason but passively accepts what has been decided for him.

Confirming Gilchrist's accusations of blind obedience, whilst speaking about animal sacrifice, Fazlul Karim mentions the reason which he rates as the most important one for the performance of the rite; even if it is not in the capacity of the human intellect to understand its purpose, sacrifice has to be carried out as God's order[59]. The above observation equals the following: divine commandments must be followed even when they cannot be understood by humans. Can this statement, however, be based on the teachings of the Qur'an? A superficial reading of the sacrifice story certainly gives the impression that reason is subordinated to religious faith; Abraham gets his son's permission and commences to carry out the divine command. There are neither objections nor any questions. Yet, it was human intellect, Abraham's sense of reason that led him to believe that there is one Deity.

There is indeed one narrative that makes Abraham's apparently passive obedience to God's bewildering request look even more inexplicable. That is the

---

[57] Gilchrist, *Millat-A-Ibrahim: the True Faith of Abraham.*, pp. 6 and 8.
[58] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[59] Fazlul Karim, *Al-Hadis*, p. 484.

story in which the patriarch-prophet and his wife, Sarah, learn from the heavenly messengers who appear at their tent of the impending birth of their son, Isaac, and are also informed about God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah[60]. On this occasion, Abraham attempts to negotiate with God for the fate of the inhabitants, Lut's countrymen.

In the light of this saga, the scholars who view the near sacrifice as Abraham's failure in his role as a father or simply as a misunderstanding, comment on but are unable to explain how a man who pleads with God to revoke His plans and show mercy to strangers, does not attempt to persuade Him spare his own sons[61]. To this, I have to add an important detail; the citizens of Sodom and Gomorra are sinners. They have broken God's laws leading a scandalous life and they are, thus, accountable for their distraction. Abraham's boy, on the other hand, has done absolutely nothing to deserve such a fate and neither has Abraham.

My interpretation of what appears to be a pure contradiction is that in trying to persuade God to change his plans, Abraham shows the nobility of his character rather than disobedience or blasphemy as no matter what the end result of his intercession will be, he himself has nothing to lose. On the other hand, should he refuse the divine challenge 'to bring his son to the altar', his negative response would betray want of faith.

Furthermore, as is well known to the student of Islam, the qur'anic narratives are not meant to provide the believers with details about the lives of the prophets. The sacrifice story is a separately told Abrahamic story and it is obvious that it is not the

---

[60] In Meccan passages Q.11:69-76; 15:51-60; 29:31f; 51:24-34. The actual names of the towns are not mentioned in the Qur'an.
[61] See Leviant, 'Parallel Lives', p. 22; Caspi&Cohen, *The Binding [Aqedah]*, p. 4; L.H. Kant, 'Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text, Part 1, p. 88.

full story. The fact that we are not presented with any feelings or reactions by Abraham does not mean that there is only a command and its instant fulfillment but that there is something else that the text wants to draw attention to rather than emotional reactions.

Finally, should we accept that according to the Qur'an one submits exactly because one has knowledge (*'ilm* <=> *īmān*, *īmān* <=> *islām*),[62] the possibility that Abraham's submission in the Qur'an is connected to blind/unquestioning obedience can be ruled out.

As for the idea of trusting that God will keep His promise about the patriarch's descendants, it cannot be applied to the Muslim version of the incident for the qur'anic God never promises Abraham numerous descendants through the *dhabīḥ*. Instead of promising offspring -in the context of Abraham having being tried with certain commands that he fulfilled- God says: 'I will make thee an imam to the nations'. What is more, when Abraham asks God to also make imams from his offspring, the divine response is: "But my promise is not within the reach of evil-doers."…[63]. The only other promise that God makes *about* Abraham[64] concerns the hereafter '…Him [i.e. Abraham] We chose and rendered pure in this world: and he will be in the hereafter in the ranks of the righteous'.[65] In Q.16:120-122 the same theme occurs related to the fact that Abraham was truly obedient, a *hanīf* who turned away from idolatry and showed gratitude for the divine gifts[66].

---

[62] Turner, *Islam without Allah?*, p. 2 and throughout chapter 1.
[63] Q.2:124.
[64] In this case Abraham is not addressed directly and the word 'promise' is missing.
[65] Q.2:130.
[66] '*120.* Abraham was indeed a model, devoutly obedient to God, (and) true in faith, and he joined not gods with God: *121.* He showed his gratitude for the favours of God, Who chose him, and guided him

## 6.4. Sura 37: Belief in the Unity of God, Idolatry, Prophethood and the Hereafter

In order to prevent objections to the possibility of studying a qur'anic passage in the context of the sura in which it appears, on the grounds that the structure of the Qur'an is such that often renders it impossible for the reader to know how one passage or even one single verse is related to the following, it has to be noted that sura 37 *does* have thematic coherence and for the most part can be read as a full story. Furthermore, with reference to the two different chronologies of the Qur'an available to us (the one employed by the standard Egyptian edition of the Qur'an and the Western one, established by Nöldeke and Schwally), it has to be noted that although the chronology of certain suras or individual ayas is disputed, as far as sura 37 is concerned, there is a consensus of opinion; the entirety of the sura is classified as Meccan.

As is well known to the student of Islam, the message of the first phase of qur'anic revelation presents, for the most part, the three central tenets of Islam, namely '*tawhīd*' (belief in the unity of God), '*nubuwwa*' (prophethood) and '*al-akhira*' (the hereafter). Revealed in the early middle Meccan period, sura 37 -which takes its name '*Al-Ṣāffāt*' (those in ranks)[67] from the first word of the chapter- is permeated by all three ideas. The sura starts with a strong statement of God's Oneness. That is followed by a short reference to the secrets of the spiritual world. The greatest part of the sura warns its hearers about '*al ma'di*' (the return) and the Day of Judgement. The prophetic teachings about the unity of God and resurrection

---

to a straight way. *122*. And We gave him good in this world, and he will be, in the hereafter, in the ranks of the righteous.'

[67] The epithet refers to the angels.

had been denied by the unbelievers in the past and the Qur'an warns its detractors about the veracity of the prophetic message; emphasis is placed on personal responsibility and the powerlessness of previously influential leaders to help their followers once the Day of Judgement comes. There is a vivid description of the abodes of hell and paradise that refers to the future; the first is a place of continuous torment, inhabited by idolatrous people who used to mock the prophetic message about the hereafter and felt secure following their earthly leaders. The second is a place of eternal bliss, inhabited by men who managed to stay devoted to God, despite some of their companions' efforts to lead them astray. The rest of the sura is an account of the stories of the prophets Noah, Abraham, Moses and Aaron, Elijah, Lot and Johan, who fought against different kinds of idolatry, were persecuted but ultimately delivered and rewarded by Allah.

## 6.5. Qur'anic References to Literal Sacrifice

### *a. Animal Sacrifice in the Qur'an*

Looking at modern Muslim interpretations on sura 22 (the Hajj)[68] and particularly verses 34-38 which serve to instruct the pilgrims in regards to the annual rite of Eid al-Adha[69] (the Feast of Sacrifice), the spiritual and material benefits that derive from sacrifice fall into three categories: a. showing gratitude to Allah, b. holding oneself ready to give up property and become detached from material comforts and c. relieve the poor. Apart from this feast which concludes the rites of

---

[68] Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*; Fazlul Karim, *Al-Hadis*; Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, 'The Ritual of Animal Sacrifice' in http://www.renaissance.com.pk/JanIslamiShari12y5.htm

[69] According to 'Amer Yunis the word '*adhaa'* derives from the root '*Dahhaa'* which signifies the time between sun rise and noon. Because the Feast of Immolation used to take place during the first quarter of the day, the Muslims called it '*Eid al Adhaa'*. Yunis, 'The Sacrifice of Abraham in Islam', p. 147; The Hajj sacrifice, also called Eid al-Kabir, i.e. the Greater Festival [Turkish: *Kurban Bayrami* (*kurban*=sacrifice)] takes place on the tenth of the month *Dhu al-Hijjah* in the valley of Mina near Mecca.

the pilgrimage and the sacrifice of an animal on the birth of a child (*'aqiqa* sacrifice), no other sacrifice is recognized by orthodox Islam.

Animal sacrifice is, first and foremost, understood as an act that is repeated once a year in recognition and appreciation of God's gifts to man '...that they might celebrate the name of Allah over the sustenance He gave them from animals', '...thus have We made animals subject to you, that ye may be grateful', '...that ye may glorify Allah for His guidance to you'[70]. Men, to show their gratitude, should dedicate to God the most precious of their belongings. Livestock used to be the basic source of income for the Arabs and sacrificing their cattle would be a serious loss to them but at the same time a good way to learn how not to attach great importance to mundane affairs[71]. By making a sacrifice to God, the Muslims are encouraged to learn the value of self denial.

Offering animals in sacrifice is beneficial also because it helps people remember that animals have been created for man and serve their purpose by providing him with milk, meat and labour, hence, they must never be taken as objects of worship[72].

In connection to the above, distinction between the Islamic type of sacrifice and the pagan one is clearly drawn in the qur'anic text when attention is called to the fact that God does not take pleasure in the blood or the meat of the animals but He delights in people's piety[73]. Sacrifice is, thus, a symbol that calls for a visible institution. What is really offered here is the hearts of the faithful who are also

---

[70] Q.22:34; 22:36; 22:37; see also Q.108:1-2.
[71] Fazlul Karim, *Al-Hadis*, p. 484.
[72] *Ibid.*
[73] Q.22:37.

reminded through this act that life is sacred and that sacrifice should be instigated not by cruelty but rather the need of sustenance[74].

Particularly interesting in this respect is Q.22:34 'To every people did We appoint rites (of sacrifice), that they might celebrate the name of Allah over the sustenance He gave them from animals (fit for food), But your God is One God...'; this last phrase 'But your God is One God' is probably a reminder to the practice of pagan sacrificial rituals; the verse in its totality seems to me to be subtly expressing a concern that the Muslim community are not yet clear as to the meaning of Islamic sacrifice.

Finally, sacrifice provides the Muslims with the opportunity to be benevolent towards their poorer brothers '...and spend (in charity) out of what We have bestowed upon them'[75] and learn to share '...eat ye thereof, and feed such as (beg not but) live in contentment, and such as beg with due humility...'[76]

We have already seen that several Muslim and non-Muslim scholars understand the annual Hajj sacrifice to be connected in one way or another to Abraham's sacrifice. Javed Ahmad Ghamidi treats the *dhabīḥ Allāh* and Hajj verses together and asserts that the Muslim pilgrimage was established on the day of Abraham's attempted sacrifice, in order for it to be commemorated every year. Based on the *dhabīḥ Allāh*, Ghamidi understands the annual Hajj ritual as symbolic of the giving of one's own life rather than the giving of one's wealth. Likewise, he sees the sacrificial animal as the substitute for one's life. Interestingly, he interprets Abraham's sacrifice as a misunderstanding which, nevertheless, was not only

---

[74] Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, n. 2815 and n. 6287.
[75] Q.22:35.
[76] Q.22:36.

accepted by God but also offered as guidance on submission to the rest of humanity. He notes: 'When we offer our life symbolically to the Almighty by offering the sacrifice of an animal, we are in fact expressing our gratitude on the guidance of submission which was expressed by Abraham (sws) by sacrificing his only son.'[77]

Although such an interpretation seems quite legitimate today that the connection between the Hajj and its rituals is firmly established, if the animal sacrifice in the Qur'an was so closely related to the *dhabīḥ Allāh*, we would expect to come across an allusion to Abraham's sacrifice in Q.22, i.e. sura *al-ḥajj*, where there is mention to Abraham's proclamation of the pilgrimage followed by the longest reference in the Qur'an to the Hajj sacrifice. On the contrary, the *dhabīḥ Allāh* ayas occur in a sura that has nothing to do with animal sacrifice but is rather related to idolatry and the hereafter.

***b. Child Sacrifice in the Qur'an***

The killing of children in the Qur'an refers more often than not to the practice of female infanticide, the prohibition of which can be seen in Q.16:58-59 and Q.81:8-9. In verses 15:1-3 of sura 6, which have been read as a kind of 'an Islamic Decalogue', similar to, yet considerably different from the biblical Ten Commandments[78], among other things, Muslims are prohibited from slaughtering their children on the plea of being poor: '…Kill not your children on a plea of want…'[79]. Again here, although not clearly stated, mention is more than likely to female children given that boys were more highly valued. Nöldeke suggests that

---

[77] Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, 'The Ritual of Animal Sacrifice'. According to Ghamidi's unusual interpreation, Abraham, in his dream, was not asked to slaughter Ishmael but to dedicate him to the service of the Ka'ba. *Ibid.*

[78] William M. Brinner, 'An Islamic Decalogue' in William M. Brinner, Stephen D. Ricks (eds), *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions* (Atlanta, Georgia, Scholars Press, 1986).

[79] Q.6:151; see also Q.17:31; 60:12.

female infanticide could have been associated to the worship of subterranean deities, although the real motive must have been poverty[80]. There is also reference to the sacrificial killing of children. Qur'an 6:137 and 140 bear witness to the custom of child sacrifice among the Arab tribes during the pre-Islamic times[81].

In sum, the enquiry into the qur'anic references to literal sacrifice has made it clear that animal sacrifice serves only to promote spiritual growth. As for human sacrifice, the killing of one's newborn on a plea of poverty and the ritualistic killing of children are strictly forbidden. The message to the new Muslim community 'Kill not your children'[82] is clear and is never abrogated. Given that, as well as the frequent occurrence of Allah's Merciful nature and the statement that God is not pleased by the flesh and blood of animals, it would be inconceivable that He requires the flesh and blood of human beings. Furthermore, in light of the verses that refer to child sacrifice, we may conclude the following: a. every time this practice is mentioned, it is condemned with the exception of Abraham's sacrifice that is praised and rewarded, b. apart from Abraham's son's sacrifice, no other male sacrifice is there mentioned explicitly and c. child sacrifice is said to have occurred because of poverty and also as a pagan religious practice. Quite the opposite, Abraham is depicted as having left his people exactly because of their pagan beliefs long before the attempted sacrifice. Finally, it goes without saying that whatever the reason for child sacrifice, a father would never ask for the victim's permission as is the case in Abraham's story.

---

[80] Nöldeke, 'Arabs (Ancient)', p. 669.
[81] In Islamic exegesis, the 'Abd al-Muttalib legend hints at a pre-Islamic practice of vowing a child sacrifice. However, the condemnation of the idea by the Quraysh indicates that it must have been a sporadic phenomenon rather than a custom. Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 227, n. 50.
[82] Q.6:151; 17:31.

## Chapter 7: Literary and Historical Sources on Sacrifice

### 7.1. Fathers and Sacrificial Children in Literature

To get a further perspective on the issue of the relationship between 'sacrificing' fathers and -mainly- sons, we now turn to the fields of literature and psychology. In an article that looks at a number of nineteenth and twentieth century novels in which the tragic main characters end up killing their own sons, George Sebouhian draws a parallel between the biblical figure of Abraham and the 'heroes' of the books he discusses. These novels are mainly stories of psychopathic individuals who attempt to kill their sons because of their self-destructive character that will not let them be cured through the help of their promising sons or the stories of mentally sick individuals whose sons' weaknesses remind them of their own failure. Although we cannot accept the reading of the biblical passage as the story of a psychopath who ultimately overcomes his urge to kill his son –for reasons I have already explained[1]-, this article is very interesting in the way that it describes how the fathers seem to identify with their offspring. In all cases, the parents can see many of their own qualities having passed to their children. They feel as if part of themselves lives through their sons. Their children are not only their physical extension -part of their flesh- but they also show signs of the fathers' spirit. They act as the mirrors of the fathers' souls reflecting either weaknesses that their fathers cannot face or good qualities that seem to have been transferred to the children, who represent life and the potential of success[2].

---

[1] See chapters 1.3 and 6.3.
[2] George Sebouhian, 'From Abraham and Isaac to Bob Slocum and My Boy: why Fathers kill their Sons' in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1981), pp. 43-52.

In an article that attempts to provide us with the historical evolution of religious child sacrifice, Aviezer Tucker presents us with a completely new idea concerning the parents' motive for killing their children. Tucker claims to have discovered the deeper universal motive of child sacrifice which is 'a natural tendency to deny responsibility for one's children'[3]. As a base for his theory, he uses Giambattista Vico's postulate of a pre-civilized humanity where:

'parents, since they are held by no necessary bond of law, will proceed to cast off their natural children. Since their parents may separate at any time, the children, abandoned by both, must lie exposed to be devoured by dogs'[4].

According to Tucker, this is the natural state which has only been controlled - at least up till modern times- by means of institutionalization of parental irresponsibility in a form that does not pose a threat to the community, namely 'paedocidal religious sacrifice, the socially sanctioned killing of children'[5].

What is interesting about the methodological approach of the author is that although he emphasizes the historical character of his research, Tucker is not interested in the historical-anthropological information that we have on the subject of paedocide[6] but rather focuses solely on 'cultural-literary evidence'[7]. This is not to say that his method is illegitimate; it is unquestionable that a work of literature can be a mine of information on the personality of its author as well as her/his era. However, since Tucker is interested in the historical development of paedocide, a parallel inquiry into purely historical sources can prove useful; especially when someone is

---

[3] Tucker, 'Sins of our Fathers: a Short History of Religious Child Sacrifice', p. 30.
[4] Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Th. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984), paragraph 336, quoted in Tucker, *ibid.*
[5] Tucker, *ibid.*
[6] Tucker does not differentiate between religiously and non-religiously motivated killings of children.
[7] Tucker, *ibid.*, p. 43.

about to 'assign universal immorality to parents'[8]. To give an example of what I mean, information that we have on the people of the eighteenth century East Indian island Siaoo, who would steal and sacrifice to the spirit of a volcano children from neighboring islands and not their own children would certainly give the author pause for thought.

In order to support his hypothesis, Aviezer Tucker draws on three well-known sacrifice narratives: Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and what he sees as God's sacrifice of his son, Jesus. The symbol of a child that is sacrificed by a parent is according to the author the most prominent one in Western civilization[9]. In a way that reminds us of Delaney's theory of 'the endorsement of patriarchy through the Abrahamic narrative' but is in fact the reverse, Tucker does not argue that the sacrifice narratives contain risky connotations for humanity but rather implies that the sacrifice narratives simply tell the historical truth as it is, the truth that applies to whole nations or civilizations, i.e. that man (and not the narrative) is dangerous.

In the first case, Agamemnon, who represents the pagan world, satisfies his urge to sacrifice his daughter on the pretext of a war that cannot be avoided and a

---

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] The present author strongly believes that the interpretation of a religious text is as important as the text itself. The narrative of Abraham's sacrifice is indeed prominent (and not only in the Western world as Tucker notes) but not as a symbol of a murderous father. With regard to Iphigenia's sacrifice that Tucker considers to be more significant than other Greek myths, it is only one of the many well-known stories of Greek mythology-not more prominent than Achilles or Odysseus adventures, for example. As for Jesus' crucifixion, although Tucker notes Girard's observation that early Christianity was 'anti-sacrificial' and only later did Christians interpret the crucifixion as the sacrifice of a son by his father [René Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris, Grasset, 1978), n. 11, pp. 266-374 cited in Tucker, *ibid.*, pp. 39-40], he adds that he is not concerned with historical Jesus but with the New Testament sacrifice myth that provides the sacrificial ideology that parents are in need so that they find transcendental justification for killing their children (*ibid.*). Especially in regards to Jesus' crucifixion that as Girard correctly notes is not described in the New Testament as sacrificial more than once (i.e. in the Epistle to the Hebrews), I believe that Tucker over-stresses a certain interpretation of it that does not represent the Western civilization in its totality. During my four-year Bachelor's course in a theology school that represents the Orthodox Christian tradition, I never came across the idea of Jesus' crucifixion as the sacrifice of a son by his father.

goddess, Artemis, who will not let the Greek ships sail to Troy unless Iphigenia is sacrificed to her. The case of Abraham is slightly different. Unlike the shameless Greek gods, Yahweh is a just God. For that reason, Abraham (who is, beyond doubt, guilty of paedocidal desires since not only he does not offer his own life in exchange for his son's life but he does not even protest as he did on behalf of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah) besides divine sanction, needs a moral excuse for the intended murder of his son; he, therefore, lies; he lies to his wife, his companions and his victim[10]. The same paedocidal instinct that now takes Abraham to the top of the mount Moriah had earlier made him desert his firstborn son, Ishmael and Ishmael's mother, Hagar into the wilderness. For the first time, Christianity is on the side of the sacrificed; elevating the sacrificed to the highest possible position, Christianity does not only provide a transcendental ideology that legitimizes paedocide, hence, relieves the sacrificers of guilt but it also provides a sense of purpose for the confused, hurt and resentful victims.

Tucker argues that as the world is becoming more and more secular, religious transcendental ideologies tend to be rejected; but parental irresponsibility, natural as it is, does not go away and since the ideologies that used to give legitimacy and at the same time control this feeling are dead -at least in the largest part of the world- new sacrificial ideologies have been invented, the strongest among which, nationalism[11]. To support his argument the author reminds us that the Palestinian children have been the protagonists in the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts and notes that the Muslim suicide-

---

[10] See also Abramovitch, who considers the possibility that Abraham has *unconscious* aggressive feelings towards Isaac. If that is the case, says the author, the divine command relieves Abraham of his guilt since it is not him but God who demands the killing. Henry Hanoch Abramovitch, *The First Father: Abraham: the Psychology and Culture of a Spiritual Revolutionary* (Lanham, Md., London, University Press of America, 1994), p. 122.

[11] Among the various forms that parental paedocide urges may take in the modern era, the author names mental abuse.

bombers are young men who are encouraged by their parents to kill themselves[12]. In other contemporary societies, claims the author, the need for legitimizing the sacrifice of children through institutionalization has been overcome by means of technology. In particular, it is the reliable methods of birth control that helped lessen 'the conflict between sexual pleasure and social responsibility'[13]. Lastly, the author notes that while in the societies where contraception is avoided sacrifice ideologies are still alive, in the societies where birth control has eliminated the need for the socially acceptable killing of children and where the restrictions of religion or morality do not apply anymore, parents have simply gone back to the 'natural state' in which they 'leave their newborn children to fend for themselves in the modern asphalt jungles'[14].

In his concluding paragraph, the author states that humanity is divided into 'those who continue to institutionally kill their children, those who neglect them, and those who care for them'[15]. This is the first time in his article that Tucker mentions caring parents[16]. Still, he does not leave a space to explain what 'went wrong' with these parents, that is to say how these parents managed to overcome the killer instinct. Surely man is no angel, child abuse (often exercised in the name of religion) is a sad reality and parental paedocide is not only mythical; generalizations, however, are to be avoided.

Although extremely pessimistic about human nature, Tucker's analysis is very interesting as well as informative in regard to the victimization that man has exercised

---

[12] As if the parents stand outside the dangerous ideology; I do not mean to say that adults are not responsible for contributing to the perpetuation of the victimization of their children; ignorance can and in this case *does* kill. However, this is totally different to charging these parents with a desire –even a subconscious one- to rid themselves of their children.
[13] Tucker, 'Sins of our Fathers', p. 46.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 47 (the italics are mine).
[16] The only other time that he refers to a supportive mother in passing is when he attempts to show that Sigmund Freud was mentally abused by his father. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

and suffered in history as well as the pathology of the sacrificers and the psychology of the near-sacrificed. Specifically, Tucker's comparisons between the typical behavior of abusing parents and that of Agamemnon and Abraham and also between the emotional reactions and post-traumatic mental problems of abused children and the symptoms that the near-sacrificed of the narratives appear to display further indicate that the Qur'an has made sure to avoid using language that would connote abusing behavior on behalf of Abraham.

According to the author, in both cases of Iphigenia and Isaac, the father betrays the trust of his child (Agamemnon promising his daughter marriage with Achilles and Abraham misleading his son as to the purpose of their pilgrimage) in order to bring the victim to the appointed for the ritual location. Treachery serves also to keep the victim silent; neither Iphigenia nor Isaac gets any chance to protest. Following her traumatic experience, Iphigenia displays emotional and behavioral problems which are typical of children who have been abused by a parent; her feelings for her father are a mixture of love and hatred; unable to blame her father, she is displacing her desire for revenge towards Helen and Menelaus who caused the war; she is 'cynical, angry, revengeful, traumatized and self-centered to the effect that she lacks any ability for sympathy and empathy with other people'[17]. Tucker believes that this is how Isaac must also feel, although the Bible keeps silent as to the victim's reaction[18]. Jesus on the other hand protests both before his crucifixion and on the cross[19]. Furthermore, according to Tucker, Jesus displays another symptom typical of

---

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 33.
[18] Reference has already been made to scholars who -based on biblical indications- have argued for the total alienation of Isaac from his father following the Moriah incident.
[19] 'O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me…' (Matthew, 26:39); '*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*?' (Matthew, 27:46).

an abused-sacrificed child, 'He wants to win the love of the sacrificing parent by cooperating in his own destruction, while at the same time he wants to live'[20].

## 7.2. The Nature of the Sacrificial Ritual in the History of Man

### 7.2.1. Introduction

In the early nineties during her anthropological fieldwork in a Turkish village, Delaney was often being told by children that 'if God had not provided Ibrahim with a ram, fathers would still be slaughtering their children'[21]. It seems that those people understood Abraham's sacrifice as a story that recounted the substitution of animal for human sacrifice.

We have seen that except for Abraham's sacrifice, the Qur'an refers to cases of child sacrifice in pre-Islamic sixth century Arabia[22]. To find out whether we may draw a distinction between Islamic sacrifice as it is portrayed in the Qur'an through the figure of Abraham and non-Islamic, non-monotheistic sacrifice, it would be very worthwhile to expose the fundamental nature of the sacrificial act in past and present times,[23] the main objective of this enquiry being to indicate its vitality for the actor of the drama rather than deal with the moralists' view i.e. sacrifice as means of victimization. Looking at different occasions for this ritual –symbolic or actual- will show us its various manifestations, all of which can ultimately be classified under one single category for they all express the very same ethos of sacrifice: the hunt for immortality. First, I will refer to the two most important theories that have been produced on the subject: sacrifice as a gift-offering and sacrifice as a sacramental

---

[20] Tucker, 'Sins of our Fathers', p. 37; Tucker points to John 10:17 '…my father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again'.
[21] Delaney, *Abraham on Trial*, p. 163.
[22] Q.6:137, 140.
[23] This chapter focuses for the most part on sacrifice among primitive societies.

union. Reference will be made to two more important theories and to the role of the sacrificial victim. Finally, I will study Becker's view on sacrifice as the product of the fear of death and consider how it can apply to societies where men believe that their deeds on earth cannot possibly determine favourable or unfavourable conditions in the abode of the dead.

### 7.2.2. Gift-Offerings[24]

The earliest theory of sacrifice looks at it as a gift to a deity; primitive man feels deeply indebted to nature. Nature has given him goods in abundance and man feels that he has to offer gifts to the gods of nature to keep things in balance. From a psychoanalytical point of view 'the gods exist to make the debt payable'[25].

The gift theory is embraced by a number of scholars, each one of whom has added his own interpretation to it. Spencer, for instance, suggests that sacrifice has its origins in the custom of leaving food at the graves of the ancestors. After ancestor worship began to emerge, the provisions for the dead evolved into sacrifices[26].

Tylor assumes that gift-offering must be the earliest type of sacrifice, as it seems to be the most underdeveloped one. In a childlike way, a gift is offered to

---

[24] As Oesterley remarks, the term 'sacrifice' is not etymologically appropriate when referring to the offerings of the primitives; the word 'sacrifice' is derived from the Latin *sacrificium*, which comes from the terms *sacer* (holy) and *facere* (to make) and its connotation is that something is killed-destroyed and in this way dedicated to God. To the primitive understanding, on the other hand, an offering is a matter of mere practicability. By giving, one expects to receive. William O. E. Oesterley, *Sacrifices in Ancient Israel: their Origin, Purposes and Development* (London, Hodder&Stoughton, 1937), p. 12. Nonetheless, due to the age-long usage of the term 'sacrifice' as 'offering' by the academia, the two words have become interchangeable.

[25] Norman O. Brown, *Life against Death: the Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (New York, Viking, 1959), p. 271.

[26] Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Sociology* (London, Macmillan, 1969), p. 162.

guarantee that the sacrifier[27] will not fall out of grace with gods while there is no decided opinion as to the usefulness the gift has for the receiver[28].

Gray, on the other hand, although a devout supporter of the gift-idea, notes that in the Old Testament a kind of sacrifice is described during which a small portion of the offering is given to Yahweh and the larger one is consumed by the sacrifier and his companions. He observes, thus, that there is more to sacrifice than just making God presents[29].

Finally, Oesterley asserts that originally sacrificial worship served three fundamental purposes, which manifest themselves in three different types of sacrifice: the gift-offering, the life-liberating and the communion ones but the essence of sacrifice – the reason that accounts for its emergence – is based on men's perception of the nature of gods. In a nutshell, gods are believed to behave in exactly the same way as men; they get angry when displeased and sympathetic when approached carefully and humbly[30]. Some of the most common objectives of a gift-offering are: to ward off danger that offence against the spirits brings about, to secure victory at war and success at hunting, give thanks after a wish has been granted or simply nourish and honour the god[31]. An amusing idea regarding the purpose of the gift-offerings for the Fijians is reported by Frazer in his anthropological work *The Golden Bough*. According to this idea, Fijian islands rest on the body of a god who causes

---

[27] Drawing from Hubert and Mauss's definition of terms relating to sacrifice, I use the term 'sacrifier' to refer to the organizer or sponsor of the ritual and the term 'sacrificer' to refer to the person who actually performs the act.
[28] Edward B. Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture* (New York, Harper, 1958, Vol. 2 of *Primitive Culture*, 1st ed. 1871), p. 462.
[29] George B. Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament: its Theory and Practice* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1925), p. 3.
[30] Oesterley, *Sacrifices in Ancient Israel: their Origin, Purposes and Development*, pp. 11-12.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 26; vow-related offerings are still very common among contemporary Bengali Hindus. See, for example, Suchitra Samanta, 'The "Self-Animal" and Divine Digestion: Goat Sacrifice to the Godess Kali in Bengal' in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (1994), p. 782.

earthquakes every time he turns over in his sleep. A highly valued thing is sacrificed to this god so that he turns as gently as possibly[32].

### 7.2.3. Communion Sacrifice

An entirely novel idea, dealing with the genesis of the sacrificial rite, is brought forward by Robertson Smith. The latter maintains that in its dawn, sacrifice - and early Semitic sacrifice in particular- is a sacramental ritual act that takes the form of a communal meal between the worshippers and the object of their worship. In this case, the victim plays the role of the vehicle that brings those who partake of it in physical communion with their god because the god is believed to be immanent in the body and blood of the animal that is being eaten - sacrificed. The same act brings also social union[33]. According to Smith, this theory can be applied to all totemic societies of the past[34].

The earliest known type of sacrifice in Arabia is described by Nilus and is quoted by Smith as a very illustrative example of a sacrificial meal shared between worshippers and the object of their worship. According to the narrative, after a white camel has been forced to drop on its knees, the worshippers walk in procession three times around it chanting. As soon as the third circle has been completed and while the last words of the hymn are still on the lips of the congregation, the leader, using a

---

[32] James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion*, Part 4, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris*, I (London, Macmillan&Co, 1927), p. 201.

[33] Aristotle in his *Politics* refers to the vital role of the institution of sacrifice in creating a social bond, not however in a mystical way, like the one Smith describes. Social institutions such as marriage, *phratries* [groups of families] and *thysia* [sacrifice] promote good life; good life is the only means of keeping the members of a *polis* together. Without these social institutions, a *polis* cannot exist. Aristotelis, *Politica*, 1280b31-9.

[34] Robertson W. Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: the Fundamental Institutions* (London, A.&C. Black, 1927). Smith's 'communion' theory had its impact on many scholars; see, for example, Sydney C. Gayford, *Sacrifice and Priesthood: Jewish and Christian* (London, Methuen, 1924), p. 178; Oesterley, *Sacrifices in Ancient Israel: their Origin, Purposes and Development*, Introduction and p. 53; Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph W. Swain (London, George Allen&Unwin, 1915). On Durkheim's theory see further on.

sword, stabs the animal and rushes to drink of the blood that is gushing out of the wound. Immediately, the rest of the group rush at the camel and using knifes, they devour its flesh, entrails, marrow and bones in such haste that in a few minutes after the rite has begun no part of the animal is left[35] - 'and thus in the most literal way all those who shared in the ceremony absorbed part of the victim's life into themselves'[36].

Hubert and Mauss- the authors of the first thorough monograph on the topic- agree with Smith in that one of the most important intentions of sacrifice is to generate a union with the god. However, they hold that its key object is to establish a connection between the sacred and the profane. Through consecration, the victim is saturated by divine qualities. By slaughtering the animal, one is releasing divine power and by consuming part of it, he is receiving the supernatural power within himself, establishing thus conduct with the spiritual world[37]. But why is it that the profane wants to approach the divine? In the authors' words: 'it is because it sees in it

---

[35] *Καμηλον λευκην τω χρωματι και αμωμον επι γονατων ανακλιναντες περιερχονται τριτω κυκλω κειμενην παμπληθει δολιχευοντες. Εξαρχει δε τις και της περιοδου και ωδης της εις το αστρον αυτοις πεποιημενης, η των βασιλευοντων η των ηλικια και γηρα σεμνυνομενων ιερεων· Ος μετα την τριτην περιοδον, ουπω της ωδης παυσαμενου του πληθους, ετι δε επι γλωττης το ακροτελευτιον του εφυμνιου φεροντος, σπασαμενος το ξιφος ευτονως παιει κατα του τένοντος και πρωτος μετα σπουδης του αιματος απογευεται. Και ουτως προσδραμοντες οι λοιποι ταις μαχαιραις οι μεν συν ταις θριξιν μερος τι βραχυ της δορας αποτεμνουσιν, οι δε το επιτυχον αρπαζοντες των σαρκων αποκοπτουσιν, οι δε μεχρι σπλαγχνων χωρουσι και εγκατων, ουδεν της θυσιας καταλιμπανοντες ακατεργαστον, ο δυνησηται λοιπον προσοφθηναι φαινοντι τω ηλιω. Ουτε γαρ οστεων και μυελων απεχονται, νικώντες παραμονη την κραταιοτητα και σχολη περιγενομενοι της αντιτυπιας.* Nilus, 'Narrations' 3, in *Patrologiae Graeca [PG]*, Vol. 79 (1865), 612.

[36] Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: the Fundamental Institutions*, p. 339; Smith has been strongly criticized on not providing convincing evidence to support his idea regarding the sacred character animals had in the Semite rituals. According to his theory, the sacredness of the animals was based on an alleged identification between their substance and the substance of gods rather than the act of their consecration. He also claimed that the gods of the early Semites were believed to be the ancestors of their worshippers. See Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, 'The Meaning of Sacrifice among the Nuer' in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 84, No. 1/2 (1954), pp. 22-23.

[37] Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: its Nature and Function*, trans. W. D. Halls (London, Cohen&West, 1964, 1st ed. 1898), p. 97.

the very source of life…it is there that the very conditions for its existence are to be found'[38].

Durkheim's notion on the most primitive intention of sacrifice appears confusing. The author himself does not seem to have a very clear idea of the theory he is putting forward. Initially, he suggests that sacrifice in its most primitive form is an act of oblation that is carried out in order to increase the totem species and can be still seen in the Intichiuma rites of the Arunta tribe of Central Australia[39]. He, then, notes that he can also see the elements of communion at the ceremonial eating of the totem animal by the tribe[40] only to state, later on: 'Perhaps the oblation is even more permanent than the communion'[41].

### 7.2.4. Other Theories:

#### *a. Life-Giving Sacrifice*

Another theory considers the primary function of sacrifice to be the growth of life. Giving of life to promote life as the fundamental principle of the sacrificial act, may involve the fortification of gods or spirits, not as a goal per se but as a means to enable them perform their beneficent functions to the advantage of man. Liberation of life power can also strengthen the sacrifier so that he may be strong against destructive powers. It may, finally, function as a technique carried out to bring union with the good forces and, therefore, contact with the supernatural sphere[42]. Moreover,

---

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 98.
[39] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p. 331.
[40] *Ibid.*, p. 337.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 343.
[42] Edwin O. James, *Origins of Sacrifice: a Study in Comparative Religion* (London, John Murray, 1933), p. 256f.

'In the ritual shedding of blood it is not the taking of life, but the giving of life which is really fundamental, for blood is not death, but life'[43].

A modern ethnographic paradigm of a community that sacrifices animals having the intention of prolonging the life of its members is illustrated by Gibson. The latter conducted his anthropological fieldwork on a society of the Philippine island Mindoro, the Buid, among whom sacrifice has a twofold function: it can bring union with desirable spirits (forces of the earth that bring fertility and rebirth) and separation from undesirable ones (ghosts of the dead and other malicious forces). 'It is in the balance between these external agencies...that the perpetuation of the community is assured'[44]. Among the Buid, '...animals represent a source of continuing life and growth...'[45] Domesticated animals are believed to have a kind of vitality that can be used to frighten the uninvited spirits away when the latter intrude in human space. They are not seen as substitutes for human lives. Their vitality can also be shared between men and benevolent spirits in a communal meal. Coming in conduct with the forces of the earth brings fertility and safety for the children[46].

***b. Expiation-Substitution***

Expiation of a sin via substitution is what Evans-Pritchard describes as the main idea that characterizes all piacular sacrifices among the Nuer. Having placed ashes on the back of the animal, the sacrifier has identified the evil part of himself with the victim, so that once the animal is slaughtered, that evil part flows away in its blood. Sacrificed, usually in times of illness, '...the life of a beast (is) being taken by

---

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 33; see also Samanta, 'The "Self-Animal" and Divine Digestion: Goat Sacrifice to the Godess Kali in Bengal', p. 790.
[44] Thomas Gibson, *Sacrifice and Sharing in the Philippine Highlands: Religion and Society among the Buid of Mindoro* (London, Dover, Athlone Press, 1986), p. 188.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 157.
[46] *Ibid.*, pp. 151-89.

God in the place of the life of a man, or the life of a beast (is) being given in exchange for the life of a man'[47]. This idea is later adopted by Lévi-Strauss, who generalizes it by saying that the underlying principle of sacrifice is substitution[48].

The idea of substitution is also expressed by Hubert and Mauss. If the spirits of the sacred are the forces of life and especially if these forces are at a high level of intensity, when concentrated in an object, they destroy it. Therefore, contact between the sacred and the profane is only achieved through an intermediary that takes the place of the sacrifier in the ritual and dies so that the first stays protected[49].

### 7.2.5. The Offering

The original sacred element to be offered is food. Food is highly valued by man because it sustains life. Man offers food to gods for this is what he asks from them in order to stay alive. However, food is not a non-spiritual thing. It hides within it life. Anything that comes from an animal i.e. the milk of a cow, the teeth of a shark, holds the essence of the animal's vitality[50]. Again, in this case, life is transferred. The more gifts someone offers to gods, the more energy he releases to the advantage of the community becoming in this way a cosmic hero[51]. In ancient Arab ritual, fluid substances (water, milk and blood) are the customary sacrificial offerings

---

[47] Evans-Pritchard, 'The Meaning of Sacrifice among the Nuer', p. 25; see also Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 262.
[48] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 224.
[49] Hubert&Mauss, *Sacrifice: its Nature and Function*, p. 98; LaHurd observes that the role of the ram in Abraham's sacrifice corresponds to the historical function of a ram or sheep as 'an intermediary between humans and the gods and often as a surrogate sacrifice'. LaHurd, 'One God, One Father: Abraham in Judaism, Christianity and Islam', p. 22.
[50] Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York, London, Free Press, 1975), pp. 29-30.
[51] Arthur M. Hocart, *The Life-Giving Myth* (London, Methuen, 1952), pp. 102-103.

for they are absorbed by earth and disappear, leaving the devotees under the illusion that they are consumed by the gods[52].

### *a. Human Sacrifice*

There is plenty of evidence of human sacrifice being offered for the harvest. The best known example is the killing of the Meriah - a ritual that was practiced until the middle of the nineteenth century by the Khonds, a Dravidian tribe of Bengal. The Meriah lived a respectful life for years, usually got married to another Meriah and was offered a piece of land to dwell until circumstances called for a sacrifice. The whole village would then lead the victim in procession to a field that had never been cultivated before. After partaking in ceremonial orgies, dancing and touching the identified with the divinity victim, the villagers would strangle him or cut him in pieces, burn him slowly or drug him with opium and crush his bones. Bits of the victim would be distributed among the representatives of all villages; those would be immediately taken and buried in the fields with great pomp. After the British authorities had banned human sacrifices, the Khonds started using animals instead[53].

Archaic man was terrified at the thought that one day he would wear out the 'forces' of vegetation. His anxiety was even more intensified because of his belief that fields were inhabited by spirits which, if annoyed, would not allow men use the powers that made plants grow. This fear was quietened by first-fruits offerings to

---

[52] Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: the Fundamental Institutions*, p. 229.
[53] James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*: *a Study in Magic and Religion*, Part 5, *Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild,* I (London, Macmillan&Co, 1963, pp. 245-51; information comes from the British authorities of the time.

gods and rites (like the one described above) that would cause the renewal of nature and the rebirth of the community itself through expiation of its sins (scapegoating)[54].

All rites that aim at the increase of harvest are linked to a cosmogonic myth which explains the creation through the violent death of a legendary giant or sea monster whose pieces gave birth to the world and the plants[55]. Thus, 'The object in sacrificing a human victim for the regeneration of the force expressed in the harvest is to repeat the act of creation that first made grain to live'[56].

***Bauopfer***

We can now draw a parallel between this type of sacrifice and Bauopfer (building sacrifice). Again, in this case, man feels the need to sacrifice before laying the foundations of a building. Since gods had to slaughter a prehistoric being to create the world, repetition of their act is most important if the house or city is to be solid. A building, in order to endure must have life-force within it. Only via blood sacrifice can life be transferred to a building. Blood sacrifice can be human or animal sacrifice and it is often substituted by symbolic sacrifice[57].

A tale collected from the Bedu on the banks of the Euphrates at Salahiyya close to the ruins of Dura connects the Abrahamic sacrifice to Bauopfer – the building sacrifice. According to the legend, Abraham started constructing a house but he failed in his attempt as the building collapsed. Having tried to gain God's favour by offering Him first a lamb and then a camel and having failed since the house would

---

[54] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (London, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1958), pp. 345-47.
[55] *Ibid.*
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 346.
[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 51-56.

not stand, he decided to sacrifice Isaac. At this point, God intervened and provided him with a lamb, as a substitute for his son. The house (possibly representing Ka'ba) was now secured[58].

This unique tradition is evocative of some observations made by Samuel Ives Curtiss, following his ethnographic fieldwork in Syria and Arabia at the turn of the twentieth century. Conducting research on the place where primitive Semites used to sacrifice, in 1903, Curtiss travels to Syria and Arabia in order to come in touch with groups of Semites who, still uninfluenced -or slightly influenced- by their Muslim and Christian neighbors, follow ancient custom. Curtiss observes that one of the two places where those people who represent the primitive Semites offer sacrifice is the house of the sacrifier[59]. Whenever an individual or a family moves into a new house regardless of whether it is a building, a tent or a cave, they have to slaughter an animal at the entrance of the dwelling. The sacrifice is intended for the jinn who live in that place for according to local belief, every place is inhabited by some spirit or jinn that may be filled with anger and bring bad luck, illness or death if not presented with a placatory sacrifice by the new residents. This belief is vividly expressed by a local sheikh, the sheikh of Kafr Ḥarib (i.e. the area above the Sea of Galilee) whose words are preserved in one of Curtiss's journals:

'For the new house they sacrifice a victim on the threshold and a woman takes the blood to secure the safety of the new house, because every place, land, or spot on the earth has its own dwellers, lest one of the family die on this land. Because it is not theirs they redeem the family by a fedou, one or all'[60].

---

[58] Comte du Mesnil Du Buisson, 'Trois Histoires d'Arabes sur Abraham et Moise' in *Revue des Etudes Juives* (REJ), Vol. 99 (1934), pp. 19-20.
[59] The other place is any area that is conceived of as the dwelling place of a saint or a demon, i.e. a tree, a fountain or the mouth of a cave. Samuel I. Curtiss, 'The Place of Sacrifice among the Primitive Semites' in *The Biblical World*, Vol. 21, No. 4, p. 251. According to Curtiss, the main incentive for sacrifice in either case is fear of the spirits. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 253; again, here we come across the idea of sacrifice as substitution.

It appears that human sacrifices were frequently practiced among the Arabs. These had most of the times a thanksgiving character. Captives were chosen on the basis of youth and beauty and were offered to the deity as part of the booty taken in battle. Nilus, in an autobiographical narrative found in *Patrologia Graeca*, describes how his son, Theodulus -who had been captured by the Saracens during a raid on the monastery of Mount Sinai- was to be sacrificed to the morning star and was only saved by accident; his captors were still asleep when the sun rose; by that time the morning star had disappeared and it was too late for the ritual to take part[61].

Sacrificing captives was meant to a. testify to the sacrifier's power over life and death, b. affirm his life for killing the enemy is synonymous to being in favour with the gods and c. force the latter's favour because of the quantity of blood- energy released for their sake[62].

In the eighth / seventh BC century Judaism, we come across the practice of child sacrifice. To be more precise, the provisions of the Mosaic Law and the prophets' preaching in the Old Testament turn sharply against the worship of a Semitic subterranean deity named Moloch, which was disseminated among the Israelites and included the burning of young children[63]. Likewise, documents of the ninth to the seventh centuries BC attest to the burning of children to Assyrian deities[64].

---

[61] *PG* 79, cols. 587-694.
[62] Becker, *Escape from Evil*, pp. 104-105; Herodotus reports that of out of a hundred prisoners of war the Scythians used to sacrifice one of to god Ares: '*οσους [δ] αν των πολεμιων ζωγρησωσι, απο των εκατον ανδρων ανδρα ενα θυουσι...*' Herodotus, *History*, 4:62.
[63] See Leviticus 18:21 and 20:1-2; Deuteronomy 18:10; 2 Kings 16:3 and 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31; Ezekiel 16:20-22; Micah 6:7; for further information on the Moloch cult, the reader is referred to Morton Smith, 'A Note on Burning Babies', pp. 447-79; in his article, Smith mainly focuses on the evidence in the Old Testament of an early Israelite practice that entailed sacrificing the firstborn male children to Yahweh.
[64] M. Smith, 'A Note on Burning Babies', p. 479.

Indicative of child sacrifices taking place in the nineteenth century is a report on an East Indian island called Siaoo or Siauw, where '... a child stolen from a neighbouring island used to be sacrificed every year to the spirit of a volcano in order that there might be no eruption'[65].

***b. Animal Sacrifice***

We have already mentioned the different roles of animals concerning sacrifice. An animal may play the part of the mediator between humans and spirits[66], that of a substitute for a human life and a scapegoat for man's sins[67], or it may even be treated as a sacred being[68]. Where animals are believed to be incarnated deities or the abode of spirits during their visits to earth, they often receive and consume sacrifices[69].

According to Hocart, animals were the objects of cults while man still believed that sacrificing animals would bring more. As soon as he became more self-assured about his power over other creatures and especially when worship started being connected with respect, that stopped[70].

Yet, as much as this comment makes sense to the secular or Western mind, it would not find agreeable a great number of religious people in the East, the Hindus, as

---

[65] James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion*, Part 3, *The Dying god* (London, Macmillan&Co, 1923), p. 218 quoted from an ethnographical work on the tribe mentioned above by B. C. A. J. Van Dinter.
[66] Gibson, Sacrifice *and Sharing in the Philippine Highlands: Religion and Society among the Buid of Mindoro*, p. 188.
[67] Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice: its Nature and Function*, p. 98 and Evans-Pritchard, 'The Meaning of Sacrifice among the Nuer', p. 25; for animal and human scapegoats, see James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion*, Part 6, *The Scapegoat* (London, Macmillan&Co, 1925), pp. 31sqq., 190sqq., 208sqq., 216sqq. and Francis A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion* (Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1970), pp. 89-92.
[68] Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: the Fundamental Institutions*, pp. 543-44.
[69] See, for example, Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture*, pp. 316-20 and pp. 464-65.
[70] Arthur M. Hocart, *Social Origins* (London, Watts, 1954), p. 35; Becker, on the other hand, argues that animals' sacredness faded away when man invented new ways to extend his life. Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 25.

they experience a totally different world view. For the Hindu, to whom god and man are not separate entities and who can identify him/herself with an animal, an animal sacrificial offering (*paśubali*) can help him free himself from *samsara*- the equivalent to achieving immortality. Briefly, during a *paśubali*, rebirth to a higher spiritual status is a common purpose between the sacrifier and the animal. The sacrifier, in his ignorance is animal-like and it is his animal qualities (the self-animal) that he is intending to sacrifice. On the other hand, the animal has also within itself the potential to become conscious of its own divinity and desires to be offered as *bali* (gift) so that it returns to life as a human being. By casting her sight upon it '... the ('knowledgeable') goddess 'consumes' the head (symbol of the self that is offered), digests the sins contained in the animal that it represents, and refines it spiritually so that it may have a better rebirth'... 'By eating what is now ('digested as') *prasād* (grace) the worshiper partakes of and shares that essence of divinity with which the food is now permeated...' [71].

But what did primitive man first put on the altar? Was it an animal or another human being? Opinions differ as to which form of sacrifice preceded which and there is no evidence that could provide us with a positive answer. However, in all probability 'both human and animal sacrifice co-existed from the beginning, and both fulfilled similar purposes'[72]. Smith remarks that there is no reason why animal sacrifice would precede human sacrifice or vice versa in a totemic community where a man was not considered to be any different from an animal[73]. Predominance of one type over the other in a tribe did exist and was determined by life conditions. Among

---

[71] Samanta, 'The "Self-Animal" and Divine Digestion: Goat Sacrifice to the Godess Kali in Bengal', p. 791.
[72] Oesterley, *Sacrifices in Ancient Israel: their Origin, Purposes and Development*, p. 41.
[73] Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, pp. 361-65.

a people that were constantly at war with other tribes, for instance, sacrificing captives would be commonplace[74].

## 7.3. Conclusion

That the institution of sacrifice has various ends finds us all, I believe, agreeable. There is objection, however, regarding the proposed starting point of the ritual. From the very beginning, man is not only concerned about staying in good terms with the gods. What he fears more than the invisible and powerful forces is physical death and above all final extinction. Although anthropological research has provided us with numerous references on life-giving sacrifices[75], the first scholar to bring in the idea of immortality as the main objective of the sacrificial act is the social theorist Ernest Becker[76].

---

[74] Oesterley, *Sacrifices in Ancient Israel*, pp. 41-42.
[75] Gibson, *Sacrifice and Sharing in the Philippine Highlands*, pp. 151-89; Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Part 5, *Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild,* I; Evans-Pritchard, 'The Meaning of Sacrifice among the Nuer', p. 25.
[76] Becker, *Escape from Evil*.

## Chapter 8: Becker's Theory on Sacrifice as an Immortality Technique and Turner's Theory on Wealth as an Immortality Symbol in the Qur'an

### 8.1. The Meaning of Historical Sacrifice according to Ernest Becker

Before going into details concerning Becker's theory, it would be appropriate to reflect on another scholar's work that has been a great inspiration to Becker. The word is for the anthropologist Arthur Maurice Hocart and his survey on the dual and ritual organization of primitive societies[1].

Hocart maintains that ritual organization evolved to government organization. In the course of his argumentation, he refers to the conceptions of life that brought the performance of the ritual into being[2]. He holds that 'The object of ritual is to secure full life and to escape from evil'[3]. Sacrifice in particular, is a technique for the transference of life and the renewal of nature[4]. The notion of transference, however, presupposes a second living being for one cannot impart life to one's own self. Thus, in the case of life-giving rituals, in order to procure life, a life has to be sacrificed[5].

The epitome of his idea is the following: primitive man observed that human beings and things acquired life by invisible forces. Plants and children, for example, came out of the invisible. These forces were somehow connected to gods or spirits. By sacrifice one could possess the powers that were connected to the sacrificial

---

[1] Hocart, a talented but neglected scholar, occupied an academic post only for some time before his death and, thus, did not have the opportunity to make his ideas known. For a review of his work, see Evans-Pritchard's foreword and Rodney Needham's comments (editor's introduction) in Arthur M. Hocart, *Kings and Councillors* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970, 1st ed. 1936).
[2] Hocart, *Kings and Councillors*.
[3] *Ibid.*, *Social Origins*, p. 87.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 201.
[5] *Ibid.*, *Kings and Councillors*, p. 290.

victim, identify with them and use them to benefit his community. The sacrifier, thus, stepped into the invisible sphere and acquired divine- superhuman powers[6].

What Hocart does not state clearly is what kind of life power is the primitive after. As Rodney Needham points out in his introduction note to Hocart's *Kings and Councillors*, terms like 'life' and 'death' hold various meanings in different societies and simply saying that the core of the sacrificial rite is the transference of life is very imprecise. However, the fact that Hocart often refers to notions of prosperity and vitality suggests that the type of life he speaks of is physical organic life rather than life that transcends natural death[7].

That man yearns for eternal life is an axiomatic truth. To Becker this desire can be translated as human being's thirst to continue experiencing the joys of prosperity. '…prosperity means simply that a high level of organismic functioning will be maintained, and so anything that works against this has to be avoided'[8].

Faced with the pettiness of human existence, 'Men *need* transference in order to be able to stand life'[9]. In order to transcend death, man needed to create an 'immortal self' and culture provided him with the necessary tools – symbols that do not vanish and ensure unlimited duration – such as discovering a broad meaning for his life (in the religious sphere or not) that will make him feel that he has made a difference in the universe[10].

---

[6] *Ibid.*, *Social Origins*, pp. 201-202 and 224.
[7] Rodney Needham, *Kings and Councillors* (Introduction), pp. xxxii-xxxv.
[8] The major threat is disease and, of course, death. Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 2.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 148.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Scapegoating is indicative of man's efforts to qualify for an everlasting spiritual life[11] but also avoid physical death for as long as possible. It is as if the sacrifier says to God: 'If this is what you want, here, take it!'[12] but let me live! In the same line of thought, as Hubert and Mauss aptly remark, although the element of abnegation is always present in sacrifice, selfishness is also there. A man gives up something he owns but he does not give himself simply because by giving, he is partly expecting to receive[13].

Sacrifice is the ancient means of self-perpetuation that springs from the fear of death. Archaic man was convinced that ceremonial repetition of the exact steps gods took to create the universe could give him the power to control life; via sacrifice, he could bring fertility and make any arrangements of nature he wished for. Apart from a life-giving technique, sacrifice was also the battle against evil for a single mistake in the ritual would empower the demons, causing, thus, the failure of man's plans to control life[14].

As for modern man, the broader meaning of life is 'visible physical worth'. Since the idea of merit given by God according to good deeds has collapsed, comparison depends on material things which have become his immortal symbols: 'the house, the car, the bank balance…'[15].

---

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 102.
[12] Alan Harrington, *The Immortalist* (New York, Random House, 1969), p. 49 cited in Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 109.
[13] Hubert&Mauss, *Sacrifice: its Nature and Function*, p. 100; among modern Bengalis, the most extreme case of self-offering is the one where the sacrifier offers blood from his/her chest to a deity. See Samanta, 'The "Self-Animal" and Divine Digestion', p. 783.
[14] Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 20.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 85.

## 8.2. Perceptions of Afterlife

But why is it that the elements of immortality and fear of death are particularly obvious in certain sacrificial rites and hardly observable in other? I feel that the answer to this question does not only lie in the type of sacrifice that is offered but also relates to the ideas a society has about afterlife. After the above analysis, it goes without saying that the crave for immortality is more apparent in life-giving sacrifices and less obvious in gift-offerings, where the surface may be an act of thanksgiving or simply paying tribute to a god and the deeper motive, fear for one's own life. That fear acts as a catalyst for the practice of blood sacrifice is indisputable and can be seen in present time Bengal, where since the image of fearsome Śakti has changed to that of Kālī, the loving mother, live offerings have become mostly a lower or lower-middle class phenomenon, as more and more educated Bengalis express 'their reluctance to offer a loving Mother-goddess the blood of one of her own creation'[16].

Trying to apply, however, Becker's theory on the early Jewish history or the ancient Greek world, it is not clear from the beginning how sacrifice can be connected to the idea of the hunt for immortality. The difficulty arises because of our knowledge about these peoples' ideas on afterlife. The pre-exilic Jewish man believes that when he dies he goes to *Sheol*, a place where all the dead lie in a state of weakness. Similarly, to the Greek, all the departed mortals, good or bad, brave or not, end up at the dark land of Hades, where they lay weak waiting for the mortals to nourish them with blood from sacrifices. In both cases, the fact that there is no extinction of the self does not sound very appealing. Why is it, then, that sacrifice is an everyday practice among these people?

---

[16] Samanta, 'The "Self-Animal" and Divine Digestion', p. 783.

Two assumptions can be made as to this matter, both leading up to the idea of fear of death. The most obvious one relates to the way gods are perceived. Like the early Jew that thinks of Yahve as a 'jealous' god who demands to be worshipped to the exclusion of any other deity, the ancient Greek, having an anthropomorphic idea about his gods, expects them to get angry and dangerous if not treated properly. To avoid the wrath of their gods which will cause calamities or death, sacrifice is essential.

The second possible explanation is the following: neither the early Jew nor the ancient Greek lived trying to qualify for a glorious paradise made for the righteous ones by Yahve or the gods, for there was not one. Therefore, like the secular man Becker describes, they invented their own broader meaning of life that would make them feel that they have made a difference in the universe. For the Jew, this is leaving behind many descendants and sacrifice is included in the contract he has made with Yahve. This contract -if honoured by the Jew- will guarantee him the above. For the ancient Greek, it is leaving behind an immortal name, the greatest of all his aspirations. *Phimi*, literally translated as 'fame' but having the meaning of a glorious death in battle, is how the latter perceives immortality. The help of the gods- essential for a man to reach his ideal- can be attained via sacrifice[17].

Coming back to the Qur'an, we are told that Allah's messengers are sent to preach monotheism among societies where the concept of the hereafter is missing. Although there is no reference to any sacrificial rituals practiced by these people, Colin Turner demonstrates that the prophets' stories allude to the existence -among

---

[17] See how the great warrior Achilles challenges the ideal of *phimi* when he expresses his intention to remain in the abode of the living for as long as possible rather than lay down his life for a glorious name. Homer, *Iliad*, ix:488-505; see also ix:385-388. Still, *phimi* is too important to ignore and in the end, Achilles decides to stay in Troy and die in battle.

the old prophets' communities and Muhammad's contemporaries- of an 'immortality technique' that fits Becker's 'immortality projects' theory perfectly.

## 8.3. Turner's Theory on Wealth as an Immortality Symbol

In his study of the significance of wealth (*māl*) for the communities that according to the Qur'an the prophets were sent to in order to reveal the Word of God, Colin Turner points to the main reason that accounts for the failure of a prophet's mission: the divine message is addressed to idolatrous people who follow the traditions of their ancestors blindly and love wealth excessively. Misconceptions about the purpose that wealth is supposed to serve are mentioned in the Qur'an quite a few times as a major hindrance to the accomplishment of total submission to the revealed message[18].

Moreover, certain ayas make it clear that not only wealth but also progeny could be spiritually problematic on account of the feeling of pride they tend to generate. With regard to the 'rejection narratives', Turner draws attention to the fact that among some of the 'addressee communities'[19] one's very honour and status seem to rely exclusively on one's personal wealth and number of children; the more possessions and children one has, the more respect one commands among his fellow tribesmen.

---

[18] Colin Turner, 'Wealth as an Immortality Symbol in the Qur'an: a Reconsideration of the *mal/amwal* Verses' in *The Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2006) [in press], p. 2 [the page numbers refer to a copy that I personally received from Dr Turner].

[19] Both terms are Turner's; the first one refers to those passages that describe prophets' fruitless attempts to be heard by their people and the second one to the people who rejected them.

Having located these and several other ayas which point to the presence of wealth and children fetishism among the 'addressee communities'[20], the author goes on to investigate the applicability of Becker's 'quest for immortality' theory to the 'rejection narratives' and concludes that the power which a tribesman derives from his wealth and children is virtually the same kind of magic *mana* power that according to Becker all human beings are after in order to achieve immortality.

More specifically, Becker argues that in order to deal with the deep anxiety that the awareness of mortality inevitably causes, human beings have always set up projects aiming to give them the illusion of immortality. Different societies have come up with different immortality projects that their members have to comply with in order to preserve what Becker calls the 'vital lie'- the lie that human beings are in desperate need of in order to quieten their worst fear: the fear of death. These immortality projects or 'hero systems' are there to allow men feel significant because 'importance equals durability equals life'[21]. Men always identify themselves with certain immortality symbols (the dominant immortality symbols of their era and society) - superhuman power channels through which they can achieve transference. And although a man cannot create his own hero system (unless he is mad), his social group leaves him space to achieve immortality separately; via working on his little personal project, man may prove himself to the other members of his social group and, this way, show that he is more eligible for immortality than other people. Either acting as an individual or working towards the perpetuation of the group ideology,

---

[20] For the purposes of this study I will restrict reference to the qur'anic material indicated by Turner to only those verses that mention *both* wealth *and* children. The author, however, refers to more ayas in which the fetishization of wealth (alone) is displayed. See e.g. Q.2:247; 27:36.
[21] Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 13.

man is always ready to harm anyone who will stand in his way; hence, the root of all evil[22].

As we have already seen, the dominant immortality techniques of the ancient world are ritual and sacrifice. Early man observes how vegetation grows, dies and revives. Through ritual, the forces of nature are personified by the members of a community who, having turned into the elements, are now able to control nature and promote the release of life-power for the group[23]. By means of sacrifice, except for the renewal of nature, the participants ensure the continuation of their very existence, not within the abode of the living but in the invisible land of their gods and ancestors. Seeing reality as a cycle, man is enabled to gain control over death -which is part of the cycle- through its embodiment that takes place during a sacrificial ceremony[24].

Turner draws our attention to the practice of gift-giving which according to Becker accounts for the identification of wealth with magic power. Drawing on Hocart, the latter explains how ancient people, seeing that food has the power to sustain life, offer food as a source of life-power to gods expecting to receive some kind of superhuman *mana* power in return. People, however, do not offer food only to their gods but also to the gods of their kinsmen. This practice takes the form of a competition among men; the more gifts one offers to the gods, the more life one causes to be released for the sake of his community and, by implication, the more gifts one has to offer, the more important he is among his people. Becker notes that this

---

[22] Becker, *Escape from Evil*; see also Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York, Free Press, 1997), throughout, and especially pp. 47-66 on the human character as a vital lie.
[23] *Ibid.*, *Escape from Evil*, pp. 16-18.
[24] See chapter 8.1. (The Meaning of Historical Sacrifice according to Ernest Becker).

kind of competition resulted in the creation of surplus; surplus is, thus, created so that one has always something to offer in exchange of another person's gift to his gods[25].

In the ancient societies Becker describes, man derives life-power from the sphere of the invisible- the land of the spirits. Later on, however, the invisible comes to be embodied by certain people who act as mediators between gods and human beings. Those individuals stand out because of some extraordinary skill- a clear indication in the eyes of the community that the former have been blessed with an extra dose of sacred power by the gods. As the only channels through which sacred life-power reaches a community, power figures come to be respected as much as gods and ancestors. Additionally, the fact that spiritual leaders are the ones who deal with the redistribution of wealth contributes once more towards the equation of wealth with spiritual power. Of course, gifts, wealth as well as any other immortality symbol and those who represent them are not important per se but as the source of power that human beings must have in order to attain immortality[26].

The concept of wealth as a source of supernatural power can be detected, as Turner shows, in the 'rejection narratives'. Here, except for the visible gods (i.e. the idols), it is the tribe elders who act as the embodiment of sacred power. The latter and the immortality symbols whose power they represent, namely, wealth and children are the only sacred power channels the tribe has. Prophets cannot be treated as power figures simply because they lack the power (wealth and children); they are, therefore, rejected[27]. What Turner practically suggests is that the new immortality system/dogma presented to the 'addressee communities' by the prophets is judged by

---

[25] Becker, *Escape from Evil*, pp. 29-31; see also chapter 8.1.
[26] *Ibid*., pp. 44-47.
[27] Turner, 'Wealth as an Immortality Symbol in the Qur'an: a Reconsideration of the *mal/amwal* Verses', pp. 20-22.

the tribesmen for its validity on the basis of their own transference objects (wealth and children). Comfortable as they are with the immortality techniques that their fathers created, the powerful tribesmen -and at a lesser extent the weak ones who derive power yielding to the strong ones- do not find anything appealing in an immortality ideology that does not acknowledge the means of extending life that they have already created and safeguarded.

Besides Q.104:1-3 that is the only verse where the idea of wealth as the basis for the realization of eternal life is clearly expressed[28], Turner points to a certain qur'anic passage that may indeed be described as a vivid example of a pre-modern immortality project according to Beckerian standards. Qur'an 18:32-44 is of great interest to this study as it enlightens us not only about the life-power symbolism of wealth and children but also about two other qur'anic ideas, the idea of pride as the root of evil and that of associating others with God, which, as I will try to show, likewise relate to the Islamic perception of sacrifice. The passage describes an argument that takes place between the proud owner of beautiful gardens and his neighbour that he looks down on; puffed up with pride, the rich man tells his neighbour: 'More wealth have I than you, and more honour and power in (my following of) men.'[29] Later on, the same man expresses the belief that his gardens will never perish and that the Day of Judgement will never come; but even if it does, he will definitely find something valuable among his possessions to give to his lord in exchange. His neighbour rebukes him for assigning power to other than God and in a counter argument that proves prophetic, he says that it may well be that God did not

---

[28] The verse reads: 'Woe to every (kind of) scandalmonger and backbiter, who pileth up wealth and layeth it by, thinking that his wealth would make him last forever!' quoted in *ibid.*, p. 12; different commentators' interpretations of the verse are given in Turner, *ibid.*, pp. 12-14.
[29] Q.18:34.

give him wealth or sons because He has planned to give him something better than his neighbour's gardens and that the latter may lose everything he has. When disaster strikes, the arrogant man wishes he had never assigned partners to God.

One of the ideas expressed in the gardens parable that reminds us of Becker's 'immortality striving' theory is the idea that wealth and connections equals honour and high standing. The beautiful garden is not important per se but for its ability to perform a double function, i.e. to project its owner's power and to become a magnet for the power of others[30]. As is clearly expressed in verses 35-36, where the rich man turns a blind eye to the ravages of time and defies God and the consequences of his unbelief should the Day of Judgement come[31], power in the gardens narrative is associated to the idea of 'self perpetuation'. Moreover, the parable seems to relate to the second type of society described by Becker, in which people strive for immortality not as a group but as individuals who look to the king (and not the spirits) for their share of power[32]. It should finally be noted that the earthly garden, a recurring image in the Qur'an has a special symbolism since the word garden '*jannah*' is used in the Qur'an (usually in the plural '*jannāt*') to denote 'paradise'[33]. Earthly gardens in the Qur'an refer to ungodly man's futile efforts to build his own everlasting paradise on earth and can, thus, be interpreted along the same lines as Becker's 'immortality projects'[34].

---

[30] Turner, 'Wealth as an Immortality Symbol in the Qur'an: a Reconsideration of the *mal/amwal* Verses', p. 31.
[31] Notice the implication that the gardens owner has already been informed about the monotheistic idea of afterlife which he has chosen not to accept.
[32] Turner, 'Wealth as an Immortality Symbol in the Qur'an', p. 33.
[33] The actual word 'paradise' (*firdaws*) appears in the Qur'an only twice.
[34] Turner, 'Wealth as an Immortality Symbol in the Qur'an', pp. 34-35; other verses referring to earthly gardens are Q.2:226; 17:91; 25:8; 26:58; 34:15-16; 68:17-34 quoted in *ibid.*, p. 42, n. 93.

Given the implicit importance of Abraham's son for his faith in our narrative, Turner's conclusions are very enlightening about the qur'anic notion of one's relationship to one's child-children as a determining factor in one's position in the hereafter. Even though the main focus of his analysis is the notion of wealth, since progeny is mentioned together with wealth in a number of *māl* verses, it is clearly expressed by the author that -given the equally significant role that children seem to play in terms of social advancement[35] and most importantly given the notion expressed by the messengers' challengers that wealth and children can immunize them against the punishments on the Day of Judgement (should it ever come)[36]- just as wealth, so children are part of the immortality qur'anic symbology.

Another piece of information that the above analysis provides us with regarding the meaning of one's children for one's present or future life is that some of Muhammad's contemporaries but also men of earlier societies seem to believe that having children is 'a sign of divine favour'[37]. More importantly, we are informed about the qur'anic view on the true meaning and purpose of children. 'Wealth and sons are allurements of the life of this world'[38]; using their wealth and children as his secret weapon, Satan is trying to keep God's much-loved creatures away from the straight path[39]. Therefore, the Qur'an urges on Muslims the importance of not letting

---

[35] Of the ayas Turner cites, those that refer to children besides wealth are Q.8:28; 9:55; 17:64; 18:32-44, 46; 23:55; 26:88; 34:35; 68:14; 71:21; particularly informative with regard to the role of one's children as a catalyst for his position in society are Q.68:10-14 in which Muhammad is advised by God not to pay attention to his discreditors simply because they have wealth and sons and Q.71:21 in which Noah puts the failure of his mission down to the fact that his people follow men who -unlike him- have wealth and children.

[36] See Q.26:88 and Q.34:35 quoted in *ibid.*, p. 9 and p. 30 respectively; see also Q.3:10, 116; 58:17; cf. Q.18:36.

[37] Turner, 'Wealth as an Immortality Symbol in the Qur'an', p. 9; see Q.18:39; 23:55 cited in *ibid.*

[38] Q.18:46.

[39] Q.17:64 cited in Turner, *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

'your riches or your children divert you from the remembrance of Allah'[40]. Likewise, wealth and progeny are meant by Allah as a punishment for the unbelievers in this and the next life and as a test/temptation for the believers[41]. This last piece of information is of great importance to us, since Abraham's sacrifice 'was obviously a trial'[42] that involved a son.

Before we move on to the qur'anic notion of divine trial and having looked at father and son relationships in literature, let us take a look at the information that the Qur'an provides us with about the importance of the father-son relationship among the Arab tribes.

## 8.4. Fathers and Sons

Although the idea of worshipping money -discussed in Becker's and Turner's theories- is very familiar to everyone who lives in the secularized societies of the West, the idea of children as a status symbol may raise a few eyebrows. And perhaps it will make little or no difference to the overall conclusion of this study, but it would not be out of place to remark that the terms 'offspring', 'progeny' and 'children' in the verses cited above refer, without doubt, to sons as opposed to daughters[43]; the latter appear to be more of a hindrance than a help for the men of the 'addressee communities' during their earthly life, let alone their passports to eternity. Among the clear-cut qur'anic evidence that pre-Islamic Arabs hated the idea of having a daughter are references to the custom of female infanticide as well as the irony in the fact that

---

[40] Q.63:9 cited in *ibid.*, p. 11.
[41] Q.9:55; 8:28 cited in *ibid.*, p. 10.
[42] Q.37:106.
[43] Of the *māl* ayas mentioned, three verses clearly speak of 'wealth and sons (*abna'*)' (Q.18:46; 26:88; 68:14) while the rest speak of 'wealth and *awlād*'. The term *awlād* can be translated both as 'sons' and 'children' and the Qur'an uses the two terms interchangeably. However, because of the 'wealth and sons (*abna'*)' verses, it is reasonable to infer that all *māl* verses speak of sons as opposed to children in general.

Muhammad's contemporaries believe that Allah has daughters while they themselves are extremely saddened and ashamed when their wives give birth to girls[44].

Now, as regards the importance of sons for one's position in society on a superficial level, there is a good sociological reason that accounts for it. The 'addressee communities' are societies organized around clans and tribes; the tribal system is patrilineal, meaning it depends on relationships between men and it is based on honour. Honour is a very important concept in pre-Islamic Arabia where clans and tribes through lack of a legal system are based on the honour system for their protection. Since the tribe offers security and a sense of identity, it is all that matters; each member of the tribe is loyal to the group and its values, the most basic of which are bravery, manliness, generosity and hospitality. Manpower is of vital importance for the greater number of men, the stronger the tribe against outside dangers. Accordingly, the tribesman is respected by the tribe for contributing to manpower. Hence, it is no wonder that the more sons a father has to offer to the tribe the more influential he is among his fellow tribesmen[45].

This kind of father-son bonding is no less prevalent among the desert Arabs today. Bruce Feiler, during his research on Abraham as he is perceived by the Jews,

---

[44] Q.16:57-59; 17:40; 37:149-153; 43:16-20; 52:39; 53:19-23; 81:8-9; in modern times, Thaiss, having conducted anthropological fieldwork among the bazaar tradesman of Tehran reports that producing male offspring is not important to men on account of the continuity of the agnatic link but because in doing so the father affirms his manliness as well as for the reason that a daughter is a possible threat to the honor of the family 'for at any time he may be called up to defend the honor of his family because of the indiscretions of his daughter'. Gustav E. Thaiss, *Religious Symbolism and Social Change: the Drama of Husain* (Ph.D. thesis in Anthropology, Washington University, 1973), p. 59. Of course, the concept that a man's honor depends on the purity and modesty of the female members of his family is a very complicated gender issue and outside this writer's tasks. However, the fact that women as the weak members of the tribe were not in a position to defend themselves (e.g. against sex offenders), posing thus a major threat to the honor of the family, could be another major factor that accounts for the preference of sons over daughters.

[45] Similarly, in the light of the abovementioned sociological evidence, it is not surprising that among communities where young men were indispensable, sons came to be treated as a source of sacred power.

Christians and Muslims who live near the lands where Abraham supposedly settled thousands of years ago (Jerusalem, Hebron, Beersheba etc), asks a desert Arab why he thinks that the story of Abraham is so concerned with children and receives the following response: 'In the desert you have nothing...You are moving all the time. You have no house, no land. The only relationship you have is with your son, his son, and his son- a chain. You must connect with something, so you connect to your family.'[46]

To summarize our findings in regards to the meaning of Q.37:99-113, up till now we have seen that firstly, the sacrifice ayas are part of a sura that focuses on the hereafter and also part of the Meccan portrayal of Abraham as a sacrificing figure- a believer who is ready to sacrifice anything that will stand between him and total submission to God's will; an enquiry into the meaning of the qur'anic terms *'ilm*, *īmān* and *islām* and their occurrences in the Abrahamic passages has shown that the sacrifice narrative is in all probability about Abraham's perfection of *islām*. Secondly, all prophetic stories that appear for the most part in the Meccan part of revelation are meant to teach, encourage and inspire the new Muslim community; thirdly, the Qur'an portrays Abraham as one of the prophets who preached monotheism and were rejected by people who used to idolize their wealth and sons and did not believe in the afterlife. It was in such a socio-religious context that Abraham was tried by his Lord.

---

[46] Bruce Feiler, *Abraham: a Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York, Harper Collins Publishers, 2004, 1st ed. 2002), pp. 63-64.

## Chapter 9: Divine Trial, Purification of the Heart and Idolatry

### 9.1. Introduction

Coming to the idea of divine trial, Q.37:105 -i.e. the verse that describes the divine reaction to Abraham's response to his dream/vision- is of great interest because based on this verse some scholars have argued or implied that Allah did not really ask His messenger to offer his son in sacrifice and that Abraham simply misunderstood his vision. We have already looked at the interpretation given by the great Sufi teacher, Ibn 'Arabi.

Furthermore, a juxtaposition between a number of English translations of the Qur'an by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars shows that despite the fact that the translators are in general agreement as to the rest of the sacrifice verses, when it comes to verse 105 translations vary considerably, reflecting, of course, the vagueness of the relative verse that allows for different interpretations. In most cases, opinion differs as to how the verb '*ṣaddaqata*' should be interpreted. The term '*ṣaddaqa*' can be variably translated as: 'to certify' or 'to confirm', 'to fulfil', 'to come true', 'to believe' or 'to tell the truth'[1].

One of the two most typical understandings of the words that Allah utters after Abraham and his son have submitted is: 'O Abraham! Thou hast already fulfilled the vision!'[2]; the other is: 'Abraham, thou hast confirmed (or verified) the vision'[3]. To

---

[1] Lane, An Arabic-English Lexicon.
[2] Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, p. 1150; Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an: an Explanatory Translation* (Birmingham, Islamic Dawah Centre International, 2000), p. 267; also in Farid, *The Holy Qur'an; Arabic Text and English Translation with Commentary*, p. 967 and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Mushin Khan, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language: a Summarized Version of Al-Tabari, Al-Qurtubi and Ibn Kathir with Comments from Sahih Al-Bukhari* (Riyadh, Darussalam, 1997), p. 642 except for the Arabic *ru'yā* which is translated as 'dream'.

translate the verb '*ṣaddaqa*' as 'to fulfil' or 'to confirm' can only be taken as a confirmation of the prophet's sound judgement. Abraham must have interpreted his vision correctly because 'to fulfil' means to achieve something that is expected; likewise, 'to confirm' is to show that something is true[4]. Interestingly, Farid asserts that Abraham's reading of his dream is correct but adds that in reality its symbolic fulfilment took place before he even had the dream, when he had left Hagar and Ishmael at the barren valley of Mecca; according to the commentator, this act of bravery was the symbolic sacrifice of Ishmael, whereas what God expected of Abraham this time was 'a practical demonstration of his intention and preparedness to sacrifice his son' but not the actual sacrifice[5].

In a quite confusing way, Maulvi Muhammad Ali first interprets Abraham's dream as an omen of his son's forthcoming exile; after that he goes on to say that the fact that Ishmael's descendents -meaning the Muslims- were the ones to keep a memorial of the sacrifice as part of the Hajj, proves that Allah commanded for Ishmael and not Isaac to be sacrificed. In the end, as if he realises that his second statement clashes with the first one or that he is getting off the subject[6], he adds: 'and

---

[3] Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, Vol. 2 (London, George Allen&Unwin, 1955), p. 154; Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *A Journey through the Qur'an: Themes and Messages of the Holy Qur'an*, abridged by Abdalhaqq Bewley (London, Dar Al-Taqua, 1998), p. 328; Lane, *Selections from the Kur_ran*, p. 72; Wherry, *A Comprehensive Commentary on the Qur'an*, p. 361; Palmer, *The Qur'an*, p. 172; Ahmed Ali, *Al Qur'an: a Contemporary Translation* (Karachi, Akrash Publishing, 1984), p. 381.

[4] In the same line of thought -only clearly and leaving no doubt as to the intended meaning- Behbudi and Turner translate: 'O Abraham! We have already accepted the sacrifice from both of you'. Muhammad Baqir Behbudi, *The Quran: a New Interpretation*, trans. Colin Turner (Richmond, Curzon Press, 1997), p. 269; the truth of the dream is further confirmed in the interpretation of verses 103 and 106, *ibid*.

[5] Farid, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 968 (the italics are mine).

[6] For what could the purpose of the actual sacrifice be and what is the meaning of keeping a memorial of it if the dream was only meant as a sign for Ishmael's exile?

that sacrifice was in one sense accomplished by Abraham leaving Ishmael in a strangle land...'[7].

In order to convey the meaning of the passage correctly, Muhammad Asad feels that some explanatory notes have to be interpolated into the text. Therefore, in his own translation of the Qur'an, Q.37:105 is rendered as 'O Abraham, thou has already fulfilled [the purpose of] that dream-vision!'. According to Asad, the purpose (i.e. God's will) was to test Abraham's 'readiness to sacrifice...all that was dearest to him in life'. For that reason, he also believes that Q.37:103 should be translated in the following way: '...as soon as the two had surrendered themselves to [what they thought to be] the will of God...' [8]

In contrast to the previous interpretations of Q.37:105, Khatib as well as Fakhry in his modern English version, do not rule out the possibility that Abraham misread his vision. Although this idea is not expressed in a straight forward way, it is communicated subtly through their translation of the relative verse and the one that follows. In particular, Khatib translates: 'O Abraham, you have regarded the vision as true. We, therefore, recompense the good-doers'[9]. Fakhry's translation 'You have believed the vision. ..This, indeed, is the manifest calamity' is even more suggestive of the same idea[10].

So what exactly is the nature of the test that Abraham is challenged with? Is the divine command what it appears to be at a first glance, an endurance test - a trial

---

[7] Maulvi Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur-ān: containing the Arabic Text with English Translation and Commentary* (Lahore, India, Ahmadiyya Anjuman-i-ishāat-i-Islam, 1920), p. 874; in a way that matches the ambiguity in his comments, M. M. Ali translates verse 105 as such: 'You have indeed shown the truth of the vision'. *Ibid.*
[8] Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, p. 688.
[9] Mohammad M. Khatib, *The Bounteous Koran: a Translation of Meaning and Commentary* (London, Macmillan Press, 1986), p. 593.
[10] Majid Fakhry, *The Qur'an: a Modern English Version* (Reading, Garnet, 1997), p. 283.

of faith and obedience or a misunderstanding? Our enquiry into the fluidity of *īmān* and *islām* according to the Qur'an has shown that the sacrifice ayas must be depicting the highest level of *islām* reached by the prophet Abraham through the test of his son's sacrifice. However, the ultimate proof of faith in all three monotheistic religions has always been self-sacrifice rather than any other type of sacrifice. And Abraham's preparedness for self-sacrifice has already been proven when following his rebellion against the idolatry of his people and refusing to repent, he is thrown into the fire.

In order to shed new light on Abraham's trial, it would be useful to start by looking at the meaning of divine 'trial' or 'test' in the Qur'an.

## 9.2. Divine Trial in the Qur'an

There are three terms that the Qur'an uses to describe the concept of divine trial; in their verbal form those are: *fatana*, *balā*[11] and *imtaḥana*[12]. The first term occurs in the Qur'an fifty-nine times, the second thirty-six times and the third only twice[13]. The vast majority of trial verses describe the idea of trial, testing or temptation instigated by God. There are, however, a few trial verses in which the tempters of human beings (i.e. the believers) are other human beings or Satan[14]. Apart from its primary meaning, the verb *balā* may also mean 'to prove'. Likewise, the term *fatana* –often found in the form of a noun (*fitna*) - has further connotations of temptation, persecution, punishment, dissension, subterfuge, sedition, and in one

---

[11] Two other forms of the same verb (i.e. coming from the same root and having the same meaning as *balā*) are *ablā* and *ibtalā*; *balā* is the term that appears in verse 106 'For this was obviously a trial'.
[12] See Q.49:3; 60:10.
[13] These statistics also include all the nouns which are derived from the verbs as well as their possessive forms.
[14] See Q.5:49; 17:73; 37:162; 57:14; 7:27; in two 'trial' verses the believers are asked to 'test' the intention of the orphans and female emigrants who claim to have converted [Q.4:6 (*ibtali*) and Q.60:10 (*imtaḥin*), respectively].

single verse, it is used adjectivally to denote someone who is mentally ill[15]. Furthermore, there does not seem to be a preference for any of the two most frequently used terms (*balā* and *fatana*) in any of the two phases of revelation as each term appears in both Meccan and Medinan verses with the same frequency[16].

In terms of content, the divine trial verses can be divided into four main categories; the verses that make mention of the peoples and individuals who underwent trial in the past, those that provide us with information about the purpose of divine trial, the verses which describe the means by which people are tested and the verses that illustrate certain individuals' response to the trial that God has chosen for them. Each of the four categories or themes can be divided into several subcategories.

With regard to the subjects of trial (or temptation), the Qur'an tells us how certain communities that God's messengers were sent to were tested. In particular, mention is made to the people Noah[17], Talut (the biblical Saul)[18] and Salih (the Thamud)[19], while most references are made to the trials that the Jews were allowed to undergo under the Egyptian bondage but also to the temptations that they succumbed to after they had left their oppressors and while they were enjoying a period of prosperity even though they had been instructed in faith by Moses and Aaron[20].

---

[15] *balā* is translated as 'to prove' in Q.10:30; for *fitna* as persecution (of the Muslims' beliefs or persecuted Jews by Pharaoh) see Q.2:191, 193, 217; 4:101; 8:39, 73: 10:83; 16:110; 29:10; 85:10; for *fitna* in the sense of punishment (that the unbelievers receive in this and the next life) see Q.24:63; 37:63; 51:13-14; for *fitna* as dissension see Q.3:7; 33:14; for *fitna* as subterfuge see Q.6:23; for *fitna* as sedition see Q.9:47-48; for *fitna* as mental illness (*maftūn* = demented) see Q.68:6 (this verse actually refers to Muhammad's accusers who as soon as the latter's mission went public started calling him a madman; the Qur'an implies that it is not Muhammad but his discreditors who are *maftunūn*).

[16] The word *balā* occurs 15 times in the Mecca verses and 16 in the Medina ones; the word *fitna* occurs 27 times in the Mecca verses and 27 times in the Medina verses; there are also five occurrences of the term *fitna* and five occurrences of the term *balā* in verses whose chronology is in dispute.

[17] Q.23:30.

[18] Q.2:249.

[19] Q.27:47; 54:27.

[20] Q.2:49; 7:141; 7:155; 7:163; 7:168; 14:6; 20:85; 20:90; 44:33.

However, it is not only the Jews but also their persecutors –the people of the Pharaoh- who are tested by God[21].

The above brings us to a very important aspect of the qur'anic concept of divine testing that has to do with the kind of people that God tests. Based on the last reference, we may infer that in contrast to the biblical idea of divine trial according to which God tests the righteous[22], divine testing in the Qur'an is directed at both believers –or those who claim to be believers- and unbelievers[23]. Given the vital role that prophets are meant to play as spiritual guides, it would not surprise the student of the Bible to know that the prophets in the Qur'an are -like the rest of the believers- tested by God. Thus, we get to know how not only Abraham but also Moses was tried with many trials, Solomon passed his test on gratefulness and Saul (on a certain occasion) failed his on humility[24]. What could come as a surprise, however, is that according to the Qur'an, a prophet's vision can be given for the purpose of testing people other than the prophet. That is implied in Q.17:60, where it is stated: 'We granted the vision which We showed thee [Muhammad], but as a trial for men'[25].

The verses stating that the early prophets' communities and the prophets themselves have been tested by God are, no doubt, included in the Qur'an as a warning of the trials that human beings should always be prepared for. In short, God

---

[21] Q.44:17; the bulk of this category of divine trial verses, needless to say, belongs to the first part of revelation, as it is during the Meccan period that the prophets' stories ayas are, for the most part, revealed.
[22] Psalms, 11:5; Jeremiah 20:12.
[23] Straightforward references to the divine testing of unbelievers are made in Q.22:53; 60:5; 74:31.
[24] Q.2:124; 20:40; 27:40; 38:24-25 respectively; see also Q.38:34.
[25] Drawing on the above verse, one may suggest that Abraham's vision of himself sacrificing his son was meant as 'a manifest trial' not only for Abraham but also for his and Muhammad's contemporaries; in other words, Q.37:106 could imply that apart from a personal trial, Abraham's vision was a divine sign that was meant to strengthen the faith of those who followed the prophet's way and at the same time cause the unbelievers to bring out their true colours.

has always put the receivers of His message to the test regardless of whether they accept or refuse to comply with it.

Moving on to the purpose of divine trial, the Qur'an makes it absolutely clear that a mere statement of belief does not make one a true believer and, therefore, all those who call themselves Muslims will be tested[26]. Bringing all the members of the *umma* to the test, Allah reveals who the true believers are and at the same time exposes the superficial faith of those who are quick to declare their faith but not willing to strive in His way[27].

A divine trial, however, is a lot more than just a faith indicator or a divine mechanism employed so that the hypocrites- a group of people who have secretly allied themselves with Muhammad's enemies- are marked out from the real believers. More than anything else, it is a learning experience which -if wisely used- acts as a catalyst for the betterment of one's faith. Through a trial, as is clearly expressed in Q.3:154, man is given the opportunity to purge the sin from his heart, and consequently increase in faith[28].

However, the same trial that is meant to bring out the best in a believer is sometimes intended to bring out the worst in an unbeliever. Thus, in Q.74:31 and 6:53, the unbelievers are tried so that they are caused to bring out their worst qualities, not for Allah to know (as the Qur'an states in Q.3:154 -possibly in order to forestall any misgivings about the All-Knowing nature of God- a trial is given for the purification of the heart 'For Allah knoweth well the secrets of your hearts') but because 'Thus doth Allah leave to stray whom He pleaseth...' (Q.74:31). Still, God's

---

[26] Q.29:2-3; 47:31.
[27] See Q.47:31; cf.47:29-30.
[28] Cf. Q.47:31.

mercy, the Qur'an tells us, precedes His wrath, and so Allah tries the unbelievers several times during their earthly lives giving them the chance to repent 'Yet they turn not in repentance...'[29]

The purifying quality of divine testing can also be verified by the prophets' trials; for how else can we explain the fact that Abraham, the proto-muslim and exemplar of faith, is, like everyone else, tried by God?[30] Surely, there is no need for Allah to bring any of his prophets' intentions out in the open, for it is He who has chosen them to carry out a mission and the omniscience of God implies that a prophetic mission would never be entrusted to a weak man whose faith may perish. Nevertheless, prophets are human beings, hence capable of sinning. And despite the fact that many Muslims view the prophets as infallible[31], one only has to look at the aforementioned case of Saul to see that prophets can fall into error[32]. After all, divine trial in the case of infallible men would be completely meaningless. Conversely, the fact that the prophets are tested by God shows that they are not infallible since perfection does not take improvement. In conclusion, if we piece the above information together with the information that we have about the fluidity of faith (*īmān*), we may safely say that God in the Qur'an tries a prophet –who just as all other believers may have his faith strengthened or weakened - for the sole purpose of increasingly instilling faith into his heart until his *islām* is perfected.

The bulk of our information relating to the concept of divine trial concerns the different ways in which Allah tests believers and unbelievers. Thus, we learn from

---

[29] Q.9:126.
[30] Q.2:124.
[31] For the various interpretations of *'isma*, the doctrine of 'prophetic infallibility', see Colin Turner, *Islam: the Basics*, (London, New York, Routledge, 2006), pp. 85-86.
[32] Q.38:24-25; equally enlightening are verses 15-16 of sura 28, which mention that Moses once killed a man out of anger. The fact that in both passages the prophets repent and are given forgiveness attests to the same conclusion.

the Qur'an that human beings are tried both in adversity and prosperity[33]. War is a trial period par excellence. Several trial ayas revealed during the Medina period of revelation, when the newly formed *umma* are fighting against their Meccan persecutors, explain how Allah instigated certain events that took place in the battlefield in order to test in some cases the believers and in other the hypocrites[34].

Divine trial, however, should not be necessarily identified as a difficult experience. Muslims are not only tried when they are in war against the unbelievers; except for the battles against the visible enemies of their faith which in most cases anyway do not last for more than a short period in one's life, believers are expected to win spiritual battles against enemies that are not always as noticeable. With respect to this kind of struggle, Allah tries His believers in what they have been given, including their own selves: 'Ye shall certainly be tried and tested in your possessions and your personal selves…'[35]. Among the ayas that talk about the way that Allah tests firmness of character is a verse that urges Muslims to honour their contract with God and never break their oaths[36]. Elsewhere, the Qur'an warns Muslims that Allah will test their ability to fight the temptation of killing an animal within the sacred precincts of Mecca[37]. Above all, the Qur'an calls attention to riches and children as things of this world via which human beings are tried: 'And know ye that your possessions and your progeny are but a trial; and that it is Allah with whom lies your highest

---

[33] Q.7:168; 21:35.
[34] See Q.3:152, 154; 8:17; 9:49; 33:11; 47:4.
[35] Q.3:186; one of the ways in which an individual may be tested through his possessions or personal self is described in Q.2:155: 'Be sure we shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil)...'; in Q.6:165 it is stated: 'It is He Who hath made you (His) agents, inheritors of the earth: He hath raised you in ranks, some above others: that he may try you in the gifts He hath given you…'; see also Q.5:48.
[36] Q.16:91-92.
[37] Q.5:94.

reward'[38]. Accordingly, it encourages Muslims not to be envious of the people who enjoy 'the splendour of the life of this world' because through their riches they are simply being tested[39].

What is more, not only material things, but even the special features of people who belong to different races are said to be ways through which human beings are tested[40]. Even a blessing such as the gift of rain can be intended as a trial for men[41]. Most importantly -as is clearly implied in the 'possessions and children' verses, explicitly stated in at least five qur'anic verses[42] and dramatically illustrated in Abraham's story- human beings are tested through other human beings.

The above brings us to the idea of the creation of the whole world as a test for human beings. That God created man in order to try him and that everything in this world serves this particular purpose is an idea expressed from the early stages of the qur'anic revelation: 'Verily We created man from a drop of mingled sperm, in order to try him: so We gave him (the gifts), of hearing and sight'[43].

Furthermore, in some of these Meccan verses, the interpretation of life on earth as a trial period is intrinsic to the belief in resurrection and the hereafter. We are, thus, told that the cosmos has been created as a temporary trial stage; still, when the unbelievers are given the message of resurrection, they dismiss Muhammad's visions as sorcery[44]. Some of them even seem to believe that it is possible to escape death; to those the Qur'an confirms that 'every soul shall have a taste of death' and

---

[38] Q.8:28; see also Q.64:15; 68:17; cf. Q.3:10, 14, 116; 18:46.
[39] Q.20:131.
[40] Q.5:48.
[41] Q.72:17.
[42] Q.25:20 '...We have made some of you as a trial for others...'; see also Q.6:53; 10:85; 47:4; 60:5; cf. Q.2:102.
[43] Q.76:2; also in Q.11:7; 18:7; 67:2.
[44] Q.11:7.

after they have been tested, all human beings must return to their Creator[45]. In Q.2:155-156, Muhammad is instructed to give glad tidings to those who deal with the trials that Allah has imposed on them patiently saying 'To Allah we belong, and to Him is our return'. The implication in the abovementioned verses is that *a positive response to divine trial is possible only when someone is a firm believer in resurrection.*

On the same subject -i.e. that of the way that human beings respond to divine testing- we are also told that some men are on the verge of unbelief; while they happily serve Allah as long as they do well, when they are tried with adversity, their faith is found wanting[46]. In other cases, the response to Allah's trials is the reverse of the previous one; when a man is in trouble, he turns to God. However, when a favour is bestowed on him, he takes the credit for it, showing ingratitude towards his Lord[47]. Finally, there are those men whose behaviour remains inappropriate under any circumstances; when they are tried for humility, they show arrogance and when they are tried for patience their behaviour becomes blasphemous: 'Now, as for man, when His Lord trieth him, giving him honour and gifts, then saith he, (puffed up), "My Lord hath honoured me" / But when he trieth him, restricting his subsistence for him , then saith he (in despair), "My Lord hath humiliated me!"'[48].

Coming back to the element of sacrifice in Abraham's life, mention has been made to the time when persecuted by his own people the prophet is self-exiled from his homeland as well as to the episode of his being cast into the fire and his dispute with an idolatrous king. These are evident cases of trial. In the light of our research

---

[45] Q.21:35.
[46] Q.22:11.
[47] Q.39:49; see also Q.28:78.
[48] Q.89:15-16.

into the meaning of divine trial in the Qur'an, however, which has shown that trials and tests are there both in hardship and in prosperity, we may draw the following conclusion: As a young man Abraham is tried in adversity; he finds himself in harsh conditions and is expected to show courage and remain steadfast in faith. Later on, having survived persecution through divine intervention, he is blessed with a family and lives in peace and happiness. As a family man leading a tranquil life, Abraham is tried in prosperity; in this privileged condition, he is asked to sacrifice his son and he is expected to remain humble and remember that all blessings are due to Allah.

Based on the above, we may also conclude that in the case of a prophet a divine trial in the Qur'an is a learning experience that will enable him perfect his faith. That the sacrifice test is there to guide Abraham could be also implied in the latter's statement that precedes the sacrifice story and can be read as an introduction to it: 'He said: I will go to my Lord! He will surely guide me!'[49]

Al Ghazali (d. 1111AD) stresses the unremitting challenge of the Muslims' faith as well as the importance of showing faith in deed. He interprets the divine command as the ultimate test that Abraham has to pass in order to prove his loyalty yet again. Life on earth is a trial period and no matter how many times believers have proved themselves to be real Muslims, Allah will keep examining their faith. He notes: 'The story shows that that divine testing of man is serious and that it never ceases, and that faith is not simply words on the tongue but means steadfastness and submission'.[50]

Still, there are several questions that remain unanswered. First of all, what exactly is Abraham supposed to realize through his trial and why does the highest

---

[49] Q.37:99.
[50] Ghazali, *A Journey through the Qur'an: Themes and Messages of the Holy* Qur'an, p. 328.

level of his faith need to be reached through the sacrifice of his son? Why can't he perfect his faith through a benevolent act instead? Moreover, if the purpose of the divine trial is to teach Abraham patience, why is the loss of his son an affliction that the prophet has to impose on himself; why isn't he afflicted with death or disease like Job?[51] Also, in view of the fact that children are said to be a test and a potential hindrance to one's faith as in the case of Noah[52], can Abraham's son be an obstacle to his faith and if yes, in what way?

In order to answer these questions, our next task will be to look at the key qur'anic concepts of the purification of the heart (i.e. the main function of divine trial) and *associationism*. These two concepts will enlighten us about the kind of knowledge that Abraham is to acquire through his trial, and consequently about the message that the Qur'an wishes to communicate through the sacrifice verses to the Meccan Muslim community.

## 9.3. Purification of the Heart

The purification of the heart is a key concept in Sufi teaching; it is the ultimate goal of the mystics of Islam, not one that everyone can achieve but one that all believers should pursue. As far as this study is concerned, the purification of the heart is a qur'anic concept of great interest; all the more so because we find it closely connected not only to the idea of divine testing but also connected to the qur'anic figure of Abraham outside the sacrifice ayas. As we shall see, there are plenty of references to the human heart in the Qur'an; however there are only two occurrences

---

[51] For Job's trial, see Q.21:83-84; 38:41-44.
[52] Q.11:42-47.

of the phrase 'sound heart'[53]. Both passages in which the expression occurs refer to the prophetic figure of Abraham. In the first one, the sound heart of the prophet Abraham stands in stark contrast to the idolatrous disposition of his people[54].

Fascinatingly, the second passage combines the subjects of 'wealth and children', 'resurrection', 'purified hearts' and 'idolatry'. In particular, Q.26:87-89 portrays Abraham expressing disapproval of his people's dependence on wealth and sons, saying that on the Day of Judgement wealth and sons will be of no help to anyone; on the contrary, prosperity in the hereafter is destined for those who bring God a sound heart: 'And let me not be in disgrace on the day when (men) will be raised up; (87) The day whereon neither wealth nor sons will avail, (88) But only he (will prosper) that brings to God a sound heart' (89). As for those who worshipped others besides Allah, their objects of worship will not be able to help them and they will end up in hellfire wishing they had never listened to their seducers[55].

So far as the Qur'an is concerned, the heart of a human being is the centre of his/her consciousness. That means that before the mind articulates a thought and before the body acts, the heart is aware. In Q.7:179, for example, we are told that there are men who have 'hearts wherewith they understand not'. Likewise, in Q.22:46, those who reject the divine message may be physically able to see but their

---

[53] Although the term *salīm* [i.e. sound, e.g. *qalbīn salīmīn* (sound hearts)] differs from the term *zakah* (purity), in this chapter I follow al-Ghazali in treating the terms 'pure' and 'sound' as synonymous; see e.g. Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. by Claud Field (New York, London, M. E. Sharpe, 1991), p. 237, where whilst speaking of the purification of the heart, al-Ghazali makes mention to Q.26:89, which refers to a 'sound' heart.

[54] Q.37:84ff. 'Behold, he approached his Lord with a sound heart. (84) Behold, he said to his father and to his people, "what is that which ye worship?"' (85).

[55] Q.26:91-102.

hearts are blind. Lastly, according to Q.6:25, God has thrown veils on the hearts of those who pretend to accept the prophetic message, so that they do not understand it[56].

This basic concept of Islamic spirituality is also expressed in a popular prophetic hadith according to which 'Faith is to acknowledge with the heart, to voice with the tongue, and to act with the limbs'. That means that although practicing your faith and using rational speech to express your faith are both imperative in Islam, the part of the body where faith is located and that which ultimately determines what the tongue says and what the body does is the heart[57].

The lucidity of the heart and its good or bad effect on body and mind depends on the state that the heart is in[58]. The ideal of recognizing the reality of things can only be actualised when the heart is purified by Allah[59]. But what exactly is this reality that a sound heart may become aware of and what has Abraham done to purify his heart that his fellow countrymen have not? The deeper understanding of things - usually defined as 'gnosis'- that only a pure heart may achieve pertains to God-knowledge and self-knowledge. Those two are inextricably linked because, as we shall see, the only way for man to get to know something about the nature of God is to solve the mystery of his own creation[60].

---

[56] See also Q.47:29; 74:31.
[57] See William C. Chittick, *Sufism: a Short Introduction* (Oxford, Oneworld, 2005, 1st ed. 2000), pp. 6-7.
[58] 'But some hearts are like mirrors so befouled with rust and dirt that they give no clear reflections, while those of the prophets and saints, though they are men "of like passions with us" are extremely sensitive to all divine impressions.' Al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, p. 10.
[59] See e.g. Al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, p. 8 'The aim of moral discipline is to purify the heart from the rust of passion and resentment, till like a clear mirror, it reflects the light of God'.
[60] See Chittick, *Sufism: a Short Introduction*, pp. 32-33; see also Al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness* (chapters one and two, on 'knowledge of self' and 'knowledge of God') and Ibn al-'Arīf, *Maḥāsin al-Majālis (The attractions of mystical sessions)* trans. by William Elliott and Adnan K. Abdulla (Avebury, 1980), pp. 20-24 (chapter on 'gnosis').

### *a. Revelation*

As regards man's knowledge of God, the study of comparative religion shows that what differentiates the three great monotheistic religions from the rest of the world religions is that whilst people of other faiths are in search of a deity, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, instead of leaving the discovery of His existence up to man, God reveals Himself to man.

Specifically in Islam, divine revelation is of two sorts; the creational and the spoken. With regard to the creational kind of revelation, lots of qur'anic verses talk about the 'signs' of God, evidence scattered throughout the universe which points to the existence of one single Deity[61]. In fact, according to the qur'anic world view, meditating upon the divine signs is the *sine qua non* for attaining belief. This is most evident in the stories of the prophets; we have seen how Abraham had to meditate upon the planets and the stars before he was enabled to perceive the Unity of God. Similarly, it was not before the young trader Muhammad had spent a considerable amount of time praying and contemplating that he was able to see things clearly and thus be entrusted his prophetic mission by God.

At this point an explanation of why we do not come across the same type of creational revelation in Christian theology could prove useful. The reason for that seems to lie in the different way that the 'original sin' is perceived. In the Bible, after Adam and Eve have committed the original sin, human beings lose their ability to recognize God; for man to able to reach gnosis of God once again, a divine plan is needed. This plan involves spoken revelation and most importantly, the Incarnation (God coming to earth in human form as Christ). Contrary to the biblical version of

---

[61] See e.g. Q.2:164ff; 3:190ff; 6:99ff; 10:6ff; 10:67ff; 16:69; 17:12; 20:54; 24:46; 26:8; 27:86; 29:44; 30:20-25; 30:46; 31:31; 32:26ff; 36:33ff, 41:37, 39; 42:29; 45:3-6, 12-13.

the original sin, Adam and Eve in the Qur'an disobey God's orders but as soon as they repent God forgives them[62]. There is no indication that man's nature is affected by this mistake in any way which, of course, means that human beings never lose their ability to recognize the existence of One God through His 'signs'.

Coming to the spoken kind of revelation, God in Islam makes Himself known through his living Word -the Qur'an- as well as his messengers (prophets and angels). Spoken revelation is extremely important to man because this is how he gets to know things about the purpose of the creation, the meaning of his life and the nature of God. Such matters cannot be clarified through creational revelation for the latter can indicate no more than the Oneness of God. The key to the riddle of human existence which pertains to the relationship between the creation and its Creator is, thus, primarily found within the Qur'an.

In the Qur'an we are told that Adam (who is the prototype for all humans) was created in order to act as the 'vicegerent' of God on earth[63] and that God is 'nearer to him than (his) jugular vein'[64]. So that man may act as God's representative on earth, God 'taught Adam the names of all things'[65]. This special knowledge that man acquired elevated him to a powerful position in comparison with all other creatures in the heavens and the earth; for even the angels that were made out of light were asked to prostrate themselves before this seemingly dark creature that God made using clay, a creature that -as the angels' perspicacity allowed them to foresee- would make mischief and shed blood. And the angels did bow down to Adam but only after Allah

---

[62] Q.2:36; 7:22-25; 7:27; 20:120-123.
[63] Q.2:30; 6:165; 38:26.
[64] Q.50:16.
[65] Q.2:31.

had let them see that man was taught a lot more than what they had been taught[66]. And man did accept to become God's 'vicegerent' in the earth but because he was given free will, he was able to choose between following God's commands and thus, honouring his position as God's '*khalifa*'[67] and disobeying God's instructions and thus, failing in his duty. By saying that man undertook the Divine Trust but 'he was indeed unjust and foolish'[68], the Qur'an clearly implies that the majority of human beings fail in their God-given role that they themselves accepted to take on.

### *b. Creator and Creation according to Islamic Spirituality*

Like all other Muslims, the mystics of Islam attach great importance to spoken revelation. However, they also believe that besides receiving God-knowledge through the medium of prophecy, a man with a pure heart can also be taught by God Himself. This kind of direct knowledge is called 'unveiling' and a pure-hearted individual is said to be able to see reality through 'the eye of the heart'. Thus, despite the fact that the Sufi view of reality derives from the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions, it has been further amplified on the basis of the mystics' spiritual experience. And even though throughout the ages Islamic spirituality has found expression in a variety of concepts and practices, as far as qur'anic anthropology is concerned, Sufi teachings do not appear to diverge significantly[69].

In general terms, it is believed that since according to the prophetic saying that repeats the well-known biblical saying 'God created man in His own image', one may find thousands of 'signs' that indicate God's names or attributes not only scattered

---

[66] Q.2:30-34.
[67] The Arabic word '*khalifa*' from which the English word caliph derives is the qur'anic term for 'vicegerent'.
[68] Q.33:72.
[69] For a detailed description of the major beliefs and practices of Sufis, the reader is referred to William C. Chittick's excellent work *Sufism: a Short Introduction.*

throughout the universe but also within one's own self. Actually, in contrast to all other creatures which manifest only a few of the divine attributes, man manifests (but only dimly, because of his limitations) all divine attributes. In other words, embracing the total number of divine attributes (although not able to see all of them for God's names are innumerable and man's intelligence limited) man reflects God Himself. God-knowledge is, therefore, possible through self-knowledge. This idea is expressed in the often cited prophetic hadith 'He who knows himself knows his Lord'[70]. More specifically, Sufis claim that human beings are nothing but the reflection of their Creator; all the divine attributes that man finds reflected in his own self and considers as his in reality belong to another because if God possesses all attributes of perfection in their totality, there is nothing left for man to possess.

Analysing this concept in the context of the *shahāda*, the Sufi teachers say: 'there is no god but God' equals 'there is no creator but the Creator', 'there is none merciful but the Merciful, 'there is none wise but the Wise' and ultimately 'there is no real but the Real', etc. Everything other than God is unreal[71]. From a different perspective, however, since all things are 'signs' of God, all things partake in God's reality and are to some extent real; but their reality is derivative and weak. The frailty of human existence is such that if God was to withdraw his creative power from man for a moment, man would instantly cease to exist. This is how Q.28:88 'Everything is perishing but His face' has been interpreted by Muslim sages[72].

---

[70] See e.g. Al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, pp. 5, 15.
[71] Chittick, *Sufism: a Short Introduction*, p. 12; in chapter 1.4. we saw how Ibn 'Arabi perceives this world as nothing but a vague reflection of the 'absolute Reality'; cf. Ibn al-'Arīf, *Maḥāsin al-Majālis* (*The attractions of mystical sessions*), Introduction, p. 15 and *ibid.*, p. 62 where Ibn al 'Arīf quotes al-Ḥallāj, e.g. 'You are the One who occupies every space...All knowledge is Yours...as a non-entity, I found you'.
[72] Chittick, Sufism: a Short Introduction, pp. 12-13.

Given his absolute dependence on his Lord, what is expected of man is to purify himself of all claims to sovereignty; by surrendering all the positive qualities that he finds reflected in himself (such as power, beauty, mercy and forgiveness) as well as everything that he appears to possess in this life to the true Owner of all things, man makes space for God to be reflected through himself and thus realizes his full potential as God's representative on earth. In practical terms, giving up your claims to ownership means constantly acting in God's name and in accordance to God's will and not as if the gifts that you have received from God are yours to make use of as you see fit. And this is more than likely what the Qur'an means when it urges the believers to submit their whole selves to God[73]. Therefore, a man realizes who God is when he realizes who he is not.

If, however, man's self-awareness is dominated by his ego, he cannot perceive reality[74]. Instead, he perceives idols- things that only appear to be real. That is why Rumi says 'The mother of all idols is your own ego'[75]. Ego is included in the 'no god' part of the *shahāda*; for if an individual is ruled by considerations of the self, instead of affirming God's absolute authority and only reality -as the second half of

---

[73] Q.2:112; 7:29; the word that is translated as 'self' in these verses is *wajh* which literally means 'face'. In this case, however, the term denotes the inner self of a human being- his or her nature. The whole personality of a human being finds its expression on the face; thus, when, for example, an Arab wants to say that he has been dishonoured, he says that 'his face is blackened'. A qur'anic example of the term 'face' used in this sense is Q.30:30, which reads 'So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the faith'; obviously, the verse is not to be taken literally; here the believers are asked to turn their whole being toward Allah.

[74] See, e.g., Ibn al-'Arīf: 'Truth, however, only appears when the self disappears, because personal ambition means remoteness from God...If it were not for rebellion by one's own self, veils between God and man would rise...If it were not self-interest, the love of God would become deeply-rooted.'. Ibn al-'Arīf, *Maḥāsin al-Majālis (The attractions of mystical sessions)*, p. 22.

[75] Jalal al-Din Rumi, Maulana, *Mathnawi*, translation and commentary by Reynold Nicholson (London, Luzac, 1925-40), I:772 cited in Chittick, *Sufism: a Short Introduction*, p. 16.

the first part of the *shahāda* 'but God' commands- he worships himself even if he appears to worship God at the same time[76].

In total contrast to those rare individuals whose hearts have been purified stand those people whose hearts are diseased[77]. In a fascinating Sufi manual translated by Hamza Yusuf, Imam Mawlud sets out the various diseases of the heart and offers advice on the effective treatment of the sick heart that people must follow before it is too late to prevent its spiritual death. Some of the symptoms of affliction that a heart shows before it dies are vanity, boasting and arrogance, envy, fear of poverty, obliviousness to blessings, displeasure with the divine decree, relying on other than God and antipathy toward death. The root, however, of all diseases of the heart is –according to Imam Mawlud and cited as the opinion of al-Hilali and Ibn 'Ashir- love of the temporal world[78]. Having said that, Imam Mawlud goes on to explain that as the creation of God, this world is not inherently bad; blameworthy are only the things of this world that lead someone to spiritual decline. On the contrary, the love of the things or people who promote our spiritual elevation is desired and commendable[79].

Apart from the expression 'purification of the heart', there is also a similar expression used by Muslim mystics, i.e. *tazkiyat al-nafs* which is commonly translated as 'purification of the soul'. The two phrases seem to be used interchangeably. According to Chittick, the phrase 'purification of the soul' is derived from Q.91:7-10: 'By the soul, and the proportion and order given to it; and its

---

[76] See Chittick, *Sufism: a Short Introduction*, pp. 16, 36 and following chapter on *shirk* and Saïd Nursi on the human 'I'.
[77] Q.2:10; 5:52; 8:49; 9:125; 22:53; 24:50; 33:12; 33:60; 47:20; 47:29; 74:31.
[78] Al-Mawlud, *Maṭharat al-Qulūb*, translation and commentary by Hamza Yusuf ed. as *Purification of the Heart: Signs, Symptoms, and Cures of the Spiritual Diseases of the Heart* (U.S.A., Starlatch Press, 2004), p. 159.
[79] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

enlightenment as to its wrong and its right- truly he succeeds that purifies it, and he fails that corrupts it!'[80]. Although, as far as I am aware, it is not clear whether in Sufism a man's soul is identified with his heart, there is definitely a strong connection between the two since the function of the heart is said to be both physical and spiritual[81].

What is more, a comparison between the verses quoted above and those verses that talk about Abraham's sound heart make it clear that the end result of both the so-called 'purification of the heart' and what Sufis call 'purification of the soul' is the same, namely prosperity in the hereafter[82]. For in Q.26:85-90 Abraham appears to say that contrary to those who prosper in this life (i.e. those who have wealth and sons) the inheritors of the garden of bliss will be those who bring Allah a pure heart. Similarly, Q.91:9 'truly he succeeds that purifies it (i.e. the soul)' can be interpreted in terms of prosperity since the verb that is translated by Yusuf Ali as 'to succeed' comes from the Arabic root *f-l-h* which has connotations of both success and prosperity[83].

### 9.4. *Shirk*-Associating Others with God

We have seen that among the prophetic communities described in the Qur'an, the major obstacles to believing in the hereafter are idolatry, unquestioned adherence to ancestral custom and excessive love of wealth and children. What these three

---

[80] Chittick, *Sufism: a Short Introduction*, p. 40.
[81] In Ghazali, the terms 'heart' and 'soul' are used interchangeably to denote 'that which uses all the other faculties as its instruments and servants.'. Al-Ghazzālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, p. 6.
[82] See also Chittick, *Sufism: a Short Introduction*, p. 41.
[83] Chittick asserts that the word 'purification' does not do justice to the Arabic '*tazkiya*', which actually combines two meanings, those of 'purification' and 'growth'. 'Hence *tazkiyat an-nafs* means not only "to purify the soul," but also to allow the soul to grow and thrive by opening it up to the bounty of God. Therefore, a better translation might be "cultivation of the soul."' *Ibid.*

things have in common is that they are all forms of idolatry, or to put it in a more precise term of Islamic theology, they are all different forms of *shirk*.

In its literal sense, the word *shirk* - derived from the Arabic root *sh-r-k* - means 'to share', 'to be a partner' or 'to give someone a partner'. In its qur'anic context it means 'giving God partners' and, by implication, worshipping these partners at the same time as worshipping God[84]. Although typically translated as polytheism, *shirk* is a broader term that means associating anything other than God with God or attributing any of God's attributes of perfection to anyone or anything that is not God. Attributing partners to God is nothing but the reverse side of *tawhīd*, a concept implicit in the first article of faith, the *shahāda*: 'there is no god but God' (*la ilaha illa Allah*) and also throughout the Qur'an. Given that *tawhīd* is at the core of Islamic faith, an essential precondition for entering the world of Islam (not to mention something that human beings are said to be born with) it is not surprising that committing *shirk* –and therefore, invalidating *tawhīd*- is emphasised in the Qur'an as the greatest and only unforgivable sin[85].

Different forms of *shirk* are often classified by Muslim thinkers into two categories: *shirk al-akbar* (major *shirk*) or *shirk al-jali* (manifest *shirk*) which includes the most obvious forms of idolatry such as worshipping trees, stones or statuses and *shirk al-asghar* (minor *shirk*) or *shirk al-khafi* (secret *shirk*) which refers to modern forms of idolatry such as worshipping money, lust or the ego.

In the Qur'an, derivatives of the term *shirk* occur in the stories of the early prophets who are sent by God in order to teach monotheism among communities that worship idols, usually in the form of statuses carved out of stone, wood or other

---

[84] Lane, An Arabic-English Lexicon.
[85] Q.4:48, 116; 5:72; 31:13.

material[86]. Another form of crude idolatry mentioned in the Qur'an is the deification of celestial bodies. Abraham, for instance, lives among people who seem to be worshipping stars and planets[87]. Additionally, the Qur'an makes mention of three female deities (al-Manat, al-Lat and al-'Uzza) that Muhammad's contemporaries worship -in the form of idols- alongside God[88].

The *mushrikun*, however, are not only people such as the pagans of Mecca or the old prophets' communities that worship nature and other visible idols. The Qur'an makes use of the term *shirk* also to refer to the Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus[89] as well as the belief that priests and ascetics may intercede with God on behalf of other human beings[90].

In regards to the secret kind of *shirk*, Q.45:23 states that there are men who take as gods their own desires. The implication in this verse is that except for the deification of other human beings, human beings can idolize their own selves through worshipping their own inclinations. The idea of worshipping one's own self is illustrated more clearly than in any other qur'anic verse, in Q.18:32-44 where the idea of *shirk* appears connected with the aforementioned idea that Turner has identified in the Qur'an, that of wealth and children as immortality symbols. As we have already seen, the wealthy man in the gardens parable boasts of his riches and sons and rejects the prophetic message about the return. In response to the latter's display of power,

---

[86] In Q.7:148, e.g. the children of Israel take for worship a calf made of gold.
[87] Q.6:74-84.
[88] Q.53:19-20.
[89] Q.5:72.
[90] Q.9:31; 3:64.

his neighbor rebukes him for denying God and says that unlike him, he (the seemingly underprivileged man) will never associate anything with Allah[91].

At this point it becomes clear that *shirk* refers neither to some belief in the existence of minor deities sharing lordship with Allah nor to the worship of stones, statuses or planets. On the contrary, the sin of associating others with God refers to the pride of a man who has idolized his property, his sons and -through all the things that he has- his own self. By attributing to himself God's power of determining how long created things may last, this man has committed a grave sin. What is more, expressing the belief that his power is so great that not even God can cause him any harm, suggests that this man has come to think of himself as a god. Our hypothesis is further confirmed when the proud man who is afflicted with calamity and loses everything, wishes that he had never ascribed partners to Allah. The parable ends saying that this man could not save himself and nobody was left to help him and that the only one who can protect, reward and give success is Allah[92].

According to some hadith traditions, although Muslims do not seem to be in immediate danger of attributing anthropomorphic qualities to Allah, they are prone to commit secret *shirk*, which has do to with the attribution of power or any other Name of God either to human beings or to some abstract force other than God. The prophet, for instance, is reported to have said:

'The most frightening thing that I fear for my Community is associating others with God. I do not mean to say that they will worship the sun, or the moon, or idols. I mean that they will perform works for other than God with a hidden desire'[93].

---

[91] Q.18:38.
[92] Q.18:43-44.
[93] Cited in Murata&Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, p. 51.

Expecting a reward for your spiritual efforts by other men is then considered to be a form of idolatry. Another hadith places great emphasis on the spiritual dangers of performing a prayer beautifully not for the sake of Allah but in order to impress someone who is watching[94]. In addition to the relevant hadith traditions, the Qur'an seems to refer to its Muslim audience when it says that most of those who believe in God associate partners with Him[95].

***Saïd Nursi on the human 'I'***

The mystics of Islam are especially concerned about the kind of idols that lie within one's own self. In a fascinating study of the human nature, the Turkish scholar Saïd Nursi (1876-1960)[96] shows that the most commonly committed act of *shirk* is not the external worship of some false deity as most people may think but the idolization of the self. What differentiates Nursi from other students of Islamic spirituality is that while most Muslim thinkers struggle to find the most effective methods to purify the soul or cure the heart from the diseases that this type of idolatry has caused, Nursi starts with the root of the evil, i.e. the constituent element of human nature that makes people susceptible to self-idolization[97].

This element, according to the author, is '*Ene*'[98]- the human 'I'. The human 'I' is that vague phenomenon existent in all human beings which makes it possible for each individual to distinguish her or himself from other unique individuals. '*Ene*', Nursi tells us, was given to man as part of the responsibility he took upon himself to

---

[94] *Ibid.*
[95] Q.12:106; cf. Q.6:88, 151; 23:59f.
[96] Saïd Nursi, a renowned thinker of the twentieth century, aimed at restoring faith in a society that was becoming more and more materialistic. Because of his efforts to unite Muslims and Christians in the fight against materialism, Nursi is regarded by his followers as the father of interfaith dialogue.
[97] Bediuzzaman Saïd Nursi (2002, 1st ed. 1992), *The Words: on the Nature and Purposes of Man, Life, and All Things*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler Neşriyat), pp. 557-562.
[98] *Ene* is the Turkish word for 'I'.

act as God's representative on earth. This responsibility is identified by Nursi among several other scholars as the Divine Trust referred to in Q.33:72. In this verse we are told that man foolishly undertook a Trust offered to him by God although even the heavens, the earth and the mountains before him had refused to undertake it. Nursi is convinced that the reason that all creation (except for man) refused the Divine Trust is exactly because the Trust included '*Ene*', something that everyone but man realised that was a great responsibility to bear. For '*Ene's*' main purpose is not to simply allow man recognize himself as a unique entity and differentiate himself from other individuals; this is only a secondary effect of the human 'I'. On the contrary, the basic function of '*Ene*' is to enable man discern the divine attributes (*sifāt*) and as a consequence realize his own nature as well as the true purpose of the whole universe. However, in the case that '*Ene*' fails to perform its predetermined function, it starts ascribing partners to God, committing what the Qur'an describes as the only unpardonable sin. The prospect of committing the cardinal sin of *shirk* is according to Nursi what filled the earth, the heavens and the mountains -symbols of power and stability- with so much fear that they had to refuse the divine offer.

Saïd Nursi explains how this essential component of the Divine Trust works; the human 'I', we are told, is a quality that is used as a standard measurement of God's Names. More specifically, '*Ene*' is the seat of thousands of signs and samples that can be measured against God's attributes so the latter become visible to man, who should then realize that God's attributes are out of all proportion to his own attributes. The human 'I' is, therefore, a unit of measurement. However, a unit of measurement does not need to have real existence; 'like hypothetical lines in geometry, a unit of

measurement may be formed by hypothesis and supposition'[99]. This is the case with the human 'I'; 'I' does not have a meaning in itself; it is there for the sole purpose of indicating something other than itself.

The next step in Nursi's analysis is to explain the reason why the perception of the divine attributes would be impossible without the help of '*Ene*'. He, therefore, notes that since God's attributes are absolute, infinite and all-embracing, they cannot be comprehended because the human mind can only perceive things that have limits, things that appear in some shape or form. A typical example theologians use in order to illustrate some God-given truth about the essence of God involves the features of light. Accordingly, to show that God's attributes of perfection are beyond comprehension, Nursi points to the nature of light. If there was only light, people would not be able to perceive it; light is known through darkness. Darkness is nothing but the lack of light and has no actual existence but is necessary for the perception of light.

The human 'I' plays the role of a line of darkness against which the light is contrasted and in this way recognized; it is the hypothetical line that puts an imaginary limit on God's all-encompassing Names, such as All-Powerful, All-Wise, All-Knowing, All-Compassionate, so that they may become known. That happens as follows: The 'I' imagines that it owns itself together with all the signs and samples of God's attributes that lie in itself such as power, wisdom, knowledge etc, samples that have been placed there by God. By doing this, '*Ene*', which is part of the human being, draws a line between what it thinks it has and what God has and in this way, through dividing God's attributes and claiming a share for itself, the human being

---

[99] Nursi, The Words: on the Nature and Purposes of Man, Life, and All Things, p. 558.

starts having a rudimentary understanding of the nature of God's Names. Man, for example, looks at what he seems to own on earth and says: 'Like I am the owner of this house, so too is the Creator the owner of the universe'[100]. The same happens with all thousands of signs and attributes that the human 'I' contains. Through the wisdom that he appears to have, man understands something of God's Wisdom and through his own art, he understands something about God's creative act 'As I made this house and arranged it, so someone must have made the universe and arranged it'[101].

Having completed the description of its function, Nursi goes on to describe how '*Ene*' should be used in order to fulfill its main purpose and how, unfortunately, most of the times it is used in a way that is wrong and harmful to the human soul. In particular, he takes Q.91:9-10 'Truly he succeeds that purifies it and he fails that corrupts it' to hint at this very concept of '*Ene*'. The verses in question refer to what is known in Islamic spirituality as the purification of the soul. It, therefore, seems that Nursi thinks of the 'I' as something that is intrinsically connected to the soul (if not as the soul itself), a changeable quality which is initially bestowed on every human being in a certain form but later on may take a different form depending on the way it is being used. Man fulfills his duty as the 'vicegerent' of God on earth by preserving the initial form of his 'self'- the pattern on which God has made him.

In order to fulfill the purpose of his creation man needs, first of all, to be aware of it. He needs to realize that his ownership is illusory and that he is nothing but a unit of measurement or a mirror on which the divine attributes of perfection are reflected for if God e.g. possesses power absolutely and infinitively, what sort of power can he possibly possess? Having realized his true nature, then he has to act

---

[100] *Ibid.*, p. 559.
[101] *Ibid.*

according to it- that is if he wants to honor the Trust. To act according to human nature means to submit the imaginary ownership that you previously thought you were sharing with God to God, the true Owner of all things and act as a responsible trustee does- in accordance to the will of the one he represents. The submission of the 'self' to its true Owner is true worship. True worship has been achieved by the prophets and all the pure ones who have accepted Allah as the sole Creator and Sovereign of all things and made use of the divine attributes (such as knowledge, wisdom and mercy) that they saw reflected in themselves in accordance to God's will. Feeling their weakness and poverty, the righteous came to rely entirely upon God and glorify Him for all the gifts He has bestowed on them.

Nonetheless, most people fail or refuse to see their real nature and betray the Trust. This happens when the human 'I' believes that it owns itself, in other words when it believes that the samples of mercy, knowledge, beauty or power it contains are different from those of God and belong to 'I'. When the human 'I' refuses to surrender to Allah, it starts growing rapidly and keeps spreading to every part of the human being until the latter is completely covered by the 'I' and becomes itself pure 'I'. At this point the 'I' stops being a measure of God's attributes and becomes an 'I' gauge against which all other things are measured. Now, he who claims to be the owner of all the attributes that he experiences in himself has to accept that all other people are owners of the attributes they experience in themselves. 'It is just like a man who steals a brass coin from the public treasury; he can only justify his action by agreeing to take a silver coin for each of his friends who is present. So the man who says: "I own myself," must believe and say: "Everything owns itself."'[102]. In this

---

[102] *Ibid.*, p. 560.

way, '*Ene*' divides God's attributes and starts sharing them with other human beings, things or natural phenomena[103].

## 9.5. Conclusions

Looking into the qur'anic notion of *shirk* especially as this is portrayed in the gardens parable[104], it becomes evident that the way that the polytheistic communities of the prophets treat wealth and sons is a form of idolatry that clashes with the belief in strict monotheism that they are invited to embrace. What is more, men seem to disbelieve in the newly introduced idea of the hereafter[105] because it comes in contradistinction with an old 'immortality technique' that they conveniently adopted from their ancestors, one which is based on the two things that are of most social significance to a tribesman: wealth and sons. Living among people who restlessly strive to create an eternal paradise on earth and treat their wealth and sons as the very means through which they will overpower death, it makes sense that a prophet would be tested by God with the sacrifice of his son.

There is plenty of evidence in the Qur'an that hints in the same direction; first of all, the idea that wants the sacrifice story as a Medina addition that is meant to legitimize the Festival of Sacrifice is for the most part based on the evolution of the story in Islamic literature, where the sacrifice has been associated to the Ka'ba and Hajj traditions. When it comes to the Qur'an, however, there is no basis to support such an argument; it suffices to say that there is a whole sura in the Qur'an dedicated to the Islamic pilgrimage (sura 22) which makes no mention to Abraham's sacrifice

---

[103] The implication in Nursi's treatise is that self-deification is not simply a hidden form of *shirk* but the most common form of idolatry among people and the source of all other forms of idolatry.
[104] Q.18:32-44.
[105] Believing in the hereafter is intrinsic to the monotheistic world view for by doing so, a believer affirms the existence of God and the inevitability of divine justice.

whatsoever. But even if someone argues for the intentional inclusion of the passage in a Meccan sura so that the Hajj sacrifice is justified on the basis of the earliest parts of revelation, such an interpretation begs the question as to the purpose of incorporating the story of Abraham's sacrifice in a sura that is about afterlife and the major hindrance to attaining bliss in the hereafter, idolatry.

Contrary to the belief that the sacrifice ayas are strategically placed in a Meccan sura, it seems to me that the narrative in question fits the Meccan representation of Abraham as a sacrificing figure and an idol breaker[106]; in his youth, when through careful observation of the stars and the planets he comes to realize the existence of One God, Abraham breaks the statues that his father and people worship and as a result of his rebellion, he has to sacrifice the love and security of his home and emigrate. Later on his journey, the prophet refuses to submit to the earthly power of an arrogant king, he is persecuted and through defying physical death, confirms once more the full sovereignty of Allah; here, using Rumi's language, one may say that Abraham is ready to sacrifice the idol of his body[107]. In line with the above, we may suggest that at a time when sons are thought of as some source of sacred power that may act as a shield against death or the wrath of God (if the Day of Judgement - that the prophets keep warning about- comes)[108], Abraham is called upon to sacrifice the idols of the mind.

---

[106] In his poetry, Rumi treats the sacrifice story in connection with the Nimrod story and the account of Abraham's hijra and in all three narratives, he sees the breaking of idols; the first idols to be broken are the statuses that Abraham's people hold as gods. In throwing himself to Nimrod's fire, the patriarch submits the idol of his own body. In the sacrifice story '...the body is like Ishmael, the spirit like Abraham, who pronounces the funeral *takbir* (*Allahu akbar*).' Rumi, *Mathnawi*, V:2505 and III:2145 quoted in Renard, *All the King's Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation*, p. 49.

[107] See previous footnote.

[108] See Q.34:35-36: 'They said: "We have more in wealth and in sons, and we cannot be punished." Say: "Verily my Lord enlarges and restricts the provision to whom he pleases, but most men understand not.'; see also Q.3:10, 116; 18:36; 58:17.

In the same line of thought, reference to submission in verse 103 of the sacrifice narrative is probably there to communicate that perfect *islām* is only accomplished when a believer has sacrificed all his idols. Our hypothesis is confirmed through a juxtaposition of all the Abrahamic stories in the Qur'an where the terms *īmān* and *islām* occur; in these stories one notices the different levels of faith (*īmān*) and submission (*islām*) that Abraham appears to have attained throughout his mission. That the sacrifice episode is about the highest level of Abraham's submission can be based on the following: first, it is in Q.37:99-113 that for the first time God (and not Abraham) states that Abraham (and his son) has submitted and secondly, submission in Q.37:99-113 is the fruit of a great trial. Through the portrayal of Abraham's mission, the Qur'an also indicates that submission has no connotations of passivity, for the only way to achieve real *islām* is through a constant spiritual fight that entails sacrificing one's idols.

With regard to the question of whose sacrifice it is that the Qur'an describes[109], there are several indications that the passage under study illustrates Abraham's -and not his son's- sacrifice. An indication is that the sacrifice story is part of a narrative that accounts Abraham's mission. In addition to that, it is Abraham who is given the vision and again, it is him who is rewarded for complying with the divine command. The fact that the *dhabīḥ* is not identified as Isaac or Ishmael could be another indication that the son is *not* the protagonist of the story. Finally, given the special power that his fellow countrymen believe they can draw from their sons, it is Abraham who as a father is asked to sacrifice his son and in this way break free from his peoples' idolatrous ideas.

---

[109] Since both father and son submitted their wills to Allah (Q.37:103), the Qur'anic version of the story could be about a double sacrifice. Caspi and Cohen, *The Binding [Aqedah]*, p.100.

Furthermore, we have seen that the sacrifice story does not only fit the Meccan portrayal of Abraham as a sacrificing figure but also the content of the sura in which it occurs. Most of sura *Al-Ṣāffāt* is set in the hereafter following the Day of Judgement; in it, we find images of the abode of hell which is inhabited by those who now mock the idea of resurrection[110] and attribute power to idols and other human beings[111]. Together with these images we find images of the abode of paradise that is inhabited by the devoted servants of Allah- those believers who trusted in the divine message of the hereafter despite their companions' efforts to divert them from the truth[112]; these scenes are followed by the stories of the prophets in which the latter appear to fight against different kinds of idolatry; one of these stories is the sacrifice. Reading the sacrifice story in the context of its sura, it can be inferred that by giving up what for the rest of his people is the means through which they can achieve immortality on earth, Abraham is asked to show belief in the hereafter[113].

Studying Q.37:99-113, we have focused on three key terms that occur in the passage: sacrifice, submission and trial[114]. Our enquiry into the meaning of divine trial in the Qur'an has shown that a divine test is more often than not -and in the case of a prophet always- a learning experience through which a believer is given the

---

[110] See Q.37:14, 16 'And, when they see a sign, turn it to mockery', / 'What! when we die, and become dust and bones, shall we (then) be raised up (again)'; see also Q.37:53; cf. Q.37:58-59.
[111] See Q. 37:22-25, 36.
[112] See Q.37:51-59.
[113] In a different sura, Q.26:87-104, the themes of resurrection and idolatry occur together with the theme of wealth and children as sacred power channels (see following paragraph); In reference to Gilchrist's comment about the biblical Abraham who, in contrast to the blindly obedient Abraham in the Qur'an, shows trust in God's promise, we may now say that Qur'anic Abraham *does* manifest trust, not in a covenant though, but in the divine promise about the hereafter. For had he not overcome what appears to be a common belief among his contemporaries, namely that someone can achieve immortality in this world by accumulating wealth and having sons, he would have been reluctant to offer his son in sacrifice. On the contrary, there is no hesitation as he is fully convinced that this life is simply a trial.
[114] Q.37:106.

opportunity to purify his heart, and, thus, realize what is expected of him[115]. One of the passages where the notion of the purification of the heart occurs is Abraham's prayer in Q.26:83-89, where, in the context of his confrontation with his idolatrous people, the prophet pleads with God not to let him be in disgrace on the day when wealth and sons will be of no avail and prosperity will be the privilege of the sound-hearted[116].

On the same subject of divine trial, we are told that human beings are tried not only in hardship but also in affluence and, more significantly, that children are given as trial and temptation[117]. Similarly, the Qur'an warns that immersion in the things of this world[118] is what keeps a believer from remembering God and what may cause a soul to perish[119]; contrary to prosperity in this temporary world, a pure-hearted man is promised prosperity in the hereafter[120]. Based on our knowledge about the meaning of divine trial, we may conclude that having passed the test of persecution, Abraham is tested again whilst leading a tranquil and prosperous life and this time, his trial concerns his awareness of Allah's ownership over everything that he has been blessed with.

Of all his possessions, however, God does not require Abraham's material wealth but something that has come from him- from his own body; something that can be so easily mistaken as his. The fact that a child is the physical extension of his

---

[115] We have seen that the purification of the heart pertains to God-knowledge because according to the Qur'an, there are people who 'have hearts wherewith they understand not' (Q.7:179) and this kind of people -whose hearts are blind- are said to be those who reject the divine message (Q.22:46).
[116] Q.26:87-89.
[117] See Q.8:28; 9:55; 17:64; 18:46.
[118] In Q.3:14 'the possessions of this world's life' are identified as wealth, women and sons.
[119] See Q.63:9; cf. Q.3:14.
[120] 'But those will prosper who purify themselves, 15. And glorify the name of their Guardian-Lord, and (lift their hearts) in prayer. 16. Nay (behold), ye prefer the life of this world; 17. But the hereafter is better and more enduring. 17. And this is in the books of the earliest (revelations)- 19. The books of Abraham and Moses.' (Q.87:14-19); cf. Q.26:87-89.

father has often led men to believe that they own their children. As is well known, according to ancient Germanic and Roman laws children were the property of their fathers. Also, the very fact that sons in the Qur'an are almost always mentioned together with property could be an indication that among Muhammad's community, children are treated as property. It is, thus, interesting that in our narrative, a father's decision concerning his child is based not on the logic that the son is his to treat as he wishes but rather on the logic that his son is not his to withhold from the Creator of all.

Moreover, in terms of the story's relativity to Muhammad's faith community, we have seen that the prophets' stories in the Qur'an are paradigmatic; intended to instruct the believers in faith, these stories are not concerned with the historical reality of the prophets. For this reason, we may also say with certainty that the sacrifice narrative is largely symbolic; through the sacrifice ayas, the members of the new and still weak Muslim community are not asked to sacrifice their children at God's command but they are rather asked to *not* idolize their sons and, by extension, to not be tricked into following those unbelievers who control the Meccan society based on the social power that they draw from their wealth and sons. Through the sacrifice ayas, the believers are assured that sons are given as a trial and that bliss in the hereafter belongs only to those who realize that there is no power except with God. The message is not unrelated to the fact that one of the reasons that the Meccans look down on Muhammad seems to be that he does not have sons. This is implied in Q.9:55 in which Muhammad is advised:

'Let not their wealth nor their (following in) sons dazzle thee: in reality Allah's plan is to punish them with these things in this life, and that their souls may perish in their (very) denial of Allah'[121]

From a somewhat different perspective, that of Islamic spirituality, Abraham's sacrifice could be interpreted as a rite of passage that the prophet has to go through in order to reach the highest level of *islām*. As has been noted, according to the Muslim mystics, self-knowledge can be attained through a spiritual journey during which the heart is taught and purified by God. The ultimate goal of this journey is the recognition of the frailty of the human existence which is inevitably followed by perfect submission to the will of God. In order to fulfill his role as God's vicegerent on earth, man has to become acutely aware of the fact that having being appointed to act on behalf of the Creator and Owner of all, he may claim neither power that can control the affairs of this world nor authority over what he has been given (including - as is skillfully illustrated is Nursi's study- his own self). We have also seen how the Sufi poet Rumi sees the breaking of idols in all the Abrahamic narratives and how he considers the ego to be the 'the mother of all idols'[122].

Therefore, on a deeper level, the sacrifice episode could be interpreted as the end result of a constant spiritual struggle against the self. By realizing the oneness of God, refusing to change his belief and fighting idolatry, Abraham has become *mu'min*. Furthermore, by accomplishing the task he is assigned considering the building of the first sanctuary to God and by spreading His word, he establishes the first *islamic* community. Yet, in order to pass to the higher spiritual level of *islām*, he has to overcome any temptation of getting attached to the worldly goods that God has bestowed him with and submit his whole inner self (in other words give in his ego) to

---

[121] Cf. Q.68:10-14: 'Heed not the type of despicable man...because he possesses wealth and (numerous) sons.'.
[122] Rumi, *Mathnawi* I:772.

God. Given that according to the qur'anic revelation *islām* – the submission of the whole inner self- is the greatest ideal one should adhere to, vanity or the ego is the greatest evil.

We may, thus, say that the fulfillment of such a great spiritual task in Abraham's story is expressed in the powerful metaphor of the offering of the son; in the novel stories discussed by George Sebouhian, a son is the extension of one's self. Moreover, as Izutsu notes (commenting on Ibn 'Arabi who sees Abraham's vision as a metaphor for the Hajj sacrifice ritual and the image of Isaac as the Hajj sacrificial victim), the sacrificial animal in Abraham's vision appears in the form of Isaac because the ritual signifies the offering of one's own soul to God[123]. In line with the above, one may suggest that what is really being sacrificed on the altar is Abraham's ego and that the special bond between father and son serves to show the great difficulty in being released from the bonds of one's sense of his own importance. To sacrifice your ego -i.e. to accept the frailty of your existence and cleanse your soul from any claims to power and ownership- takes the immense faith that Abraham had to sacrifice his son- the greatest possible object of dependence and very part of one's self. At the same time, the son represents prosperity and progeny- the main factors that cause selfishness and spiritual disorientation. Needless to say that in this case, being an allegorical figure the victim does not need to be identified.

In Islamic tradition, the spiritual importance and difficulty of what is demonstrated in the narrative is also testified by the sudden appearance of Iblis. The reaction of the devil ('…if I do not beguile the family of Abraham [now] I will never

---

[123] See p. 38.

beguile them!'[124]) who sees the divine command given to Abraham as his greatest opportunity to trick him into disobeying God, indicates that what is expected of Abraham is considered to be a man's weakest spot. At the same time, the devil's unusually determined effort to hinder the prophet from complying with God's order, confirms that should he fail to talk him out of it, Abraham will have reached an exceptionally high level of spiritual achievement.

The only other time that the devil seems to put so much effort in misguiding a holy person is -except for the analogous Abrahamic legends in the Jewish tradition[125]- when Jesus is according to the Synoptic Gospels confronted by him and asked to demonstrate his supernatural powers as proof of his divinity[126]. Despite the fact that each narrative should be seen in its own scriptural and religious context, the two narratives share a common element that one cannot fail to notice; Iblis or the devil is aiming at bringing out the worse in people. And in both cases the worse quality appears to be the love of the self. Counting on his greatest weapon, namely pride, the devil fights against humility by prompting Jesus to exhibit his powers and Abraham to hold on to what men in his time perceive as their main source of power.

Finally, interpreting the sacrifice as a story of submission through divine trial, the qur'anic episode of the heavenly messengers becomes immediately more intelligible. For if the sacrifice marks Abraham's transition from some stage of *īmān* to its perfection, i.e. *islām*, the divine messengers incident cannot be but one of the many learning experiences meant to provide him with the knowledge of God that will eventually help him attain the highest level of submission. To put it in different

---

[124] For the full account of the story, see chapter 2.2 (Sacrifice Narratives).
[125] See, e.g., Midrash Aggadah, Vayera 51 and Midrash Tanhuma, Vayera 81.
[126] Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-13.

words, the encounter with the angels is another trial that precedes the test through which Abraham becomes a model *muslim*. Through this certain episode, as is obvious in Q.9:144 and Q.60:4-6, the prophet -and the new Islamic community that the Qur'an addresses- is instructed that a *muslim* is not allowed to intercede with God on behalf of the unbelievers; one is responsible for one's own soul.

## Ancient, Monotheistic and Islamic Sacrifice (General Conclusions)

Revisiting Ernest Becker's theory of sacrifice as the ancient means of achieving immortality, it is noticeable that the scholar may sporadically hint at but does not discuss the difference between the kind of life that pre-modern sacrifice aims at, i.e. everlasting life in this world and the kind of immortality that God promises in monotheistic religions. Becker shows that just as the ancient man who performs sacrificial rituals in order to attract the superhuman life-power he needs to continue existing, modern man is too after immortality that he, however, is trying to achieve through different immortality techniques; the predominant among these techniques is the accumulation of money; nowadays transcendental power is contained in money and everything material money can offer.

As far as the religious sphere is concerned, the scholar makes reference to Christianity as a popular immortality system of the past that is now fading and observes that today the world is largely secularized. Interestingly, despite the fact that he describes faith as an illusion, he considers religion as a partial solution to the human condition and seems to admire Kierkegaard's 'knight of faith'[1]. However, since he is more concerned with the profane immortality projects, Becker does not treat the meaning of sacrifice in monotheistic religions[2]. That leaves us with the question of whether the old meaning of sacrifice (i.e. sacrifice as the way of securing life) could also apply to sacrifice as it is perceived by Jews, Christians and Muslims.

---

[1] See e.g. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 258-59.

[2] The only comparison that is drawn between ancient and monotheistic sacrifice refers to Hocart's parallelism between ancient ritual and Christian communion, i.e. both rituals involve men partaking of the immortality of their god, who is the sacrifice. Quoted in Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 21.

If secular man is longing for immortality in a way that he himself fails to notice, it could not be more obvious that the believer yearns for everlasting life. No doubt the aim of all human beings remains the same; what seems to differ is the means to the end. Thus, Becker has shown how ancient man attempts to escape death through the sacrifice ritual and how modern man perpetuates the 'vital lie' by accumulating money. We have also seen how for the early Jew immortality is associated to the idea of leaving behind numerous descendants and for the ancient Greek the idea of leaving behind an immortal name. Furthermore, testing the applicability of Becker's theory of the 'immortality projects' to the prophets' stories in the Qur'an, Colin Turner has shown that among the prophets' communities and Muhammad's new Muslim community, the predominant immortality technique is accumulating wealth and having offspring.

In monotheistic religions, what changes the way that immortality is approached is the belief in the hereafter. In particular, monotheism brings about a new cosmic theory according to which time is a straight line; there is a beginning, an end and at the end of time, there is afterlife. Nobody can escape physical death and nothing can guarantee endless life in this world. Man takes his life from one single deity -the creator and sustainer of the whole universe- and he has to be ready to give it back to his Creator whenever He asks for it. Eternal life, however, is possible but only through obedience to God. To be entitled to bliss in the afterlife, man has to comply with certain godly rules and show good behaviour while on earth.

Contrary to monotheistic societies, the ancient societies that Becker describes are characterised by a circular perception of time; everything in life moves within a cycle and death is a part of this cycle. In those societies where time is perceived as a cycle, via offering a communal sacrifice, people draw life-power from the invisible

world of gods and ancestors. This kind of divine power enables them to renew creation and achieve permanence on earth[3]. As man's conception of time changes and he realizes that creation cannot be renewed and death cannot be avoided, he has to either stop practicing sacrifice or give sacrifice some other meaning. In proportion to the new monotheistic message, sacrifice comes to be associated to the hereafter meaning that whilst the ancient peoples sacrifice to achieve permanence on earth, monotheistic sacrifice aims at bliss in the hereafter. Thus, the ritual of sacrifice *is* adopted but human sacrifice can only be self sacrifice, hence sporadic cases of child sacrifice are negatively criticised both in the Bible and the Qur'an. In addition, sacrifice is not strictly ritualistic any more but it becomes wider to also describe an inner act of sacrifice.

Furthermore, in accordance to the idea of personal responsibility which is concomitant to the idea of afterlife, sacrifice becomes a more personal task. Unlike the old societies where people can achieve immortality as a team (sacrifice is performed by all the members of the community and life-power is released for the whole group), in monotheist religions earning eternal life -although only possible through the Grace of God- is the outcome of a personal struggle. Modern believers may still try to reach the invisible from within a 'sacred' community or through the intercession of a sacred person but they can earn paradise only through personal contact. Even in the case that an individual cannot be saved except in a group (e.g. church), the group cannot save the individual. Especially in Islam where there is no

---

[3] Similar customs to those of the past communities Becker describes can also be observed in modern day Eastern societies where people have a circular perception of time and offer gifts to their ancestors so that they are given good health and life.

salvation history (as the concept of the original sin is practically missing), salvation is a totally personal matter[4].

Again in line with the divine promise of the hereafter, whilst among the ancient societies the motive for every act of sacrifice is fear of death, in Abraham's case the element of fear is missing. In contrast to his people who sacrifice for fear of death, Abraham's readiness to sacrifice springs from certainty of life as he is fully convinced that to earn immortality he does not need fake objects of transference. By sacrificing, early man takes power; through the sacrifice of his son, Abraham purifies himself of any claims to power, accepts the human limitations and submits to God.

Comparing sacrifice in the three monotheistic religions, we find that in contrast to Islamic sacrifice, sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity has been given more than anything else a redemptive or atoning/propitiatory value. Two examples will suffice to illustrate the point; firstly, in Christianity God Himself is sacrificed so that those who believe in Him may obtain eternal life and secondly, since early Judaism, on the Day of Atonement the high priest would offer up a blood offering to atone for his and his people's sins[5]. On the contrary, the only redemptive power that sacrifice in Islam appears to have refers to missed or half finished rituals[6]. In other words, offering an animal sacrifice is one of the two prescribed ways (the other being giving money to the poor) that a Muslim may compensate for having missed or having failed

---

[4] Among other qur'anic verses that make mention to the doctrine of personal responsibility are Q.2:134, 141.

[5] See, for example, Leviticus 16 and Numbers 29.

[6] See Q.2:196, 6:95; An unsuccessful attempt at proving the atoning character of Islamic sacrifice was made about six decades ago by Samuel Zwemer. Not being able to provide solid evidence to support his thesis, the author pointlessly tries to convince the reader of the presence in Islam of the notion of priesthood. He keeps going back to the atoning character of Jewish and Christian sacrifice and mentions other authors, who supposedly give examples of the atoning value of Islamic sacrifice in their own work that he, however, does not quote to support his case. Samuel M. Zwemer, 'Atonement by Blood Sacrifice in Islam' in *The Moslem World*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (1946), pp. 189-92.

to complete a ritual. Again, as far as the meaning of sacrifice is concerned, it seems that the notion of the 'original sin' is very important because while in Christianity where there is salvation history sacrifice has an atoning character, in Islam sacrifice is a renewed act of submission.

Isaac's sacrifice in particular, has been linked both in Christian and later Judaic traditions, as Yvonne Sherwood demonstrates, to the idea of atoning blood and fertile death- death that has the power to produce life. To be more specific, in Christianity, Jesus is seen as the new but greater Isaac who -unlike the Genesis Isaac- dies and rises again. The blood of Jesus (who is now both the son and the redeeming lamb) is said -according to different Christian theologies- to bring new life. Similarly, midrashic Judaism, through traditions that refer to 'the ashes of Isaac', or the substitute ram that is also called 'Isaac', make it possible for Isaac to die or for Isaac to die and live at the same time or -according to another tradition- for Isaac to lose a fourth of his blood on the altar and thus, experience some kind of death or at least be wounded. Here, again, death or quasi-death is imperative because 'by the merit [or blood/ash] of Isaac who offered himself upon the altar, the Holy One Blessed be He will in future resurrect the dead'[7].

Following her observation that according to Christian and midrashic theology resurrection was founded on the redemptive death of Jesus/Isaac, Sherwood draws our attention to the Islamic version of the sacrifice story from which the idea of 'the

---

[7] *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, 32, 200a, cited in Sherwood, 'Binding-Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the "Sacrifice" of Abraham's Beloved Son', p. 837; Sherwood's observation on the nature of Jesus' and midrashic Isaac's sacrificial blood enables us to notice a striking parallel between the theology of Isaac's sacrifice in later Judaism and Christianity, and the rationale behind ancient sacrifice; the analogy refers to the power that the sacrificial blood has to secure or produce ample life for a certain community - only in the case of Isaac and Jesus, the kind of life that is generated is of a more permanent nature so that there is no need for the renewal of life through repetition of the initial act of sacrifice by another member of the community.

[Abraham's] seed that by dying, germinates'[8] is missing. Because even when the victim's blood is mentioned in a tradition where Ishmael is said to have been 'most generous with his blood'[9], the only purpose it serves is to emphasise that one's blood or life is the most that one may offer, for the kind of blood that is unrelated to death or wounds is 'unproductive'[10]. Based on the fact that Islam has not embraced the logic whereby sacrificial death has the power to release life[11], the author jumps to the conclusion that the *dhabīḥ* verses bear no relation to the idea of resurrection except for the fact that they are included in a sura that talks about the righteous who will obtain paradise. In this sura, the sacrificial son and his father are simply part of a long chain of prophets who having surrendered to God were granted eternal life in paradise- a reward that is waiting for all those who follow their example. On the basis of this interpretation, the author naturally concludes that the role of the *dhabīḥ* is far less significant than the role of Jesus or midrashic Isaac[12].

It is true that in the various versions of Abraham's sacrifice that appear in the Islamic tradition the *dhabīḥ* never dies as it is true that he never gets wounded, at least not -as Sherwood puts it- 'productively'. Likewise, one may say for certain that in the case of qur'anic Abraham, the act of sacrifice (as opposed to its weighty message) benefits no one but him. However, contrary to Sherwood's statement that the qur'anic story of sacrifice is not related to the idea of resurrection, I hope I have shown that the sacrifice ayas are precisely about the belief in the message of resurrection.

---

[8] Sherwood, *ibid.*, p. 841.
[9] Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, Vol. 3, p. 350 on the authority of Ka'b al-Qurazi, cited in Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, p. 141 and quoted in Sherwood, *ibid.*, p. 840.
[10] Sherwood, *ibid.*, pp. 839-40.
[11] It should be noted at this point that although in Shi'a folk religion, martyrdom or intercession of a martyr can be redemptive, the idea does not originate in the Qur'an but rather in the Karbala martyrdom (680 AD).
[12] Sherwood, 'Binding-Unbinding', pp. 839-41.

Further investigation into the differences between sacrifice in Islam, Christianity and Judaism would be outside the scope of this study. However, should we now attempt to deal with the question that has arisen out of Becker's theory, i.e. whether or not sacrifice is still deemed as the only means to everlasting life among the people who represent the religious domain, as far as monotheism is concerned, we may answer in the affirmative. For either as a single powerful act undertaken by one holy figure (Jesus, an Imam in Shi'a folk religion) or as a ritual that is constantly repeated by a group of people (Holy Communion), sacrifice seems to be the passport to paradise. In Islam, as the sacrifice ayas suggest, to sacrifice your idols, that is to stop relying on anything and anyone except for God is the only way to attain bliss in the hereafter. But even in its ritualistic form, as an integral part of the Hajj- one of the five Islamic pillars, sacrifice is an essential part of what makes a real *muslim* and, by extension, a *muslim's* passport to everlasting life.

***Epilogue***

Having proposed my own interpretation to the sacrifice ayas and given my reasons for disagreeing with Delaney as to why a religious script per se cannot trigger corruption no matter what its socio-historical context might be, I cannot overlook the fact that there *have* been cases of political misuse of the Abrahamic narrative and the tradition that has evolved around it.

A striking example[1] relates to the fieldwork of another contemporary anthropologist, Combs-Schilling. The latter refers to the innovation that three hundred years ago the Alawi dynasty in Morocco made in the performance of the annual sacrifice ritual; instead of each household head slaughtering a ram, from then

---

[1] Also used by Delaney, *Abraham on Trial*, p. 181.

onwards, the blood-descendant ruler would sacrifice a ram on behalf of the Muslim community as a whole. This novelty, the author maintains, has managed to reinforce monarchy in a very skilful manner for the moment that he slaughters the ram, the monarch becomes the intermediary between the community (who demonstrate their faith) and God (who in turn grants His favor). In other words, the monarch becomes the means by which sacred power is transmitted to earth[2]. What is more, during the ritual 'the identity of the king is intermingled with that of the household heads…For individual heads of households to undercut the authority of the overarching ruler would be to undercut their own power base'[3].

A recent example of manipulation of the story is the allusion to Abraham's sacrifice in two al-Qaeda letters which aimed at inspiring the perpetrators of the 9/11 tragedy. The first of these two letters made public by the FBI is the plan of a 'raid' which although uses modern terms such as 'passports' and 'taxis' is imaginatively set in Medina of the prophet's time. Among other calculations, the plotter/s consider/s the possibility of a passenger 'counterattack', in which case, the following advice is given: 'If God grants (manna) any one of you a slaughter, a dhabaha, you should perform it as an offering on behalf of your father and mother...'[4]. Should there be any doubts about the connotations of the above exhortation, another letter, Muhammad Atta's will, urges the members of his family and everyone who reads his letter, to 'do what Ibrahim ... told his son to do, to die as a good Muslim.'[5]

Fortunately, the paradigm of Abraham has not only been abused to exploit and divide people but it has also been recalled in order to bring harmony among followers

---

[2] Combs-Schilling, *Sacred Performances: Islam, Sexuality, and Sacrifice*, pp. 222-23.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 252.
[4] Quoted in Sherwood, 'Binding-Unbinding', p. 823 (the online translation of the letters that Sherwood consulted is now unavailable).
[5] Cited in Sherwood, *ibid.*, p. 824.

of different religions. In the field of inter-faith dialogue Abraham has lately been the figure to focus on, when a common basis among the three monotheistic religions is been searched. Here are some suggestions of how the Abrahamic paradigm can be positively interpreted to bring out the opposite to the aforementioned results.

To start with a textual analysis, Doukhan argues for the interpretation of the sacrifice ayas as 'an eloquent appeal for dialogue'[6]. The author observes that the structure of the sacrifice passage in the Qur'an is a chiastic one (like the structure of the biblical version) which consists of A B C B1 A1 and notes that same as in the biblical version, the longest verse in the qur'anic story is the dialogue between father and son which is set in the centre of the passage and is framed by certain expressions in order to be emphasized. In the Qur'an these expressions are *fa- lamma* (and when) and the word 'we' before the dialogue starts and after it ends[7].

'A "we" (of God), v. 102
B "and when", v. 103
C dialogue: Abraham with the son, v.103
B1 "and when," v. 104
A1 "we" (of God), vv. 105-112' [8]

The author deduces from the above that both the structure of the biblical and the qur'anic versions of the sacrifice reveal that the emphasis is neither on the identity of the victim nor on the theological meaning of the episode nor on the solution of the drama but rather on the 'human questions and silences of the victims'[9]. In the qur'anic passage we have '...A question from Abraham to his son, "What do you

---

[6] Doukhan, 'The Akedah at the "Crossroad": its Significance in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue' p. 174.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 173.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 174.

think?" A question from the son to God, implied by in shā'aLlah ('God willing')…A silence of both of them in the phrase, "They both submitted" (v.103)'"[10].

In a study that looks at the figure of Abraham as the potential starting point for reconciliation between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Kuschel refers to the journey that the Egyptian president made to Jerusalem, in a peace mission, after decades of bloody conflicts between Egypt and Israel. On 20 November 1977, in the speech he delivered addressing the Knesset (the Israeli parliament), Anwar el-Sadat pointed at Abraham '...the ancestor of the Arabs and the Jews, the servant of God, who sacrificed his own son, not out of weakness but out of tremendous spiritual strength and of his own free will. In this way he personified a fixed and unshakable belief in ideals which have had great significance for humankind'[11].

A dissimilar but still positive interpretation is given by Guthrie who notes that 'The faith of Abraham was willing to sacrifice "things" for the sake of a relationship' [i.e. to be the friend of God][12]. Abraham was a man who was ready to abandon the safety that his father and community provided him with and leave tradition behind in order to look for something higher. For this reason, his story can be seen as a break

---

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 173.

[11] Anwar el-Sadat, Unterwegs zur Gerechtigkeit. *Auf der Suche nach Identität: die Geschichte meines Lebens* (Vienna and Munich, 1978), pp. 381 and 384 cited in Kuschel, *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims*, p. 239; the flaw in Kuschel's study is that although he addresses the adherents of all three religions and talks about inter-religious dialogue, to make his point he often takes into consideration only the Genesis rendition of the Abraham story and assumes agreement on the Muslims' side (see e.g. chapter B.III. 3&4). Also, in my opinion, the author minimizes the chances of Muslims considering his points as he openly speaks of the Qur'an as the making of Muhammad (e.g. p. 151); see also Levenson's criticism of Kuschel's book. Levenson, likewise, notes Kuschel's preference for the Genesis account of the Abrahamic legend as well as the latter's disregard for the image of Abraham in rabbinic Judaism, the New Testament and the Qur'an. He argues that Kuschel wishes to bring the devotees of the three Abrahamic religions to dialogue by asking them all to compromise on their faith. Jon D. Levenson, 'The Conversion of Abraham to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam' in Hindy Najman and H. Judith Newman (eds), *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2004), pp. 37-38.

[12] Guthrie, 'The Significance of Abraham', p. 119.

from nationalism which is using religion as a political weapon, and other 'idols of the mind'.[13]

Finally, Van Biema in *The Legacy of Abraham*[14] talks about the similarities and differences in the way that the common patriarch is portrayed in Judaism, Christianity and Islam as well as the possibility of reconciliation between the members of the three monotheistic religions through dialogue that has Abraham as a point of reference. His article ends with the legend of Isaac's wish: when God promises Isaac to grant him a wish as a reward for willingly accepting to be sacrificed, Isaac asks for the forgiveness of all the people who believe in God[15].

---

[13] *Ibid.*
[14] Van Biema, 'The Legacy of Abraham'.
[15] For the full two versions of the story, see 2.3.2.

## APPENDIX A

**Qur'anic References on Abraham: Juxtaposition of Two English Translations (Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Asad)**

**Medina Suras**[1]**:**

| **A. Y. Ali:** | **M. Asad:** |
|---|---|
| **Q.2:122-141**: *122*. O children of Israel! Call to mind the special offer which I bestowed upon you, and that I preferred you to all others (for my message). | *122*. O children of Israel! Remember those blessings of Mine with which I graced you, and how I favoured you above all other people; |
| *123*. Then guard yourselves against a day when one soul shall not avail another, nor shall compensation be accepted from her nor shall intercession profit her nor shall anyone be helped (from outside). | *123*. and remain conscious of (the coming of) a day when no human being shall in the least avail another, nor shall ransom be accepted from any of them, nor shall intercession be of any use to them, and none shall be succoured. |
| *124*. And remember that **Abraham** was tried by his Lord with certain commands, which he fulfilled: He said: "I will make thee an imam to the nations." He pleaded: "And also (imams) from my offspring!" He answered: "But my promise is not within the reach of evil-doers." | *124*. And (remember this:) when his Sustainer tried **Abraham** by (His) commandments and the latter fulfilled them, He said: "Behold, I shall make thee a leader of men." **Abraham** asked: "And (wilt Thou make leaders) of my offspring as well?" (God) answered: "My covenant does not embrace the evildoers." |
| *125*. Remember We made the House a place of assembly for men and a place of safety; and take ye the station of **Abraham** as a place of prayer; and We covenanted with **Abraham** and Isma'il, that they should sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or use it as a retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein in prayer). | *125*. And lo! We made the Temple a goal to which people might repair again and again, and a sanctuary: take, then, the place whereon **Abraham** once stood as your place of prayer. And thus did We command **Abraham** and Ismael: "Purify My Temple for those who will walk around it, and those who will abide near it in meditation, and those who will bow down and prostrate themselves (in |

[1] A sura is not always compiled solely by ayas revealed either in Mecca or Medina. In this appendix, the Meccan suras are those that were revealed for the most part in Mecca and the Medina suras are those that were revealed for the most part in Medina.

prayer)."

*126.* And remember **Abraham** said: "My Lord, make this a city of peace, and feed its people with fruits, -such of them as believe in God and the Last Day." He said: "(Yea), and such as reject faith, - for a while will I grant them their pleasure, but will soon drive them to the torment of fire, - an evil destination (indeed)!"

*126.* And. Lo, **Abraham** prayed: "O my Sustainer! Make this a land secure, and grant its people fruitful sustenance- such of them as believe in God and the Last Day." (God) answered: "And whoever shall deny the truth him will I let enjoy himself for a short while- but in the end I shall drive him to suffering through fire: and how vile a journey's end!"

*127.* And remember **Abraham** and Isma'il raised the foundations of the House (with this prayer): "Our Lord! Accept (this service) from us: for thou art the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.

*127.* And when **Abraham** and Ishmael were raising the foundations of the Temple, (they prayed): "O our Sustainer! Accept Thou this from us: for verily, Thou alone art all-hearing,

*128.* Our Lord! Make of us Muslims, bowing to Thy (Will), and of our progeny a people Muslim, bowing to Thy (Will); and show us our places for the celebration of (due) rites; and turn unto us (in Mercy); for thou art the Oft-Returning, Most Merciful.

*128.* O our Sustainer! Make us surrender ourselves unto Thee, and make out of our offspring a community that shall surrender itself unto Thee, and show us our ways of worship, and accept our repentance: for, verily, Thou alone art the Acceptor of Repentance, the Dispenser of Grace!

*129.* Our Lord! Send amongst them an apostle of their own, who shall rehearse Thy signs to them and instruct them in scripture and wisdom, and sanctify them: for Thou art the Exalted in Might, the Wise."

*129.* O our Sustainer! Raise up from the midst of our offspring an apostle from among themselves, who shall convey unto them Thy messages, and impart unto them revelation as well as wisdom, and cause them to grow in purity: for, verily, Thou alone art almighty, truly wise!"

*130.* And who turns away from the religion of **Abraham** but such as debase their souls with folly? Him We chose and rendered pure in this world: and he will be in the hereafter in the ranks of the righteous.

*130.* And who, unless he be weak of mind, would want to abandon **Abraham's** creed, seeing that We have indeed raised him high in this word, and that, verily, in the life to come he shall be among the righteous?

*131.* Behold! His Lord said to him: "Bow (thy will to Me):" He said: "I bow (my

*131.* When his Sustainer said to him, "Surrender thyself unto Me!" –he

will) to the Lord and Cherisher of the Universe."

answered, "I have surrendered myself unto (Thee), the Sustainer of all the worlds."

*132.* And this was the legacy that **Abraham** left to his sons, and so did Jacob; "Oh my sons! God hath chosen the faith for you; then die not except in the faith of Islam."

132. And this very thing did **Abraham** bequeath unto his children, and (so did) Jacob: "O my children! Behold, God has granted you the purest faith; so do not allow death to overtake you ere you have surrendered yourselves unto Him."

*133.* Were ye witnesses when death appeared before Jacob? Behold, he said to his sons: "What will ye worship after me?" They said: "We shall worship Thy God and the God of Thy fathers, of **Abraham**, Isma'il, and Isaac, the One (True) God: to Him we bow (in Islam)."

*133.* Nay, but you (yourselves, O children of Israel), bear witness that when death was approaching Jacob, he said unto his sons: "Whom will you worship after I am gone?" They answered: "We will worship thy God, the God of thy forefathers **Abraham** and Ishmael and Isaac, the One God; and unto Him will we surrender ourselves."

*134.* That was a people that hath passed away. They shall reap the fruit of what they did, and ye of what ye do! Of their merits there is no question in your case!

*134.* Now those people have passed away; unto them shall be accounted what they have earned, and unto you, what you have earned; and you will not be

*135.* They say: "Become Jews or Christians if ye would be guided (to salvation)." Say thou: Nay! (I would rather) the religion of **Abraham** the true, and he joined not gods with God."

*135.* And they say, "be Jews"-or, "Christians"-"and you shall be on the right path." Say: "Nay, but (ours is) the creed of **Abraham**, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God"

*136.* Say ye: "We believe in God, and the revelation given to us, and to **Abraham**, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them: and we bow to God (in Islam)."

*136.* Say: "We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon **Abraham** and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed to Moses and Jesus, and that which has been vouchsafed to all the (other) prophets by their Sustainer: we make no distinction between any of them. And it is unto Him that we surrender

ourselves."

*137.* So if they believe as ye believe, they are indeed on the right path; but if they turn back, it is they who are in schism; but God will suffice thee as against them, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing

*137.* And if (others) come to believe in the way you believe, they will indeed find themselves on the right path; and if they turn away, it is but they who will be deeply in the wrong, and God will protect thee from them: for He alone is all-hearing, all-knowing.

*138.* (Our religion is) the baptism of God: and who can baptize better than God? And it is He Whom we worship

*138.* (Say: "Our life takes its) hue from God! And who would give a better hue (to life) than God, if we but truly worship Him?"

*139.* Say: Will ye dispute with us about God, seeing that He is our Lord and your Lord; that we are responsible for our doings and ye for yours; and that we are sincere (in our faith) in Him?

*139.* Say (to the Jews and the Christians): "Do you argue with us about God? But He is our Sustainer as well as your Sustainer-and unto us shall be accounted our deeds, and unto you, your deeds; and it is unto Him alone that we devote ourselves.

*140.* Or do ye say that **Abraham**, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes were Jews or Christians? Say: Do ye know better than God? Ah! Who is more unjust than those who conceal the testimony they have from God? But God is not unmindful of what ye do!

*140.* Do you claim that **Abraham** and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants were "Jews" or "Christians"? Say: "Do you know more than God does? And who could be more wicked than he who suppresses a testimony given to him by God? Yet God is not unmindful of what you do.

*141.* That was a people that hath passed away. They shall reap the fruit of what they did, and ye of what ye do! Of their merits there is no question in your case.

*141.* "Now those people have passed away; unto them shall be accounted what they have earned, and unto you, what you have earned; and you will not be judged on the strength of what they did."

**258.** Hast thou not turned thy vision to one who disputed with **Abraham** about his Lord, because God had granted him power? **Abraham** said: "My Lord is He Who Giveth life and death." He said: "I give life and death." Said **Abraham**:

**258.** Art thou not aware of that (king) who argued with **Abraham** about his Sustainer, (simply) because God had granted him kingship? Lo! **Abraham** said: "My Sustainer is He who grants life and deals death." (The king) replied: "I

"But it is God that causeth the sun to rise from the East: Do thou then cause him to rise from the West." Thus was he confounded who (in arrogance) rejected faith. Nor doth God give guidance to a people unjust.

(too) grant life and deal death!" Said **Abraham**: "Verily, God causes the sun to rise in the east; cause it, then, to rise in the west!" Thereupon he who was bent on denying the truth remained dumbfounded: for God does not guide people who (deliberately) do wrong.

**260**. Behold! **Abraham** said: "My Lord! Show me how Thou givest life to the dead." He said: "Dost thou not

then believe?" He said: Yea! But to satisfy my own understanding." He said: "Take four birds; tame them to turn to thee; put a portion of them on every hill, and call to them: they will come to thee (flying) with speed. Then know that God is Exalted in Power, Wise."

**260.** And, lo, **Abraham** said: "O my Sustainer! Show me how Thou givest life unto the dead!" Said He: "Hast thou, then, no faith?" (**Abraham**) answered: "Yea, but (let me see it) so that my heart may be set fully at rest." Said He: "Take, then, four birds and teach them to obey thee; then place them separately on every hill (around thee); then summon them: they will come flying to thee. And know that God is almighty, wise."

**Q.3:33-34:** *33*. God did choose Adam and Noah, the family of **Abraham**, and the family of 'Imran above all people, - *34***.** offspring, one of the other: and God heareth and knoweth all things.

**Q.3:33-34:** *33*. Behold, God raised Adam, and Noah, and the House of **Abraham**, and the House of Imran above all mankind, *34*. in one line of descent. And God was all-hearing, all-knowing.

**65-68.** *65*. Ye People of the Book! Why dispute ye about **Abraham**, when the Law and the Gospel were not revealed till after him? Have ye no understanding?

**65-68.** *65*. O Followers of the earlier revelation! Why do you argue about **Abraham**, seeing that the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed till (long) after him? Will you not, then, use your reason?

*66*. Ah! Ye are those who fell to disputing (even) in matters of which ye had some knowledge! But why dispute ye in matters of which ye have no knowledge? It is Allah who knows and ye who know not!

66. Lo! You are the ones who would argue about that which is known to you; but why do you argue about something which is unknown to you? Yet God knows (it), whereas you do not know:

*67***. Abraham** was not a Jew nor yet a Christian; But he was true in faith, and bowed his will to God's, (which is Islam), and he joined not gods with God. *68*. Without doubt, among men, the nearest of kin to **Abraham**, are those who follow him, as are also this Apostle and those

*67*. **Abraham** was neither a "Jew" nor a "Christian", but was one of who turned away from all that is false, having surrendered himself to God; and he was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him. *68*. Behold, the people who have the best claim to **Abraham** are

who believe: and God is the Protector of those who have faith.

surely those who follow him- as does this prophet and all who believe (in him)- and God is near unto the believers.

**84.** Say: "We believe in God, and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to **Abraham**, Isma'il; Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, and in (the Books) given to Moses, Jesus, and the prophets, from their Lord: we make no distinction between one and another among them, and to God do we bow our will (in Islam)."

**84. Say:** Say: "We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon **Abraham** and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed by their Sustainer unto Moses and Jesus and all the (other) prophets: we make no distinction between any of them. And unto Him do we surrender ourselves."

**95.** Say: "God speaketh the truth: follow the religion of **Abraham**, the sane in faith; he was not of the pagans."

**95.** Say: "God has spoken the truth: follow, then, the creed of **Abraham**, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God."

**97.** In it [Ka'ba][2] are signs manifest; (for example), the station of **Abraham**; whoever enters it attains security; pilgrimage thereto is a duty men owe to God,- those who can afford the journey; but if any deny faith, God stands not in need of any of His creatures.

**97.** full of clear messages. (It is) the place whereon **Abraham** once stood; and whosoever enters it finds inner peace. Hence, pilgrimage unto the Temple is a duty owed to God by all people who are able to undertake it. And as for those who deny the truth, verily, God does not stand in need of anything in all the worlds.

**Q.4:54:** Or do they envy mankind for what God hath given them of his bounty? But We had already given the people of **Abraham** the Book and wisdom, and conferred upon them a great kingdom.

**Q.4:54:** Do they, perchance, envy other people for what God has granted them out of His bounty? But then, We did grant revelation and wisdom unto the House of **Abraham**, and We did bestow on them a mighty dominion

**125:** Who can be better in religion than one who submits his whole self to God, does good, and follows the way of

**125:** And who could be of better faith than he who surrenders his whole being unto God and is a doer of good withal,

---

[2] The explanatory notes in the square brackets are mine.

**Abraham** the true in faith? For God did take **Abraham** for a friend.

and follows the creed of **Abraham**, who turned away from all that is false-seeing that God exalted **Abraham** with His love?

**163:** We have send thee Inspiration, as We sent it to Noah and the Messengers after him: We sent Inspiration to **Abraham**, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes, to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms.

**163:** Behold, We have inspired thee (O prophet) just as We inspired Noah and all the prophets after him-as We inspired **Abraham**, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendants, including Jesus and Job, and Jonah, and Aaron, and Solomon; and as We vouchsafed unto David a book of divine wisdom;

**Q.9:70:** Hath not the story reached them of those before them? -The people of Noah, and 'Ad, and Thamūd; the people of **Abraham**, the men of Midian, and the cities overthrown. To them came their apostles with clear signs. It is not God Who wrongs them, but they wrong their own souls.

**Q.9:70:** Have, then, the stories of those who preceded them never come within the ken of these (hypocrites and deniers of the truth)? - (the stories) of Noah's people, and of (the tribes of) 'Ad and Thamūd, and of **Abraham's** people, and of the folk of Madyan, and of the cities that were overthrown? To (all of) them their apostles had come with all evidence of the truth, (but they rejected them) and so it was not God who wronged them (by His punishment), but it was they who wronged themselves.

**114:** And **Abraham** prayed for his father's forgiveness only because of a promise he had made to him. But when it became clear to him that he was an enemy to God, he dissociated himself from him: for **Abraham** was most tender-hearted, forbearing.

**114:** And **Abraham's** prayer that his father be forgiven was due to a promise which he had given the latter (in his lifetime); but when it was made clear unto him that he had been God's enemy (**Abraham**) disavowed him- (although), behold, **Abraham** was most tender-hearted, most clement.

**Q.33:7-8:** *7.* And remember We took from the prophets their covenant: as (We did) from thee: from Noah, **Abraham**, Moses, and Jesus the son of Mary: We took from them a solemn covenant: *8.* that (God) may question the (custodians) of truth concerning the truth they (were charged with): and He has prepared for the unbelievers a grievous penalty.

**Q.33:7-8:** *7.* And lo! We did accept a solemn pledge from all the prophets-from thee, (O Muhammad), as well as from Noah, and **Abraham**, and Moses, and Jesus the son of Mary-: for We accepted a most weighty, solemn pledge from (all of) them, *8.* so that (at the end of time) He might ask those men of truth as to (what response) their truthfulness (had

received on earth). And grievous suffering has He readied for all who deny the truth!

**Q.57:26:** And We sent Noah and **Abraham**, and established in their line prophethood and revelation: and some of them were on right guidance, but many of them became rebellious transgressors

**Q.57:26:** And, indeed, (to the same end) We sent forth Noah and **Abraham** (as Our message-bearers), and established prophethood and revelation among their descendants; and some of them were on the right way, but many were iniquitous.

**Q.60:4-6:** *4.* There is for you an excellent example (to follow) in **Abraham** and those with him, when they said to their people: "We are clear of you and of whatever ye worship besides God: we have rejected you, and there has arisen, between us and you, enmity and hatred for ever,-unless ye believe in God and Him alone": But not when **Abraham** said to his father: "I will pray for forgiveness for thee, though I have no power (to get) aught on thy behalf from God." (They prayed): "Our Lord! In Thee do we trust, and to Thee do we turn in repentance: to Thee is (our) final goal. *5.* Our Lord! Make us not a (test and) trial for the unbelievers, but forgive us, our Lord! For Thou art the Exalted in Might, the Wise." *6.* There was indeed in them an excellent example for you to follow, -for those whose hope is in God and in the Last Day. But if any turn away, truly God is free from all wants, Worthy of all Praise.

**Q.60:4-6:** *4.* Indeed, you have had a good example in **Abraham** and those who followed him, when they said unto their (idolatrous) people: "Verily, we are quit of you and of all that you worship instead of God: we deny the truth of whatever you believe; and between us and you there has arisen enmity and hatred, to last until such a time as you come to believe in the One God!" The only exception was **Abraham's** saying to his father, "I shall pray for (God's) forgiveness for thee, although I have it not in my power to obtain anything from God in thy behalf." (And **Abraham** and his followers prayed): "O our Sustainer! In Thee have we placed our trust, and unto Thee do we turn: for unto Thee is all journeys' end. *5.* O our Sustainer! Make us not a plaything for those who are bent on denying the truth! And forgive our sins, O our Sustainer: for Thou alone art almighty, truly wise!" *6.* In them, indeed, you have a good example for everyone who looks forward (with hope and awe) to God and the Last Day. And if any turns away, (let him know that) God is truly self-sufficient, the One to whom all praise is due.

**Mecca Suras:**

**Q.6:74-84:** *74.* Lo! **Abraham** said to his father Azar: "Takest thou idols for gods? For I see thee and thy people in manifest error." But when the sun set, he said: "O my people! I am indeed free from your

**Q.6:74-84:** *74.* And, lo, (thus) spoke **Abraham** unto his father Azar: "Takest thou idols for gods? Verily, I see that thou and thy people have obviously gone

(guilt) of giving partners to God.

astray!"

*75.* So also did We show **Abraham** the power and the laws of the heavens and the earth, that he might (with understanding) have certitude

*75.* And thus We gave **Abraham** (his first) insight into (God's) mighty dominion over the heavens and the earth- and (this) to the end that he might become one of those who are inwardly sure.

*76.* When the night covered him over, he saw a star: He said: "This is my Lord." But when it set, He said: "I love not those that set."

*76.* Then, when the night overshadowed him with its darkness, he beheld a star; (and) he exclaimed, "This is my Sustainer!"- but when it went down, he said, "I love not the things that go down."

*77.* When he saw the moon rising in splendour, he said: "This is my Lord." But when the moon set, he said: "Unless my Lord guide me, I shall surely be among those who go astray."

*77.* Then, when he beheld the moon rising, he said, "This is my Sustainer!"- but when it went down, he said, "Indeed, if my Sustainer guide me not, I will most certainly become one of the people who go astray!"

*78.* When he saw the sun rising in splendour, he said: "This is my Lord; this is the greatest (of all)." But when the sun set, he said: "O my people! I am indeed free from your (guilt) of giving partners to Allah."

*78.* Then, when he beheld the sun rising, he said, "This is my Sustainer! This one is the greatest (of all)!"-but when it (too) went down, he exclaimed: "O my people! Behold, far be it from me to ascribe divinity, as you do, to aught beside God!

*79.* For me, I have set my face, firmly and truly, towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth, and never shall I give partners to God.

*79.* Behold, unto Him who brought into being the heavens and the earth have I turned my face, having turned away from all that is false; and I am not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him."

*80.* His people disputed with him. He said; "(come) ye to dispute with me, about God, when He (Himself) hath guided me? I fear not (the beings) ye associate with God: unless my Lord willeth, (nothing can happen). My Lord comprehendeth in his knowledge all

*80.* And his people argued with him. He said: "Do you argue with me about God, when it is He who had guided me? But I do not fear anything to which you ascribe divinity side by side with Him, (for no evil can befall me) unless my Sustainer so wills. All things does my Sustainer

things. Will ye not (yourselves) be admonished?

embrace within His knowledge; will you not, then, keep this in mind?

*81*. How should I fear (the beings) ye associate with God, when ye fear not to give partners to God without any warrant having been given to you? Which of (us) two parties hath more right to security? (Tell me) if ye know

*81*. And why should I fear anything that you worship side by side with Him, seeing that you are not afraid of ascribing divinity to other powers beside God without His ever having bestowed upon you from on high any warrant therefore? (tell me), then, which of the two parties has a better right to feel secure- if you happen to know (the answer)?

*82*. It is those who believe and confuse not their beliefs with wrong- that are (truly) in security, for they are on (right) guidance."

*82*. Those who have attained to faith, and who have not obscured their faith by wrongdoing -it is they who shall be secure, since it is they who have found the right path!"

. *83*. That was the reasoning about Us, which We gave to **Abraham** (to use) against his people: We raise whom We will, degree after degree: for thy Lord is full of wisdom and knowledge.

83. And this was Our argument which We vouchsafed unto **Abraham** against his people: (for) We do raise by degrees whom We will. Verily, thy Sustainer is wise, all-knowing.

*84*. We gave him Isaac and Jacob: all (three) We guided: and before him, We guided Noah, and among his progeny, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, and Aaron: thus do We reward those who do good:

84. And We bestowed upon him Isaac and Jacob; and We guided each of them as We had guided Noah aforetime. And out of his offspring, (We bestowed prophethood upon) David, and Solomon, and Job, and Joseph, and Moses, and Aaron: for thus do We reward the doers of good;

**161:** Say: "Verily, my Lord hath guided me to a way that is straight, -a religion of right, - the path (trod) by **Abraham** the true in faith, and he (certainly) joined not gods with God".

**161:** Say: "Behold, my Sustainer has guided me onto a straight way through an ever-true faith- the way of **Abraham**, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him."

**Q.11:69-76:** *69*. There came Our messengers to **Abraham** with glad tidings. They said, "peace!" He answered,

**Q.11:69-76:** *69*. And, indeed, there came to **Abraham** Our (heavenly) messengers, bearing a glad tiding. They bade him

"peace!" and hastened to entertain them with a roasted calf.

peace; (and) he answered, "(and upon you be) peace!"- and made haste to place before them a roasted calf.

*70*. But when he saw their hands went not towards the (meal), he felt some mistrust of them, and conceived a fear of them. They said: "Fear not: we have been sent against the people of Lūt."

*70*. But when he saw that their hands did not reach out towards it, he deemed their conduct strange and became apprehensive of them. (But) they said: "Fear not! Behold, we are sent to the people of Lot."

*71*. And his wife was standing (there),

and she laughed: but We gave her glad tidings of Isaac, and after him, of Jacob.

*71*. And his wife, standing (nearby), laughed (with happiness); whereupon We gave her the glad tiding of (the birth of) Isaac and, after Isaac, of (his son) Jacob.

*72*. She said: "Alas for me! Shall I bear a child, seeing I am an old woman, and my husband here is an old man? That would indeed be a wonderful thing!"

*72*. Said she: "Oh, woe is me! Shall I bear a child, now that I am an old woman and this husband of mine is an old man? Verily, that would be a strange thing indeed!"

*73*. They said: "Dost thou wonder at God's decree? The grace of God and His blessings on you, O ye people of the house! For He is indeed Worthy of all praise, Full of glory!"

*73*. Answered (the messengers):" Dost thou deem it strange that God should decree what He wills? The grace of God and His blessings be upon you, O people of this house! Verily, ever to be praised, sublime is He!"

*74*. When fear had passed from (the mind of) **Abraham** and the glad tidings had reached him, he began to plead with Us for Lūt's people.

*74*. And when the fear had left **Abraham**, and the glad tiding had been conveyed to him, he began to plead with Us for Lot's people:

*75*. For **Abraham** was, without doubt, forbearing (of faults), compassionate, and given to look to God.

*75*. for, behold, **Abraham** was most clement, most tender-hearted, intent upon turning to God again and again.

*76*. O **Abraham**! Seek not this. The decree of thy Lord hath gone forth: for them there cometh a penalty that cannot be turned back!

*76*. (But God's messengers replied): "O **Abraham**! Desist from this (pleading)! Behold, thy Sustainer's judgment has already gone forth: and, verily, there shall fall upon them a chastisement which none

can avert!"

**Q.12:6:** "Thus will thy Lord choose thee [Joseph] and teach thee the interpretation of stories (and events) and perfect His favour to thee and to the posterity of Jacob – even as He perfected it to thy fathers **Abraham** and Isaac aforetime! For God is full of Knowledge and Wisdom."

**Q.12:6:** "For, (as thou hast been shown in thy dream), even thus will thy Sustainer elect thee, and will impart unto thee some understanding of the inner meaning of happenings, and will bestow the full measure of His blessings upon thee and upon the House of Jacob- even as, aforetime, He bestowed it in full measure upon thy forefathers **Abraham** and Isaac. Verily, thy Sustainer is all-knowing, wise!"

**38:** "And I [Joseph to the two prisoners in Egypt] follow the ways of my fathers, - **Abraham**, Isaac, and Jacob; and never could we attribute any partners whatever to God: that (comes) of the grace of God to us and to mankind: yet most men are not grateful.

**38:** and I follow the creed of my forefathers **Abraham**, Isaac and Jacob. It is not conceivable that we should (be allowed to) ascribe divinity to aught beside God: this is (an outcome) of God's bounty unto us and unto all mankind- but most people are ungrateful.

**Q.14:35-41:** *35.* Remember **Abraham** said: "O my Lord! Make this city one of peace and security: and preserve me and my sons from worshipping idols.

**Q.14:35-41:** *35.* And (remember the time) when **Abraham** spoke (thus): "O my Sustainer! Make this land secure, and preserve me and my children from ever worshipping idols

*36.* O my Lord! They have indeed led astray many among mankind; he then who follows my (ways) is of me, and he that disobeys me, - but Thou art indeed Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

*36.* for, verily, O my Sustainer, these (false objects of worship) have led many people astray! Hence, (only) he who follows me (in this my faith) is truly of me; and as for him who disobeys me - Thou art, verily, much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace!

*37.* O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring to dwell in a valley without cultivation, by Thy Sacred House; in order, O our Lord, that they may establish regular prayer: so fill the hearts of some among men with love towards them, and feed them with fruits: so that they may give thanks.

*37.* "O our Sustainer! Behold, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley in which there is no arable land, close to Thy sanctified Temple, so that, O our Sustainer, they might devote themselves to prayer: cause Thou, therefore, people's hearts to incline towards them, and grant them fruitful sustenance, so that they

might have cause to be grateful.

*38*. O our Lord! Truly Thou dost know what we conceal and what we reveal: for nothing whatever is hidden from God, whether on earth or in heaven.

*38*. O our Sustainer! Thou truly knowest all that we may hide (in our hearts) as well as all that we bring into the open: for nothing whatever, be it on earth or in heaven, remains hidden from God.

*39*. Praise be to God, Who hath granted unto me in old age Isma'il and Isaac: for truly my Lord is He, the Hearer of prayer!

*39*. All praise is due to God, who has bestowed upon me, in my old age, Ishmael and Isaac! Behold, my Sustainer hears indeed all prayer:

*40*. O my Lord! Make me one who establishes regular prayer, and also (raise such) among my offspring O our Lord! And accept Thou my prayer.

*40*. (hence), O my Sustainer, cause me an (some) of my offspring to remain constant in prayer! And, O our Sustainer, accept this my prayer:

*41*. O our Lord! Cover (us) with Thy forgiveness –me, my parents, and (all) believers, on the Day that the Reckoning will be established!

*41*. Grant Thy forgiveness unto me, and my parents, and all the believers, on the Day on which the (last) reckoning will come to past!"

**Q.15:51-60:** *51*. Tell them about the guests of **Abraham**.

**Q.15:51-60:** *51*. And tell them (once again) about **Abraham's** guests-

*52*. When they entered his presence and said, "Peace!" he said, "We feel afraid of you!"

*53*. They said: "Fear not! We give thee glad tidings of a son endowed with wisdom."

*52*. (how), when they presented themselves before him and bade him peace, he answered: "Behold, we are afraid of you!"

*53*. Said they: "Fear not! Behold, we bring thee the glad tiding of (the birth of) a son who will be endowed with deep knowledge."

*54*. He said: "Do ye give me glad tidings that old age has seized me? Of what, then, is your good news?"

*54*. Said he: "Do you give me this glad tiding despite the fact that old age has overtaken me? Of what (strange thing), then, are you giving me a tiding!"

*55*. They said: "We give thee glad tidings in truth: be not then in despair!"

*55*. They answered: "We have given thee the glad tiding of something that is bound

to come true: so be not of those who abandon hope!"

*56.* He said: "And who despairs of the mercy of his Lord, but such as go astray?"

*56.* (**Abraham**) exclaimed: "And who- other than those who have utterly lost their way- could ever abandon the hope of his Sustainer's grace?"

*57.* **Abraham** said: "What then is the business on which ye (have come), O ye messengers (of God)?"

*57.* He added: "And what (else) may you have in view, O you (heavenly) messengers?"

*58.* They said: "We have been sent to a people (deep) in sin,

*58.* They answered: "We are sent to people lost in sin (who are to be destroyed),

*59.* Excepting the adherents of Lūt: them we are certainly (charged) to save (from harm), - All-

*59.* barring Lot's household, all of whom, behold, we shall save-

*60.* Except his wife, who, we have ascertained, will be among those who will lag behind."

*60.* excepting only his wife, (of whom God says), "We have ordained (that), behold, she should be among those who stay behind!"

**Q.16:120-123:** *120.* **Abraham** was indeed a model, devoutly obedient to God, (and) true in faith, and he joined not gods with God:

**Q.16:120-123:** *120.* Verily, **Abraham** was a man who combined within himself all virtues, devoutly obeying God's will, turning away form all that is false, and not being of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God:

*121.* He showed his gratitude for the favours of God, Who chose him, and guided him to a straight way.

*121.* (for he was always) grateful for the blessings granted by Him who had elected him and guided him onto a straight way.

*122.* And We gave him good in this world, and he will be, in the hereafter, in the ranks of the righteous.

*122.* And so We vouchsafed him good in this world; and, verily, in the life to come (too) he shall find himself among the righteous.

*123*. So We have taught thee the inspired (message), "Follow the ways of **Abraham** the true in faith, and he joined not gods with God."

*123*. And lastly, We have inspired thee, (O Muhammad with this message): "Follow the creed of **Abraham**, who turned away form all that is false, and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God;

**Q.19:41-50:** *41*. (Also) mention in the Book (the story of **Abraham**): He was a man of truth, a prophet

**Q.19:41-50:** *41*.And call to mind, through this divine writ, **Abraham**. Behold, he was a man of truth, (already) a prophet

*42*. Behold, he said to his father: "O my father! Why worship that which heareth not and seeth not, and can profit thee nothing?

*42*. when he spoke (thus) unto his father: "O my father! Why dost thou worship something that neither hears or sees and can be of on avail whatever to thee?

*43*. O my father! To me hath come knowledge which hath not reached thee: so follow me: I will guide thee to a way that is even and straight.

43. O my father! Behold, there has indeed come to me (a ray) of knowledge such as has never yet come unto thee: follow me, then; I shall guide thee onto a perfect way.

*44*. O my father! Serve not Satan: for Satan is a rebel against (God) Most Gracious.

*44*. O my father! Do not worship Satan- for, verily, Satan is a rebel against the Most Gracious!

*45*. O my father! I fear lest a penalty afflict thee from (God) Most Gracious, so that thou become to Satan a friend."

*45*. O my father! I dread lest a chastisement from the Most Gracious befall thee, and then thou wilt become (aware of having been) close unto Satan!"

*46*. (The father) replied: "Dost thou hate my gods, O **Abraham**? If thou forbear not, I will indeed stone thee: now get away from me for a good long while!"

*46*. He answered: "Dost thou dislike my gods, O **Abraham**? Indeed, if thou desist not, I shall most certainly cause thee to be stoned to death! Now be gone from me for good!"

*47*. **Abraham** said: "Peace be on thee: I will pray to my Lord for thy forgiveness: for He is to me Most Gracious.

*47*. (**Abraham**) replied: "Peace be upon thee! I shall ask my Sustainer to forgive thee: for, behold, He has always been kind unto me.

*48*. And I will turn away from you (all) and from those whom ye invoke besides God: I will call on my Lord: perhaps, by my prayer to Lord, I shall be not unblest."

*48*. But I shall withdraw from you all and from whatever you invoke instead of God, and shall invoke my Sustainer (alone): it may well be that my prayer (for thee) will not remain unanswered by my Sustainer."

*49*. When he had turned away from them and from those whom they worshipped besides God, We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, and each one of them We made a prophet.

*49*. And after he had withdrawn from them and from all that they were worshipping instead of God, We bestowed upon him Isaac and Jacob, and made each of them a prophet;

*50*. And We bestowed of Our Mercy on them, and We granted them lofty honour on the tongue of truth.

*50*. and We bestowed upon them (manifold) gifts out of Our grace, and granted them a lofty power to convey the truth (unto others).

**58-59:** Those were some of the prophets on whom God did bestow His Grace, - of the posterity of Adam, and of those whom We carried (in the Ark) with Noah, and of the posterity of **Abraham** and Israel -of those whom We guided and chose. Whenever the Signs of (God) Most Gracious were rehearsed to them, they would fall down in prostrate adoration and in tears.

**58-59:** These were some of the prophets upon whom God bestowed His blessings- (prophets) of the seed of Adam and of those whom We caused to be borne (in the ark) with Noah, and of the seed of **Abraham** and Israel: and (all of them were) among those whom We guided and elected; (and) whenever the messages of the Most Gracious were conveyed unto them, they would fall down (before him), prostrating themselves and weeping.

*59*. But after them there followed a posterity who missed prayers and followed after lusts soon, then, will they face destruction,-

*59*. Yet they were succeeded by generations (of people) who lost all (thought of) prayer and followed (but) their own lusts; and these will, in time, meet with utter disillusion.

**Q.21:51-73:** *51*. We bestowed aforetime on **Abraham** his rectitude of conduct, and well were We acquainted with him.

**Q.21:51-73:** *51*. And, indeed, long before (the time of Moses) We vouchsafed unto **Abraham** his consciousness of what is right; and We were aware of (what moved) him

*52*. Behold! He said to his father and his

*52*. when he said unto his father and his

people, "What are these images, to which ye are (so assiduously) devoted?"

people, "What are these images to which you are so intensely devoted?"

*53.* They said, "We found our fathers worshipping them."

*53.* They answered: "We found our forefathers worshipping them."

*54.* He said, "Indeed ye have been in manifest error -ye and your fathers."

*54.* Said he: "Indeed, you and your forefathers have obviously gone astray!"

*55.* They said, "Have you brought us the truth, or are you one of those who jest?"

*55.* They asked: "Hast thou come unto us (with this claim) in all earnest-or art thou one of those jesters?"

*56.* He said, "Nay, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, He Who created them (from nothing): and I am a witness to this (truth).

*56.* He answered: "Nay, but your (true) Sustainer is the Sustainer of the heavens and the earth- He who has brought them into being: and I am one of those who bear witness to this (truth)!"

*57.* "And by God, I have a plan for your idols -after ye go away and turn your backs"…

*57.* And (he added to himself), "By God, I shall most certainly bring about the downfall of your idols as soon as you have turned your backs and gone away!"

*58.* So he broke them to pieces, (all) but the biggest of them, that they might turn (and address themselves) to it.

*58.* And then he broke those (idols) to pieces, (all) save the biggest of them, so that they might (be able to) turn to it.

*59.* They said, "Who has done this to our gods? He must indeed be some man of impiety!"

*59.* (When they saw what had happened), they said: "Who has done this to our gods? Verily, one of the worst wrongdoers is he!"

*60.* They said, "We heard a youth talk of them: He is called **Abraham**."

*60.* Said some (of them): "We heard a youth speak of these (gods with scorn): he is called **Abraham**."

*61.* They said, "Then bring him before the eyes of the people, that they may bear witness."

*61.* (The others) said: "Then bring him before the people's eyes, so that they might bear witness (against him)!"

*62*. They said, "Art thou the one that did this with our gods, O **Abraham**?"

*62*. (And when he came), they asked: "Hast thou done this to our gods, O **Abraham**?"

*63*. He said: "Nay, this was done by -this is their biggest one! Ask them, if they can speak intelligently!"

*63*. He answered: "Nay, it was this one, the biggest of them, that did it: but ask them (yourselves) -provided they can speak!"

*64*. So they turned to themselves and said, "surely ye are the ones in the wrong!"

*64*. And so they turned upon one another, saying, "Behold, it is you who are doing wrong."

*65*. Then were they confounded with shame: (they said), "thou knowest full well that these (idols) do not speak!"

*65*. But then they relapsed into their former way of thinking and said: "Thou knowest very well that these (idols) cannot speak!"

*66*. (**Abraham**) said, "Do ye then worship, besides God, things that can neither be of any good to you nor do you harm?

*66*. Said (**Abraham**): "Do you then worship, instead of God, something that cannot benefit you in any way, nor harm you?

*67*. "Fie upon you, and upon the things that ye worship besides God! Have ye no sense?"…

*67*. Fie upon you and upon all that you worship instead of God! Will you not, then, use your reason?"

*68*. They said, "Burn him and protect your gods, if ye do (anything at all)!"

*68*. They exclaimed: "Burn him, and (thereby) succour your gods, if you are going to do (anything)!"

*69*. We said, "O fire! Be thou cool, and (a means of) safety for **Abraham**!"

*69*. (But) We said: "O fire! Be thou cool, and (a source of) inner peace for **Abraham**!

*70*. Then they sought a stratagem against him: but We made them the ones that lost most!

*70*. and whereas they sought to do evil unto him, We caused them to suffer the greatest loss:

*71*. But We delivered him and (his

*71*. for We saved him and Lot, (his

nephew) Lūt (and directed them) to the land which We have blessed for the nations.

brother's son by guiding them) to the land which We have blessed for all times to come.

*72*. And We bestowed on him Isaac and, as an additional gift, (a grandson), Jacob, and We made righteous men of every one (of them).

*72*. And We bestowed upon him Isaac and (Isaac's son) Jacob as an additional gift, and caused all of them to be righteous men,

*73*. And We made them leaders, guiding (men) by Our command, and We sent them inspiration to do good deeds, to establish regular prayers, and to practise regular charity; and they constantly served Us (and Us only).

*73*. And made them leaders who would guide (others) in accordance with Our behest: for We inspired them (with a will) to do good works, and to be constant in prayer, and to dispense charity: and Us (alone) did they worship.

**Q.26:70-104:** *70*. And rehearse to them (something of) **Abraham's** story.–

**Q.26:69-104:** *69*. And convey unto them the story of **Abraham**- *70*. (how it was) when he asked his father and his people, "What is it that you worship?"

*71*. Behold, he said to his father and his people: "What worship ye?"

*71*. They answered: "We worship idols, and we remain ever devoted to them."

*72*. They said: "We worship idols, and we remain constantly in attendance on them."

*72*. Said he: "Do (you really think that) they hear you when you invoke them,

*73*. He said: "Do they listen to you when ye call (on them), or do you good or harm?"

*73*. or benefit you or do you harm?"

*74*. They said: "Nay, but we found our fathers doing thus (what we do)."

*74*. They exclaimed: "But we found our forefathers doing the same!"

*75*. He said: "Do ye then see whom ye have been worshipping,-

*75*. Said (**Abraham**): "Have you, then, ever considered what it is that you have been worshipping-

*76*. Ye and your fathers before you?

*76*. you and those ancient forebears of yours?

*77*. For they are enemies to me; Not so the Lord and Cherisher of the Worlds;

*77*. "Now (as for me, I know that), verily, these (false deities) are my enemies, (and that none is my helper) save the Sustainer of all the worlds,

*78*. Who created me, and it is He Who guides me;

*78*. Who has created me and is the One Who guides me,

*79*. Who gives me food and drink,

*79*. and is the One Who gives me to drink,

*80*. and when I am ill, it is He Who cures me;

*80*. and when I fall ill, is the One Who restores me to health,

*81*. Who will cause me to die, and then to live (again);

*81*. and who will cause me to die and then will bring me back to life-

*82*. And Who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on the Day of Judgment.

*82*. and Who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on Judgment Day!

*83*. O my Lord! Bestow wisdom on me, and join me with the righteous;

*83*. O! my Sustainer! Endow me with the ability to judge (between right and wrong), and make me one with the righteous,

*84*. Grant me honourable mention on the tongue of truth among the latest (generations);

*84*. and grant me the power to convey the truth unto those who will come after me,

*85*. Make me one of the inheritors of the Garden of Bliss;

*85*. and place me among those who shall inherit the garden of bliss!:

*86*. Forgive my father, for that he is among those astray;

*86*. And forgive my father-for, verily, he is among those who have gone astray-

*87*. And let me not be in disgrace on the day when (men) will be raised up; -

*87*. and do not put me to shame on the Day when all shall be raised from the

| | |
|---|---|
| | dead |
| *88*. The day whereon neither wealth nor sons will avail, | *88*. the Day on which neither wealth will be of any use, nor children, |
| *89*. But only he (will prosper) that brings to God a sound heart; | *89*. (and when) only he (will be happy) who comes before God with a heart free of evil! |
| *90*. To the righteous, the Garden will be brought near, | *90*. For, (on that Day), paradise will be brought within sight of the God-conscious, |
| *91*. And to those straying in evil, the fire will be placed in full view; | *91*. whereas the blazing fire will be laid open before those who had been lost in grievous error; |
| *92*. And it shall be said to them: "Where are the (gods) ye worshipped- | *92*. and they will be asked: "Where now is all that you were wont to worship |
| *93*. Besides God? Can they help you or help themselves?" | *93*. instead of God? Can these (things and beings) be of any help to you or to themselves? |
| *94*. Then they will be thrown headlong into the (fire),- they and those straying in Evil, | *94*. Thereupon they will be hurled into hell- they, as well as all (others) who had been lost in grievous error, |
| *95*. And the whole hosts of Iblis together. | *95*. and the hosts of Iblis- all together. |
| *96*. They will say there in their mutual bickerings: | *96*. And there and then, blaming one another, they (who had grievously sinned in life) will exclaim: |
| *97*. By God, we were truly in an error manifest, | *97*. "By God, we were most obviously astray |

*98*. When we held you as equals with the Lord of the Worlds;

*98*. when we deemed you (false deities) equal to the Sustainer of all the worlds

*99*. And our seducers were only those who were steeped in guilt.

*99*. yet they who have seduced us (into believing in you) are the truly guilty ones!

*100*. Now, then, we have none to intercede (for us),

*100*. And now we have none to intercede for us,

*101*. Nor a single friend to feel (for us).

*101*. nor any loving friend.

*102*. Now if we only had a chance of return, we shall truly be of those who believe!"

102. Would that we had a second chance (in life), so that we could be among the believers!"

*103*. Verily in this is a sign but most of them do not believe.

*103*. In all this, behold, there is a message (unto men), even though most of them will not believe (in it).

*104*. And verily thy Lord is He, the Exalted in Might, Most Merciful.

*104*. But, verily, thy Sustainer –He alone- is almighty, a dispenser of grace!

**Q.29:16-18, 24-27, 31-32:** *16*. And (We also saved) **Abraham**: behold, he said to his people, "Serve God and fear Him: that will be best for you - if ye understand!

**Q.29:16-18, 24-27, 31-32:** *16*. And **Abraham**, (too, was inspired by Us) when he said unto his people: "Worship God, and be conscious of Him: this is the best for you, if you but knew it!

*17*. For ye do worship idols besides God, and ye invent falsehood. The things that ye worship besides God have no power to give you sustenance: then seek ye sustenance from God, serve Him, and be grateful to Him: to Him will be your return.

*17*. You worship only (lifeless) idols instead of God, and (thus) you give visible shape to a lie! Behold, those (things and beings) that you worship instead of God have it not in their power to provide sustenance for you: seek, then, all (your) sustenance from God, and worship Him (alone) and be grateful to Him: (for) unto Him you shall be brought back!

*18.* And if ye reject (the message), so did generations before you: and the duty of the apostle is only to preach publicly (and clearly)."

*18.* And if you give (me) the lie- well, (other) communities have given the lie (to God's prophets) before your time: but no more is an apostle bound to do than clearly deliver the message (entrusted to him).

*24.* So naught was the answer of (**Abraham's**) people except that they said: "Slay him or burn him." But God did save him from the fire. Verily in this are signs for people who believe.

*24.* Now (as for **Abraham**), his people's only answer was, "Slay him, or burn him!" – but God saved him from the fire. Behold, in this (story) these are messages indeed for people who will believe!

*25.* And he said: "For you, ye have taken (for worship) idols besides God, out of mutual love and regard between yourselves in this life; But on the Day of Judgment ye shall disown each other and curse each other: and your abode will be the fire, and ye shall have none to help."

*25.* And (**Abraham**) said: "You have chosen to worship idols instead of God for no other reason than to have a bond of love, in the life of this world, between yourselves (and your forebears): but then, on Resurrection Day, you shall disown one another and curse one another- for the goal of you all will be the fire, and you will have none to succour you.

*26.* But Lūt had faith in him: He said: "I will leave home for the sake of my Lord: for He is Exalted in Might, and Wise."

*26.* Thereupon (his brother's son) Lot came to believe in him and said: "Verily, I (too) shall forsake the domain of evil (and turn) to my Sustainer: for, verily, He alone is almighty, truly wise!

*27.* And We gave (**Abraham**) Isaac and Jacob, and ordained among his progeny prophethood and revelation, and We granted him his reward in this life; and he was in the hereafter (of the company) of the righteous.

*27.* And (as for **Abraham**), We bestowed upon him Isaac and (Isaac's son) Jacob, and caused prophethood and revelation to continue among his offspring. And We vouchsafed him his reward in this world; and, verily, in the life to come (too) he shall find himself among the righteous.

*31.* When Our Messengers came to **Abraham** with the good news, they said: "We are indeed going to destroy the people of this township: for truly they are (addicted to) crime."

*31.* And so, when Our (heavenly) messengers came to **Abraham** with the glad tiding (of the birth of Isaac), they (also) said, "Behold, we are about to destroy the people of that land, for its people are truly evildoers!"

*32*. He said: "But there is Lūt there." They said: "Well do we know who is there: We will certainly save him and his following, - except his wife: she is of those who lag behind!"

*32*. (And when **Abraham**) exclaimed, "But Lot lives there!"- they answered: "We know fully well who is there; most certainly we shall save him and his household -all but his wife: she will indeed be among those that stay behind."

**Q.37:83-113:** *83*. Verily among those who followed his [Noah's] way was **Abraham**.

**Q.37:83-113:** *83*. And, behold, of his persuasion was **Abraham**, too,

*84*. Behold, he approached his Lord with a sound heart.

*84*. when he turned to his Sustainer with a heart free of evil,

*85*. Behold, he said to his father and to his people, "What is that which ye worship?

*85*. and (thus) spoke to his father and his people: "What is it that you worship?

*86*. Is it a falsehood- gods other than God- that ye desire?

*86*. Do you want (to bow down before) a lie- (before) deities other than God?

*87*. Then what is your idea about the Lord of the Worlds?

*87*. What, then, do you think of the Sustainer of the worlds?"

*88*. Then did he cast a glance at the stars,

*88*. Then he cast a glance at the stars,

*89*. And he said, "I am indeed sick (at heart)!"

*89*. and said, "Verily, I am sick (at heart)!"-

*90*. So they turned away from him, and departed.

*90*. and at that they turned their backs on him and went away.

*91*. Then did he turn to their gods and said, "Will ye not eat (of the offerings

before you)?...

*91*. Thereupon he approached their gods stealthily and said, "What! You do not eat (of the offerings placed before you)?

*92*. What is the matter with you that ye

*92*. What is amiss with you that you do

| | |
|---|---|
| speak not (intelligently)? | not speak? |
| *93*. Then did he turn upon them, striking (them) with the right hand. | *93*. And then he fell upon them, smiting them with his right hand. |
| *94*. Then came (the worshippers) with hurried steps, and faced (him). | *94*. (But) then the others came towards him hurriedly (and accused him of his deed). |
| *95*. He said: "Worship ye that which ye have (yourselves) carved? | *95*. He answered: "Do you worship something that you (yourselves) have carved, |
| *96*. But God has created you and your handiwork!" | *96*. while it is God Who has created you and all your handiwork?" |
| *97*. They said, "Build him a furnace, and throw him into the blazing fire!" | *97*. They exclaimed: "Build a pyre for him, and cast him into the blazing fire!" |
| *98*. (This failing), they then sought a stratagem against him, but We made them the ones most humiliated! | *98*. But whereas they sought to do evil unto him, We (frustrated their designs, and thus) brought them low. |
| *99*. He said: "I will go to my Lord! He will surely guide me! | *99*. And (**Abraham**) said: "Verily, I shall (leave this land and) go wherever my Sustainer will guide me" |
| *100*. O my Lord! Grant me a righteous (son)! | *100*. (And he prayed): "O my Sustainer! Bestow upon me the gift of (a son who shall be) one of the righteous!"- |
| *101*. So We gave him the good news of a boy ready to suffer and forbear. | *101*. whereupon We gave him the glad tiding of a boy-child gentle (like himself). |
| *102*. Then, when (the son) reached (the age of) (serious) work with him, he said: "O my son! I see in vision that I offer thee in sacrifice: Now see what is thy view!" (The son) said: "O my father! Do as thou art commanded: Thou will find | *102*. And (one day), when (the child) had become old enough to share in his (father's) endeavours, the latter said: "O my dear son! I have seen in a dream that I should sacrifice thee: consider, then, what would be thy view!" (Ishmael) answered: |

me, if God so wills one practicing patience and constancy!"

O my father! Do as thou art bidden: thou wilt find me, if God so wills, among those who are patient in adversity!"

*103*. So when they had both submitted their wills (to God), and he had laid him prostrate on his forehead (for sacrifice),

*103*. But as soon as the two had surrendered themselves to (what they thought to be) the will of God, and (**Abraham**) had laid him down on his face,

*104*. We called to him, "O **Abraham**!

*104*. We called out to him: "O **Abraham**,

*105*. Thou hast already fulfilled the vision! – thus indeed do We reward those who do right.

*105*. thou hast already fulfilled (the purpose of ) that dream-vision!" Thus, verily, do We reward the doers of good:

*106*. For this was obviously a trial .

*106*. for, behold, all this was indeed a trial, clear in itself.

*107*. And We ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice:

*107*. And We ransomed him with a tremendous sacrifice,

*108*. And We left (this blessing) for him among generations (to come) in later times:

*108*. and left him thus to be remembered among later generations:

*109*. Peace and salutation to **Abraham**!

*109*. "Peace upon **Abraham**!"

*110*. Thus indeed do We reward those who do right

*110*. Thus do We reward the doers of good-

*111*. For he was one of Our believing servants.

*111*. for he was truly one of Our believing servants.

*112*. And We gave him the good news of Isaac – a prophet, - one of the righteous

*112*. And (in time) We gave him the glad tiding of Isaac, (who, too, would be) a prophet, one of he righteous;

*113.* We blessed him and Isaac: but of their progeny are (some) that do right, and (some) that obviously do wrong, to their own souls.

*113.* and We blessed him and Isaac: but among the offspring of these two there were (destined) to be both doers of good and such as would glaringly sin against themselves.

**Q.38:45-47:** *45.* And commemorate Our servants **Abraham**, Isaac, and Jacob, possessors of power and vision.

**Q.38:45-47:** *45.* And call to mind Our servants **Abraham** and Isaac and Jacob, (all of them) endowed with inner strength and vision:

*46.* Verily We did choose them for a special (purpose) -proclaiming the message of the hereafter.

*46.* for, verily, We purified them by means of a thought most pure: the remembrance of the life to come.

*47.* They were, in Our sight, truly, of the company of the elect and the good.

*47.* And, behold, in Our sight they were indeed among the elect, the truly good!

**Q.42:13:** The same religion has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah- the which We have sent by inspiration to thee- and that which We enjoined on **Abraham**, Moses, and Jesus: Namely, that ye should remain steadfast in religion, and make no divisions therein: To those who worship other things than God, Hard is the (way) to which thou callest them. God chooses to Himself those whom He pleases, and guides to Himself those who turn (to Him).

**Q.42:13:** In matters of faith, He has ordained for you that which He had enjoined upon Noah- and into which We gave thee (O Muhammad) insight through revelation- as well as that which We had enjoined upon **Abraham**, and Moses, and Jesus: Steadfastly uphold the (true) faith, and do not break up your unity therein. (And even though) that (unity of faith) to which thou callest them appears oppressive to those who are wont to ascribe to other beings or forces a share in His divinity, God draws unto Himself everyone who is willing, and guides unto Himself everyone who turns unto Him.

**Q.43:26-28:** *26.* Behold! **Abraham** said to his father and his people: "I do indeed clear myself of what ye worship:

**Q.43:26-28:** *26.* And when **Abraham** spoke to his father and his people, (he had this very truth in mind): "Verily, far be it from me to worship what you worship!

*27.* (I worship) only Him Who made me, and He will certainly guide me."

*27.* None (do I worship) but Him Who has brought me into being: and, behold, it

| | |
|---|---|
| | is He Who will guide me!" |
| *28.* And he left it as a Word to endure among those who came after him, that they may turn back (to God). | *28.* And he uttered this as a word destined to endure among those who would come after him, so that they |
| **Q.51:24-34:** *24.* Has the story reached thee, of the honoured guests of **Abraham**? | **Q.51:24-34:** *24.* And has the story of **Abraham's** honoured guests ever come within thy ken? |
| *25.* Behold, they entered his presence, and said: "Peace!" he said, "Peace!" (and thought "these seem) unusual people." | 25. When those (heavenly messengers) came unto him and bade him peace, he answered, "(and upon you be) peace!"- (saying to himself), "They are strangers". |
| *26.* Then he turned quickly to his household, brought out a fatted calf, | 26. Then he turned quietly to his household, and brought forth a fat (roasted) calf, |
| *27.* and placed it before them…He said, "Will ye not eat?" | *27.* and placed it before them, saying, "Will you not eat?". |
| *28.* (When they did not eat), he conceived a fear of them. They said, "Fear not", and they gave him glad tidings of a son endowed with knowledge. | *28.* (And when he saw that the guests would not eat), he became apprehensive of them; (but) they said, "Fear not"- and gave him the glad tiding of (the birth of) a son who would be endowed with deep knowledge |
| *29.* But his wife came forward (laughing) aloud: she smote her forehead and said: "A barren old woman!" | *29.* Thereupon his wife approached (the guests) with a loud cry, and struck her face (in astonishment) and exclaimed: "A barren old woman (like me)!" |
| *30.* They said, "Even so has thy Lord spoken: And He is full of Wisdom and Knowledge." | *30.* They answered: "Thus has thy Sustainer decreed; and, verily, He alone is truly wise, all-knowing!" |
| *31.* (**Abraham**) said: "And what, O ye messengers, is your errand (now)?" | *31.* Said (**Abraham**): "And what (else) may you have in view, O you (heavenly) |

| | |
|---|---|
| | messengers?" |
| *32*. They said, "We have been sent to a people (deep) in sin;- | *32*. They answered: "Behold, we have been sent unto a people lost in sin, |
| *33*. To bring on, on them, (a shower of) stones of clay (brimstone), | *33*. to let loose upon them stone-hard blows of chastisement, |
| *34*. Marked as from thy Lord for those who trespass beyond bounds." | *34*. marked out in thy Sustainer's sight for (the punishment of) such as have wasted their own selves." |
| **Q.53:37:** *36*. Nay, is he not acquainted with what is in the books of Moses- | **Q.53:37:** *36*. Or has he never yet been told of what was (said) in the revelations of Moses, |
| *37*. and of **Abraham** who fulfilled his engagements.- | *37*. and of **Abraham**, who to his trust was true: |
| **Q.87:18-19:** *18*. And this [what is previously mentioned in this sura] is in the Books of the earliest (Revelations),- | **Q.87:18-19:** *18*. Verily, (all) this has indeed been (said) in the earlier revelations- |
| *19*. The Books of **Abraham** and Moses. | *19*. the revelations of **Abraham** and Moses. |
| **<u>A Non-Distinct Chronologically Sura:</u>** | |
| **Q.22:26-29:** *26*. Behold! We gave the site, to **Abraham**, of the (sacred) House, (saying): "Associate not anything (in worship) with Me; and sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or stand up, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein in prayer). | **Q.22:26-29:** *26*. For, when We assigned unto **Abraham** the site of this Temple, (We said unto him): "Do not ascribe divinity to aught beside Me!"- and : "Purify My Temple for those who will walk around it, and those who will stand before it (in meditation), and those who will bow down and prostrate themselves (in prayer) |
| *27*. And proclaim the pilgrimage among men: they will come to thee on foot and (mounted) on every kind of camel, lean | *27*. Hence, (O Muhammad), proclaim thou unto all people the (duty of ) pilgrimage: they will come unto thee on |

on account of journeys through deep and distant mountain highways;

foot and on every far-away point (on earth),

*28*. That they may witness the benefits (provided) for them, and celebrate the name of God, through the days appointed, over the cattle which He has provided for them (for sacrifice): then eat ye thereof and feed the distressed ones in want.

*28*. so that they might experience much that shall be of benefit to them, and that they might extol the name of God on the days appointed (for sacrifice), over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them (to this end): eat, then, thereof, and feed the unfortunate poor.

*29*. Then let them complete the rites prescribed for them, perform their vows, and (again) circumambulate the Ancient House."

*29*. Thereafter let them bring to an end their state of self-denial, and let them fulfill the vows which they (may) have made, and let them walk (once again) around the Most Ancient Temple.

**43:** *42*. If they treat thy (mission) as false, so did the peoples before them (with their prophets), - the people of Noah, and 'Ad and Thamūd;

**43:** *42*. And if they (who are bent on denying the truth) give thee the lie, (O Muhammad, remember that, long) before their time, the people of Noah and (the tribes of) 'Ad and Thamūd gave the lie (to their prophets),

*43*. Those of **Abraham** and Lūt;

43. as did the people of **Abraham**, and the people of Lot

## APPENDIX B

**Abrahamic References in *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*[1] and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*[2]**

***Al-Bukhari (d. 869AD):***

**Vol. 1:**
**IV The Book of Wudu, 140:** Narrated Kuraib: Ibn Abbas said, "The Prophet slept till he snored and then prayed (or probably lay till his breath sounds were heard and then got up and prayed)." Ibn Abbas added: "I stayed overnight in the house of my aunt, Maimūna, the Prophet slept for a part of the night, and late in the night, he got up and performed ablution from a hanging water skin, a light (perfect) ablution and stood up for the prayer. I, too, performed a similar ablution, then I went and stood on his left. He drew me to his right and prayed as much as Allāh wished, and then lay and slept till his breath sounds were heard. Later on the Mua'dhdhin (call-maker for the prayer) came to him and informed him that it was time for prayer. The prophet went with him for the prayer without performing a new ablution." (Sufyān) said to 'Amr that some people said, "The eyes of Allāh's Apostle sleep but his heart does not sleep". 'Amr replied, "I heard 'Ubaid bin 'Umair saying that the dreams of Prophets were Divine Inspiration, and then he recited the verse: 'I (**Abraham**) see in a dream, (O my son) that I offer you in sacrifice (to Allāh)" (37:102). [This hadith tradition is repeated in Vol. I, XII chapter on the characteristics of prayer, 818]

**VIII The Book of Ṣalāt, 345:** Narrated Abū Dhar: Allāh's Apostle said, "While I was at Mecca the roof of my house was opened and Gabriel descended, opened my chest, and washed it with Zam-Zam water. Then he brought a golden tray full of wisdom and faith and having poured its contents into my chest, he closed it. Then he took my hand and ascended with me to the nearest heaven, when I reached the nearest heaven, Gabriel said to the gatekeeper of the heaven, 'Open (the gate).' The gatekeeper asked, 'Who is it?' Gabriel answered: 'Gabriel.' He asked, 'Is there anyone with you?' Gabriel replied, 'Yes, Muhammad is with me.' He asked, 'Has he been called?' Gabriel said, 'Yes.' So the gate was opened and we went over the nearest heaven and there we saw a man sitting with some people on his right and some on his left. When he looked towards his right, he laughed and when he looked toward his left he wept. Then he said, 'Welcome! O pious Prophet and pious son.' I asked Gabriel, 'Who is he?' He replied, 'He is Adam and the people on his right and left are the souls of his offspring. Those on his right are the people of Paradise and those on his left are the people of Hell and when he looks towards his right he laughs and when he looks towards his left he weeps.'... [*isnād*] Then he ascended with me till he reached the second heaven and he (Gabriel) said to its gatekeeper, 'Open (the gate).' The gatekeeper said to him the same as the gatekeeper of the first heaven had said and he opened the gate...Anas said: "Abū Dhar added that the Prophet met Adam, Idrīs, Moses, Jesus and **Abraham**, he (Abū Dhar) did not mention on which heaven they

---

[1] Al-Bukhari, Muhammed Ibn Ismaiel, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans. Muhammad M. Khan, (Lahore, Kazi Publications, 1983-1986).
[2] Muslim, ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, trans. `Abdul Hamid Siddiqi in http://www.iiu.edu.my/deed/hadith/muslim (Last updated: 17 November 2005).

were but he mentioned that he (the Prophet) met Adam on the nearest heaven and **Abraham** on the sixth heaven...Anas said, "When Gabriel along with the Prophet passed by Idrīs, the latter said, 'Welcome, O pious Prophet and pious brother.' The prophet asked, 'Who is he?' Gabriel replied, 'He is Idrīs.'"...The Prophet added, "I passed by Moses and he said, 'Welcome! O pious Prophet and pious brother.' I asked Gabriel, 'Who is he?' Gabriel replied, 'He is Moses.' Then I passed by Jesus and he said, 'Welcome! O pious brother and pious Prophet.' I asked, 'Who is he?' Gabriel replied, 'He is Jesus.' Then I passed by **Abraham** and he said, 'Welcome! O pious Prophet and pious son.' I asked Gabriel, 'Who is he?' Gabriel replied, 'He is **Abraham**.'.... The Prophet added, "Then Gabriel ascended with me to a place where I heard the creaking of the pens."...Ibn Hazm and Anas bin Malik said: The Prophet said: "Then Allāh enjoined fifty prayers on my followers when I returned with this order of Allāh, I passed by Moses who asked me, 'What has Allāh enjoined on your followers?' I replied, 'He has enjoined fifty prayers on them.' Moses said, 'Go back to your Lord (and appeal for reduction) for your followers will not be able to bear it.' (So I went back to Allāh and requested for reduction) and He reduced it to half. When I passed by Moses again and informed him about it, he said, 'Go back to your Lord as your followers will not be able to bear it.' So I returned to Allāh and requested for further reduction and half of it was reduced. I again passed by Moses and he said to me: 'Return to your Lord, for your followers will not be able to bear it. So I returned to Allāh and He said, 'These are five prayers and they are all (equal to) fifty (in reward) for My word does not change.' I returned to Moses and he told me to go back once again. I replied, 'Now I feel shy of asking my Lord again.' Then Gabriel took me till we reached Sidrat-Il-Muntahā (lote tree of the utmost boundry) which was shrouded in colours, indescribable. Then I was admitted into Paradise where I found small (tents or) walls (made) of pearls and its earth was of musk." [Repetition in LV The Book of Prophets, chapter 5]

**395:** Narrated 'Umar (bin Al-Khaṭṭāb): My Lord agreed with me in three things: 1. I said, "O Allāh's Apostle, I wish we took the station of **Abraham** as our praying place (for some of our prayers). So came the Divine Inspiration: And take you (people) the station of **Abraham** as a place of prayer (for some of your prayers e.g. two Rak'āt of Ṭawāf of Ka'ba)" (2:125) ... [Repetition in Vol. 6, LX The Book of Commentary, 10]

**Vol. 2:**

**XXI Tahajjud Prayer at Night, 283:** Narrated Nāfi': Ibn 'Umar never offered the Ḍuḥa prayer except on two occasions: (1) Whenever he reached Makka; and he always used to reach Makka in the forenoon. He would perform Ṭawāf round the Ka'ba and then offer two Rak'āt at the rear of Maqām **Ibrāhīm**...

**XXIII Funerals, 468:**

Narrated Samura bin Jundab: Whenever the Prophet finished the (morning) prayer, he would face us and ask, "Who amongst you had a dream last night?" So if anyone had seen a dream he would narrate it. The Prophet would say: "Mā shā'a-lāh" (An Arabic maxim meaning literally, 'What Allāh wished', and it indicates a good omen). One day, he asked us whether anyone of us had seen a dream. We replied in the negative. The Prophet said, "But I had seen (a dream) last night that two men came to me, caught hold of my hands, and took me to the Sacred Land. There, I saw a person sitting and another standing with an iron hook in his hand pushing it inside the mouth

of the former till it reached the jaw-bone, and then tore off one side of his cheek, and then did the same with the other side; in the mean-time the first side of his cheek became normal again and then he repeated the same operation again. I said, 'What is this?' They told me to proceed on and we went on till we came to a man lying flat on his back, and another man standing at his head carrying a stone or a piece of rock, and crushing the head of the lying man, with that stone. Whenever he struck him, the stone rolled away. The man went to pick it up and by the time he returned to him, the crushed head had returned to its normal state and the man came back and struck him again (and so on). I said, 'Who (what) is this?' They told me to proceed on; So we proceeded on and passed by a hole like an oven; with a narrow top and wide bottom, and the fire was kindling underneath that hole. Whenever the fire-flame went up, the people were lifted up to such an extent that they were about to get out of it, and whenever the fire got quieter, the people went down into it, and there were naked men and women in it. I said, 'Who (what) is this?' They told me to proceed on. So we proceeded on till we reached a river of blood and a man was in it, and another man (was standing at its bank) with stones in front of him, the latter confronted the former who was in the river. Whenever the man in the river wanted to come out, the other one threw a stone in his mouth and caused him to retreat to his original position; and so whenever he wanted to come out the other would throw a stone in his mouth, and he would retreat to his original position. I asked, 'What is this?' They told me to proceed on and we did so till we reached a well-flourished green garden having a huge tree and near its root was sitting an old man with some children. (I saw) Another man near the tree fire in front of him and he was kindling it up. Then they (i.e. my two companions) made me climb up the tree and made me enter a house, better than which I had never seen. In it were some old men and young men, women and children. Then they took me out of this house and made me climb up the tree and made me enter another house that was better and superior (to the first) containing old and young people. I said to them (i.e. my two companions), 'You have made me ramble all the night. Tell me all about that I have seen'. They said 'Yes. As for the one whose cheek you saw being torn away, he was a liar and he used to tell lies, and the people would report those lies on his authority till they spread all over the world. So, he will be punished like that till the Day of Resurrection. The one whose head you saw being crushed is the one whom Allāh had given the knowledge of Qur'ān (i.e. knowing it by heart) but he used it to sleep at night (i.e. he did not recite it then) and did not use to act upon it (i.e. upon its orders etc.) by day; and so this punishment will go on till the Day of Resurrection. And those whom you saw in the hole (like oven) were adulterers (those men and women who commit illegal sexual intercourse). And those whom you saw in the river of blood were those dealing in Ribā (usury). And the old man who was sitting at the base of the tree was **Abraham** and the little children around him were the offspring of the people. And the one who was kindling the fire was Mālik, the gate-keeper of the Hell-fire. And the first house in which you have gone was the house of the common believers, and the second house was of the martyrs. I am Gabriel and this is Michael. Raise your head.' I raised my head and saw a thing like a cloud over me. They said, 'That is your place.' I said, 'Let me enter my place.' They said, 'You still have some life which you have not yet completed, and when you complete (that remaining portion of life) you will then enter

your place.'" [Repetition in Vol. 9, LXXXVII, The Book of Interpretation of Dreams, 171[3]]

**XXVI The Book of Hajj, 653:** Narrated ʻĀisha, the wife of the Prophet that Allāh's Messenger said to her, "Do you know that when your people (Quraish) re-built the Kaʻba, they reduced it from its original foundation laid by **Abraham**?" I said, "O Allāh's Messenger why don't you rebuild it on its original foundation laid by **Abraham**?" He replied, "Were it not for the fact that your people are close to the pre-Islamic Period of Ignorance (i.e. they have recently become Muslims) I would have done so." The sub-narrator, ʻAbdullāh (bin ʻUmar) stated: ʻĀisha must have heard this from Allāh's Messenger for in my opinion Allāh's Messenger had not placed his hand over the two corners of the Kaʻba opposite Al-Hijr only because the Kaʻba was not rebuilt on its original foundations laid by **Abraham**[4]. [Repetition, LV The Book of Prophets, 587, Vol. 6, LX The Book of Commentary, 11]

**655:** Narrated ʻĀisha: Allāh's Messenger said to me: "Were your people not close to the Pre-Islamic period of Ignorance, I would have demolished the Kaʻba and would have re-built it on its original foundations laid by **Abraham** (for Quraish had reduced its building), and I would have built a back door (too)." [also in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 2367]

**656:** Narrated ʻUrwa: ʻĀisha said that the Prophet said to her, "O ʻĀisha! Were your nation not close to the Pre-Islamic Period of Ignorance, I would have had the Kaʻba demolished and would have included in it the portion which had been left, and would have made it at a level with the ground and would have made two doors for it, one towards the east and the other towards the west, and then by doing this it would have been built on the foundations laid by **Abraham**." That was what urged Ibn-Az-Zubair to demolish the Kaʻba. Yazīd said: "I saw Ibn- Az-Zubair when he demolished and re-built the Kaʻba and included in it a portion of Al-Hijr (the unroofed portion of Kaʻba which is at present in the form of a compound towards the north-west of the Kaʻba). I saw the original foundations of **Abraham** which were of stones resembling the humps of camels." So Jarīr asked Yazīd, "Where was the place of those stones?" Yazīd said: "I will just now show it to you." So Jarīr accompanied Yazīd and entered Al-Hijr, and Yazīd pointed to a place and said, "Here it is." Jarīr said, "It appeared to me about six cubits from Al-Hijr or so."

**671:** Narrated Ibn ʻAbbās: When Allāh's Messenger came to Makka, he refused to enter the Kaʻba with idols in it. He ordered (idols to be taken out). So they were taken out. The people took out the pictures of **Abraham** and Ishmael holding Azlams in their hands. Allāh's Messenger said, "May Allah curse these people. By Allah, both **Abraham** and Ishmael never did the game of chance with Azlams." Then he entered the Kaʻba and said Takbīr at its corners but did not offer the prayer in it

---

[3] The description of Abraham, here, is somewhat different: " In the midst of the garden there was a very tall man and I could hardly see his head because of his great height, and around him there were children in such a large number as I have ever seen" and "...and the tall man whom you saw in the garden, is Abraham and the children around him are those children who die with Al-Fitra (the Islamic Faith)".

[4] See also hadith 654 for the changes that took place in the rebuilding of Kaʻba by Quraysh.

[Repetition in LV The Book of Prophets, 571 Vol. 5, LVIII The Merits of the Anṣār, 584].

**Vol. 3:**

**XXXIV The Book of Sales, 339:** Narrated 'Abdullāh bin Zaid: The Prophet said, "The Prophet **Abraham** made Mecca a sanctuary, and asked for Allāh's blessing in it. I made Medina a sanctuary as **Abraham** made Mecca a sanctuary and I asked for Allāh's blessing in its measures- the Mudd and the Ṣa' as **Abraham** did for Mecca [Repetition in Vol. 4, The Book of Jihād, 139, 143, Vol. 4, LV The Book of Prophets, 586, Vol. 5, LVIII The Merits of the Anṣār, 410, Vol. 7, LXV, The Book of Foods, 336, Vol. 8, LXXV, The Book of Invocations, 374, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 2422[5]].

**420:** Narrated Abū Huraira: The Prophet said, "the Prophet **Abraham** emigrated with Sārah and entered a village where there was a king or a tyrant. (The king) was told that **Abraham** had entered (the village) accompanied by a woman who was one of the most charming women. So, the king sent for **Abraham** and asked, 'O **Abraham**! Who is this lady accompanying you? **Abraham** replied, 'She is my sister (i.e. in religion).' Then **(Abraham)** returned to her and said, 'Do not contradict my statement, for I have informed them that you are my sister. By Allāh, there are no true believers on this land except you and I.' Then **(Abraham)** sent her to the king. When the king got to her, she got up and performed ablution, prayed and said, 'O Allāh! If I have believed in You and Your Apostle, and have saved my private parts from everybody except my husband, then please do not let this pagan overpower me.' On that the king fell in a mood of agitation and started moving his legs. Seeing the condition of the king, Sārah said, 'O Allāh! If he should die, the people will say that I have killed him.' The king regained his power, and proceeded towards her but she got up again and performed ablution, prayed and said, 'O Allāh! If I have believed in You and Your Apostle, and have kept my private parts safe from all except my husband, then please do not let this pagan overpower me.' The king again fell in a mood of agitation and started moving his legs. On seeing that state of the king, Sārah said, 'O Allāh! If he should die, the people will say that I have killed him.' The king got either two or three attacks, and after recovering from the last attack he said, 'By Allāh! You have sent a satan to me. Take her to **Abraham** and give her Ājar.' So she came back to **Abraham** and said, 'Allāh humiliated the pagan and gave us a slave-girl for service.'"[6] [Repetitions in XLVII The Book of Gifts and the Superiority of giving Gifts and the Exhortation for giving Gifts, Chapter 28, *ibid.* 803]

**Vol. 4:**

**LIV The Book of the Beginning of Creation, 429:** Narrated Malik bin Ṣa'ṣa'a: The Prophet said, "While I was at the House in a state midway between sleep and wakefulness, (an angel recognized me) as the man lying between two men. A golden tray full of wisdom and belief was brought to me and my body was cut open from the throat to the lower part of the abdomen and then my abdomen was washed with Zam-Zam water and (my heart was) filled with wisdom and belief. Al-Burāq, a white animal, smaller than a mule and bigger than a donkey was brought to me and I set out with Gabriel. When I reached the nearest heaven Gabriel said to the gate-keeper,

---

[5] In *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, the prophet Muhammad is asking Allah to bless Medina's *ṣa'* and *mudd* 'twice as did Abraham for the inhabitants of Makkah'.

[6] See Vol. 3, XL Distribution of Water, 556 for a narrative on Ishmael's mother.

'Open the gate.' The gatekeeper asked, 'Who is it'? He said, 'Gabriel.' The gate-keeper, 'Who is accompanying you?' Gabriel said, 'Muhammad.' The gate-keeper said, 'Has he been called?' Gabriel said, 'Yes.' Then it was said, 'He is welcomed. What a wonderful visit his is!' Then I met Ādam and greeted him and he said, 'You are welcomed O son and a Prophet.' Then we ascended to the second heaven. It was asked, 'Who is it?' Gabriel said, 'Gabriel.' It was said, 'Who is with you?' He said, 'Muhammad'. It was asked, 'Has he been sent for?' He said, 'Yes.' It was said, 'He is welcomed. What a wonderful visit his is!' Then I met Jesus and Yahya (John) who said, 'You are welcomed, O brother and a Prophet.' Then we ascended to the third heaven. It was asked, 'Who is it?' Gabriel said, 'Gabriel.' It was asked, 'Who is with you?' Gabriel said, 'Muhammad'. It was asked, 'Has he been sent for?' 'Yes', said Gabriel. 'He is welcomed. What a wonderful visit his is!' (The Prophet added): There I met Joseph and greeted him, and he replied, 'You are welcomed, O brother and a Prophet!' Then we ascended to the 4th heaven and again the same questions and answers were exchanged as in the previous heavens. There I met Idris and greeted him. He said, 'You are welcomed O brother and Prophet.' Then we ascended to the 5th heaven and again the same questions and answers were as in previous heavens. There I met and greeted Aaron who said, 'You are welcomed O brother and a Prophet'. Then we ascended to the 6th heaven and again the same questions and answers were exchanged as in the previous heavens. There I met and greeted Moses who said, 'You are welcomed O brother and a Prophet.' When I proceeded on, he started weeping and on being asked why he was weeping, he said, 'O Lord! Followers of this youth who was sent after me will enter Paradise in greater number than my followers.' Then we ascended to the seventh heaven and again the same questions and answers were exchanged as in the previous heavens. There I met and greeted **Abraham** who said, 'You are welcomed O son and a Prophet.' Then I was shown Al Bait-ul-Ma'mūr (i.e. Allāh's House). I asked Gabriel about it and he said, This is Al Bait-ul-Ma'mūr where 70.000 angels perform prayers daily, and when they leave they never return to it (but always a fresh batch comes into it daily).' Then I was shown Sidrat-ul-Muntahā (i.e. a tree in the seventh heaven) and I saw its Nabk fruits which resembled the clay jugs of Ḥajr (i.e. a town in Arabia), and its leaves were like the ears of elephants, and four rivers originated at its root, two of them were apparent and two hidden. I asked Gabriel about those rivers and he said, 'The two hidden rivers are in Paradise, and the apparent ones are the Nile and the Euphrates.' Then fifty prayers were enjoined on me. I descended till I met Moses who asked me, 'What have you done?' I said, 'Fifty prayers have been enjoined on me.' He said, 'I know the people better than you, because I had the hardest experience to bring Bani Israel to obedience. Your followers cannot pout up with such obligation. So, return to your Lord and request Him (to reduce the number of prayers).' I returned and requested Allāh (for reduction) and He made it forty. I returned and (met Moses) and had a similar discussion, and then returned again to Allāh for reduction and He made it thirty, then twenty, then ten, and then I came to Moses who repeated the same advice. Ultimately Allāh reduced it to five. When I came to Moses again, he said, 'What have you done?' I said, 'Allāh has made it five only.' He repeated the same advice but I said that I surrendered (to Allah's Final Order)'" Allāh's Apostle was addressed by Allāh, "I have decreed My Obligation and have reduced the burden on My slaves, and I shall reward a single good deed as if it were ten good deeds." [Repetition in Vol. 5,

LVIII The Merits of the Anṣār, 227, XCIII, The Book of Tauḥīd, 608[7], *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 234[8], 238]

**LV The Book of Prophets, 568:** Narrated Ibn 'Abbās: The Prophet said, "You will be gathered (on the Day of Judgment), bare-footed, naked and not circumcised." He then recited: 'As We began the first creation, We shall repeat it: A Promise We have undertaken: Truly We shall do it' (21:104) He added, "The first to be dressed on the Day of Resurrection, will be **Abraham**, and some of my companions will be taken towards the left side (i.e. to the Hell Fire), and I will say: 'My companions! My companions!' It will be said: 'They renegade from Islam after you left them.' Then I will say as the Pious slave of Allāh (i.e. Jesus) said. 'And I was a witness over them while I dwelt amongst them. When You took me up You were the Watcher over them, and You are a Witness to all things. If You punish them they are your slaves and if You forgive them, verily you, only you are the All-Mighty, the All-Wise.'" (5:120-121) [Repetition *ibid.* 656, Vol. 6, LX The Book of Commentary, 149, *ibid.* 264, Vol. 8, LXXVI, The Book of Ar-Raqāq, 533]

**569:** Narrated Abū Huraira: The Prophet said, "On the Day of Resurrection **Abraham** will meet his father Āzar whose face will be dark and covered with dust. (The Prophet) **Abraham** will say (to him): 'Didn't I tell you not to disobey me?' His father will reply: 'Today I will not disobey you.' **Abraham** will say: 'O Lord! You promised me not to disgrace me on the Day of Resurrection; and what will be more disgraceful to me than cursing and dishonouring my father?' Then Allāh will say (to him): 'I have forbidden Paradise for the disbelievers." Then he will be addressed, 'O **Abraham**! Look! What is underneath your feet?' He will look and there he will see a Dhabḥ (an animal), blood-stained, which will be caught by the legs and thrown in the (Hell) fire.

**570:** Narrated Ibn 'Abbās: The Prophet entered Ka'ba and found in it the pictures of (Prophet) **Abraham** and Mary. On that he said "What is the matter with them (Quraish)? They have already heard that angels do not enter a house in which there are pictures; yet this is the picture of **Abraham**. And why is he depicted as practicing divination by arrows?"

**572:** Narrated Abū Huraira: The people said, "O Allāh's Apostle! Who is the most honourable amongst the people (in Allāh's Sight)?" He said, "The most righteous amongst them." They said, "We do not ask you about this." He said, "Then Joseph, Allāh's Prophet, the son of Allāh's Prophet, the son of Allāh's Prophet, the son of Allāh's Khalīl (i.e. **Abraham**)." They said, "We do not want to ask about this," He said: "Then you want to ask about the descent of the Arabs. Those who were the best in the pre-Islamic period of ignorance will be the best in Islam provided they comprehend the religious knowledge." [Repetition in LV The Book of Prophets, 593, 597, Vol. 6, LX The Book of Commentary, 211]

---

[7] Abraham, here, is in the sixth heaven and Moses on the seventh because of his having talked to Allah directly. Other differences appear as well.
[8] Here Abraham is found "reclining against Al-Bait Al-Ma'mur and there enter into it seventy thousand angels every day, never to visit again.

**573:** Narrated Samura: Allāh's Apostle said, "Two persons came to me at night (in dream) (and took me along with them). We passed by a tall man who was so tall that I was not able to see his head and that person was **Abraham**."

**574:** Narrated Mujāhid that when the people mentioned before Ibn 'Abbās that the Dajjāl would have the word Kāfir, (i.e. unbeliever) or the letters KFR (the root of the Arabic verb 'disbelieve') written on his forehead, I heard Ibn 'Abbās saying, "I did not hear this, but the Prophet said, 'If you want to see **Abraham**, then look at your companion (i.e. the Prophet) but Moses was a curly-haired, brown man (who used to ride) a red camel, the reins of which was made of fibres of date-palms. As if I were now looking at him descending down a valley.'" [Repetition, Vol. 7, The Book of Dress, 795]

**575:** Narrated Abū Huraira: Allāh's Apostle said, "**Abraham** did his circumcision with an adze at the age of eighty." [Repetition *ibid*. 576, Vol. 8, LXXIV, The Book of Asking Permission to Enter, 313, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4368]

**578:** Narrated Abū Huraira: **Abraham** did not tell a lie except on three occasions [Repetition, *ibid*. 577]. Twice for the Sake of Allāh when he said, "I am sick" and he said (I have not done this but) the big idol has done it." The (third was) that while **Abraham** and Sārah were going (on a journey) they passed by (the territory) of a tyrant. Someone said to the tyrant, "This man (i.e. **Abraham**) is accompanied by a very charming lady". So, he sent for **Abraham** and asked him about Sārah saying, "Who is this lady?" **Abraham** said, "She is my sister". **Abraham** went to Sārah and said, "O Sārah! There are no believers on the surface of the earth except you and I. This man asked me about you and I have told him that you are my sister, so don't contradict my statement." The tyrant then called Sārah and when she went to him, he tried to take hold of her with his hand, but (his hand got stiff and) and he was confounded. He asked Sārah "Pray to Allāh for me, and I shall not harm you." So Sārah asked Allāh to cure him and he got cured. He tried to take hold of her for the second time, but (his hand got as stiff as or stiffer than before and) was more confounded. He again requested Sārah, "Pray to Allāh for me, and I will not harm you." Sārah asked Allāh again and he became all right. He then called one of his guards (who had brought her) and said, "You have not brought me a human being but have brought me a devil." The tyrant then gave Hājar as a girl-servant to Sārah. Sārah came back (to **Abraham**) while he was praying. **Abraham**, gesturing with his hand, asked, "What has happened?" She replied, "Allāh has spoiled the evil plot of the infidel (or immoral person) and gave me Hājar for service." (Abū Huraira then addressed his listeners saying, "That (Hājar) was your mother, O Banī Mā'-is-Samā' (i.e. the Arabs, the descendants of Ishmael, Hājar's son). [also in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4371]

**579:** Narrated Um Sharīk: Allāh's Apostle ordered that House Lizards should be killed and said, "It (i.e. House-Lizard) blew (the fire) on **Abraham**".

**581:** Narrated Abū Huraira: One day some meat was given to the Prophet and he said, "On the Day of Resurrection Allāh will gather all the first and the last (people) in one plain, and the voice of the announcer will reach all of them, and one will be able to see them all, and the sun will come close to them." (The narrator then mentioned the narration of intercession): "The people will go to **Abraham** and say: 'You are

Allāh's Prophet and His Khalīl on the earth. Will you intercede for us with your Lord?' **Abraham** will then remember his lies and say: 'Myself! Myself! Go to Moses.'"

**582:** Narrated Ibn 'Abbās: The Prophet said, "May Allāh bestow His Mercy on the mother of Ishmael! Had she not hastened (to fill her water-skin with water from the Zam-zam well) Zam-zam would have been a stream flowing on the surface of the earth." Ibn 'Abbās further added, "(The Prophet) **Abraham** brought Ishmael and his mother (to Mecca) and she was suckling Ishmael, and she had a water-skin with her."

**583:** Narrated Ibn 'Abbās: The first lady to use a girdle was the mother of Ishmael. She used a girdle so that she might hide her tracks from Sārah. **Abraham** brought her and her son Ishmael while she was suckling him, to a place near the Ka'ba under a tree on the spot of Zam-zam, at the highest place in the mosque. During those days there was nobody in Mecca, nor was there any water. So he made them sit over there and placed near them a leather bag containing some dates, and a small water-skin containing some water, and set out homeward. Ishmael's mother followed him saying, "O **Abraham**! Where are you going, leaving us in this valley where there is no person whose company we may enjoy, nor is there anything (to enjoy)?" She repeated that to him many times, but he did not look back at her. Then she asked him, "Has Allāh ordered you to do so?" He said, "Yes" She said, "Then He will not neglect us" and returned while **Abraham** proceeded onwards, and on reaching the Thaniya where they could not see him, he faced the Ka'ba, and raising both hands, invoked Allāh saying the following prayers: 'O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring dwell in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House in order, O our Lord, that they may offer prayer perfectly. So fill some hearts among men with love towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks.' (14:37) Ishmael's mother went on suckling Ishmael and drinking from the water (she had). When the water in the water-skin had all been used up, she became thirsty and her child also became thirsty. She started looking at him (i.e. Ishmael) tossing in agony; She left him, for she could not endure looking at him, and found that the mountain of Ṣafā was the nearest mountain to her on that land. She stood on it and started looking at the valley keenly so that she might see somebody, but she could not see anybody. Then she descended from the Ṣafā and when she reached the valley, she tucked up her robe and ran in the valley like a person in distress and trouble, till she crossed the valley and reached the Marwa mountain where she stood and started looking, expecting to see somebody, but she could not see anybody. She repeated that (running between Ṣafā and Marwa) seven times." The Prophet said, "This is the source of the tradition of the walking of people between them (i.e. Ṣafā and Marwa). When she reached the Marwa (for the last time) she heard a voice and she asked herself to be quiet and listened attentively. She heard the voice again and said, 'O, (whoever you may be)! You have made me hear your voice; have you got something to help me?' And behold! She saw an angel at the place of Zam-zam, digging the earth with his heel (or his wing), till water flowed from that place. She started to make something like a basin around it, using her hands in this way, and started filling her water-skin with water with her hands, and the water was flowing out after she had scooped some of it." The Prophet added, "May Allāh bestow Mercy on Ishmael's mother! Had she let the Zam-zam, Zam-zam would have been a stream flowing on the surface of the earth." The Prophet further added, "Then she drank and suckled her child. The angel said to her, 'Don't be afraid of being neglected, for this is the House of Allāh which will be built by this

boy and his father, and Allāh never neglects His people.' The House (i.e. Ka'ba) at that time was on a high place resembling a hillock, and when torrents came, they flowed to its right and left. She lived in that way till some people from the tribe of Jurhum or a family from Jurhum passed by her and her child, as they were coming through that way of Ka'ba. They landed in the lower part of Mecca where they saw a bird that had the habit of flying around water and not leaving it. They said, 'This bird must be flying around water, though we know that there is no water in this valley'. They sent one or two messengers who discovered the source of water, and returned to inform them of the water. So, they all came (towards the water). The Prophet added, "Ishmael's mother was sitting near the water. They asked her, 'Do you allow us to stay with you?' She replied, 'Yes, but you will have no right to possess the water.' They agreed to that." The Prophet further said, "Ishmael's mother was pleased with the whole situation as she used to love to enjoy the company of the people. So they settled there, and later on they sent for their families who came and settled with them so that some families became permanent residents there. The child grew up and learnt Arabic from them and (his virtues) caused them to love and admire him as he grew up, and when he reached the age of puberty they made him marry a woman from amongst them. After Ishmael's mother had died, **Abraham** came after Ishmael's marriage in order to see his family that he had left before, but he did not find Ishmael there. When he asked Ishmael's wife about him, she replied, 'He has gone in search of our livelihood.' Then he asked her about their way of living and their condition, and she replied, 'We are living in misery; we are living in hardship and destitution', complaining to him. He said, 'When your husband returns, convey my salutation to him and tell him to change the threshold of the gate.' When Ishmael came, he seemed to have felt something unusual, so he asked his wife, 'Has anyone visited you?' She replied, 'Yes, an old man of so-and-so description came and asked me about you and I informed him, and he asked about our state of living, and I told him that we were living in a hardship and poverty.' On that Ishmael said, 'Did he advise you anything?' She replied, 'Yes, he told me to convey his salutation to you and to tell you to change the threshold of your gate.' Ishmael said, 'It was my father, and he has ordered me to divorce you. Go back to your family.' So, Ishmael divorced her and married another woman from amongst them (i.e. Jurhum). Then **Abraham** stayed away from them for a period as long as Allāh wished and called on them again but did not find Ishmael. So he came to Ishmael's wife and asked her about Ishmael. She said, 'He has gone in search of our livelihood.' **Abraham** asked her, 'How are you getting on?' asking her about their sustenance and living. She replied, 'We are prosperous and well off. Then she thanked Allāh. **Abraham** said, 'What kind of food do you eat? She said 'Meat' He said, 'What do you drink?' She said, 'Water' He said, 'O Allāh! Bless their meat and water. The Prophet added, "At that time they did not have grain, and if they had grain, he would have also invoked Allāh to bless it." The Prophet added, "If somebody had only these two things as his sustenance, his health and disposition will be badly affected, unless he lives in Mecca." The Prophet added, Then **Abraham** said to Ishmael's wife, 'When your husband comes, give my regards to him and tell him that he should keep firm the threshold of his gate'. When Ishmael came back, he asked his wife, 'Did anyone call on you?' She replied, 'Yes, a good-looking old man came to me', so she praised him and added 'He asked about you, and I informed him, and he asked about our livelihood and I told him that we were in a good condition.' Ishmael asked her, 'Did he give you any piece of advice?' She said, 'Yes, he told me to give his regards to you and ordered that you should keep firm the threshold of your gate.' On that Ishmael said, 'It was my father, and you are

the threshold. He has ordered me to keep you with me.' Then **Abraham** stayed away from them for a period as long as Allāh wished, and called on them afterwards. He saw Ishmael under a tree near Zam-zam, sharpening his arrows. When he saw **Abraham**, he rose up to welcome him. **Abraham** said, 'O Ishmael! Allāh has given me an order'. Ishmael said, 'Do what your Lord has ordered you to do'. **Abraham** asked, 'Will you help me? Ishmael said, 'I will help you'. **Abraham** said, Allāh has ordered me to build a house here', pointing to a hillock higher than the land surrounding it. "The Prophet added, "Then they raised the foundations of the House. Ishmael brought the stones and **Abraham** was building, and when the walls became high, Ishmael brought this stone and put it for **Abraham** who stood over it and carried on building, while Ishmael was handing him the stones, and both of them were saying, 'O our Lord! Accept (this service) from us, verily, You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.'" The Prophet added, "Then both of them went on building and going round the Ka'ba saying: 'O our Lord! Accept (this service) from us, verily, You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.'" (2: 127) [Repetition *ibid*. 584]

**588:** Narrated Abū Ḥumaid As-Sā'idī: The people asked, "O Allāh's Apostle! How shall we (ask Allāh to) send blessings on you?" Allāh's Apostle replied, "Say: O Allāh! Send Your Mercy on Muhammad and on his wives and on his offspring, as You sent Your Mercy on **Abraham's** family; and send Your Blessings on Muhammad and on his offspring, as You sent Your Blessings on **Abraham's** family, for You are the Most Praise-worthy, the Most Glorious." [Repetition *ibid*. 589, Vol. 8, LXXV, The Book of Invocations, 368, 369, 371, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 614, 615]

**590:** Narrated Ibn 'Abbās: The Prophet used to seek Refuge with Allāh for Al-Hasan and Al-Husain and say: "Your forefather (i.e. **Abraham**) used to seek Refuge with Allāh for Ishmael and Isaac by reciting the following: O Allāh! I seek Refuge with Your Perfect Words from every devil and from poisonous pests and from every evil, harmful, envious eye.'"

**591:** Narrated Abū Huraira: Allāh's Apostle said, "We are more liable to be in doubt than **Abraham** when he said, 'My Lord! Show me how You give life to the dead.' He (i.e. Allāh) said: 'Don't you believe then?' He (i.e. **Abraham**) said: 'Yes, but (I ask) in order to be stronger in Faith.' And may Allāh send His Mercy on Lot! He wished to have a powerful support. If I were to stay in prison for such a long time as Joseph did, I would have accepted the offer (of freedom without insisting on having my guiltlessness declared)." [Repetition in Vol. 6, LX The Book of Commentary, 61, *ibid*. 216, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 216]

**596:** Narrated Ibn 'Umar: The Prophet said, "The honourable is the son of the honourable, the son of the honourable, i.e. Joseph, the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of **Abraham** [Repetition *ibid*. 603, Vol. 6, LX The Book of Commentary, 210, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4383]

**607:** Narrated Abū Huraira: Allāh's Apostle said, "On the night of my Ascension to Heaven, I saw (the prophet) Moses who was a thin person with lank hair, looking like one of the men of the tribe of Shahū'a; and I saw Jesus who was of average height with red face as if he had just come out of a bathroom. And I resemble prophet **Abraham** more than any of his offspring does. Then I was given two cups, one

containing milk and the other wine.' I took the mild and drank it. [Repetition *ibid.* 647, 648, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 245]

**Vol. 5:**

**LVIII The Merits of the Anṣār, 169:** Narrated 'Abdullāh bin 'Umar: The Prophet met Zaid 'Amr bin Nufail in the bottom of (the valley of) Baldaḥ before any Divine Inspiration came to the Prophet. A meal was presented to the Prophet but he refused to eat from it. (Then it was presented to Zaid) who said, "I do not eat anything which you slaughter in the name of your stone idols. I eat none but those things on which Allāh's Name has been mentioned at the time of slaughtering." Zaid bin 'Amr used to criticize they way Quraish used to slaughter their animals, and used to say, Allāh has created the sheep and He has sent the water for it from the sky, and He has grown the grass for it from the earth; yet you slaughter it in other than the Name of Allāh. He used to say so, for he rejected that practice and considered it as something abominable. "Narrated Ibn 'Umar: Zaid bin 'Amr bin Nufail went to Shā'm, enquiring about a true religion to follow. He met a Jewish religious scholar and asked him about their religion. He said, "I intend to embrace your religion, so tell me something about it." The Jew said, "You will not embrace our religion unless you receive your share of Allāh's Anger." Zaid said, "I do not run except from Allāh's Anger, and I will never bear a bit of it if I have the power to avoid it. Can you tell me of some other religion?" He said, "I do not know any other religion except the Ḥanīf." Zaid enquired, "What is Ḥanīf?" He said, "Ḥanīf is the religion of **Abraham** who was neither Jew nor a Christian, and he used to worship None but Allāh." Then Zaid went out and met a Christian religious scholar and told him the same as before. The Christian said, "You will not embrace our religion unless you get a share of Allāh's Curse." Zaid replied, "I do not run except from Allāh's Curse, and I will never bear any of Allāh's Curse and his Anger if I have the power to avoid them. Will you tell me of some other religion?" He replied, "I do not know any other religion except Ḥanīf." Zaid enquired, "What is Ḥanīf?" He replied, Ḥanīf is the religion of **Abraham** who was neither Jew nor a Christian and he used to worship None but Allāh" When Zaid heard their Statement about **Abraham**, he left that place, and when he came out, he raised both his hands and said, "O Allāh! I make You my Witness that I am on the religion of **Abraham**." Narrated Asmā' bint Abī Bakr: I saw Zaid bin Amr bin Nufail standing with his back against the Ka'ba and saying, "O people of Quraish! By Allāh, none amongst you is on the religion of **Abraham** except me." He used to preserve the lives of little girls: If somebody wanted to kill his daughter he would say to him, "Do not kill her for I will feed her on your behalf." So he would take her, and when she grew up nicely, he would say to her father, "Now if you want her, I will give her to you, and if you wish, I will feed her on your behalf."

**635:** Narrated 'Amr bin Maimūn: When Mu'ādh arrived at Yemen, he led them (i.e. the people of Yemen) in the Fajr prayer wherein he recited: Allāh took Abraham as a Khalīl.' A man amongst the people said, "(How) glad the mother of **Abraham** is!" (In another narration) 'Amr said, "The Prophet sent Mu'ādh to Yemen and he (led the people) in the Fajr prayer and recited: Allāh took **Abraham** as a Khalīl.' A man behind him said, "(How) glad the mother of **Abraham** is!"

**Vol. 6:**
**LX The Book of Commentary, 3:** Narrated Anas: The Prophet said, "On the day of Resurrection the Believers will assemble and say, 'Let us ask somebody to intercede for us with our Lord.' So they will go to Adam and say, 'You are the father of all the people, and Allāh created you with His Own Hands, and ordered the angels to prostrate to you, and taught you the names of all things; so please intercede for us with your Lord, so that He may relieve us from this place of ours.' Adam will say, 'I am not fit for this (intercession for you).' Then Adam will remember his sin and feel ashamed thereof. He will say, 'Go to Noah, for he was the first Apostle, Allāh sent to the inhabitants of the earth.' They will go to him and Noah will say, 'I am not fit for this undertaking.' He will remember his appeal to his Lord to do what he had no knowledge of, then he will feel ashamed thereof and will say, 'Go to the **Khalīl-Ar-Raḥman** (i.e. **Abraham**). They will go to him and he will say, 'I am not fit for this undertaking. Go to Moses, the slave to whom Allāh spoke (directly) and gave him the Torah.' So they will go to him and he will say 'I am not fit for this undertaking.' And he will mention (his) killing a person who was not a killer, and so he will feel ashamed thereof before his Lord, and he will say, 'I am not fit for this undertaking, go to Jesus, Allāh's Slave, his Apostle and Allāh's Word and a Spirit coming from him. Jesus will say, 'I am not fit for this undertaking, go to Muhammad the Slave of Allāh whose past and future sins were forgiven by Allāh.' So they will come to me and I will proceed till I will ask my Lord's Permission and I will be given permission. When I see my Lord, I will fall down in Prostration and He will let me remain in that state as long as He wishes and then I will be addressed.' Raise your head. Ask, and your request will be granted; say, and your saying will be listened to; intercede, and your intercession will be accepted.' I will raise my head and praise Allāh with a saying (i.e. invocation) He will teach me, and then I will intercede. He will fix a limit for me (to intercede for) whom I will admit into Paradise. Then I will come back again to Allāh, and when I see my Lord, the same thing will happen to me. And then I will intercede and Allāh will fix a limit for me to intercede whom I will let into Paradise, then I will come back for the third time; and then I will come back for the fourth time, and will say, 'None remains in Hell but those whom the Qur'an has imprisoned (in Hell) and who have been destined to an eternal stay in Hell.'" (The compiler) Abū 'Abdullāh said: 'But those whom the Qur'an has imprisoned in Hell, refers to the Statement of Allāh: 'They will dwell therein forever.' [*Ibid.*, 236, Vol. 9, XCIII, The Book of Tauḥīd, 507, 532, 601]

**86:** Narrated Ibn 'Abbās: Allāh is Sufficient for us and He is the Best Disposer of affairs" was said by **Abraham** when he was thrown into the fire; and it was said by Muhammad when they (i.e. hypocrites) said, "A great army is gathering against you, therefore, fear them" but it only increased their faith and they said: Allāh is Sufficient for us, and He is the Best Disposer (of affairs, for us).

**87:** Narrated Ibn 'Abbās: The last statement of **Abraham** when he was thrown into the fire was: 'Allāh is Sufficient for us and He is the Best Disposer (of affairs for us).

**291:** Narrated Abū Huraira: The Prophet said, "On the Day of Resurrection **Abraham** will see his father covered with Qatara and Ghabara (i.e. having a dark face)."

**292:** Narrated Abū Huraira: The Prophet said, "**Abraham** will meet his father (on the Day of Resurrection) and will say, 'O my Lord! You promised me that You would not

let me in disgrace on the Day when people will be resurrected.' Allāh will say, 'I have forbidden Paradise to the non-believers.'"

**Vol. 7:**
**LXII The Book of Nikāḥ, 21:** Narrated Abū Huraira: The Prophet said: **Abraham** did not tell lies except three. (One of them was) when **Abraham** passed by a tyrant and (his wife) Sāra was accompanying him. (Abū Huraira then mentioned the whole narration and said:) (The tyrant) gave her Hājar. Sāra said, "Allāh saved me from the hands of the Kāfir (i.e. infidel) and gave me Hājar to serve me." (Abū Huraira added:) That (Hājar) is your mother, O Banū Mā-As-Samā' (i.e., the Arabs)!

**155:** Narrated 'Āisha that Allāh's Apostle said to her, "I know when you are pleased with me or angry with me." I said, "Whence do you know that?" He said, "When you are pleased with me, you say, 'No, by the Lord of Muhammad,' but when you are angry with me, then you say, 'No, by the Lord of **Abraham**.'" Thereupon, I said, "Yes (you are right), but by Allāh, O Allāh's Apostle, I leave nothing but your name." [Vol. 8, LXXII, The Book of Al-Ādāb, 101]

**LXIII, The Book of Divorce, Chapter 10:** If, under compulsion somebody says about his wife, "She is my sister," there is no blame on him. The Prophet said, "Prophet **Abraham** said about his wife, Sāra, 'She is my sister' He meant his sister in Allāh's religion.

***Muslim (d. 821-875AD)*:**
**328:**
Abu Hurairah, may Allah be pleased with him, reported: Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: I found myself in the Hijr (the unroofed portion of the Ka'bah) and the Quraish were asking me about my Night Journey. I was asked about things pertaining to Bait Al-Maqdis (Jerusalem) which I could not preserve (in my mind). I was very much vexed, so vexed as I had never before. Then Allah raised it (Bait Al-Maqdis) before my eyes. I looked towards it, and I gave them the information about whatever they questioned me. I also saw myself (in this Journey) among the group of Messengers. I saw Moses saying the Prayer and found him to be a well-built man as if he was a man of the tribe of Shanu'ah. I saw Jesus son of Mary (peace be upon him) offering the Prayer, of all men he had the closest resemblance with 'Urwah bin Mas'ud Al-Thaqafi. I saw **Abraham** (peace be upon him) offering the Prayer; he had the closest resemblance with your companion (the Prophet himself) among people. When the time of the Prayer came I led them. When I completed the Prayer, someone said: O you Muhammad, here is Malik, the Warder of Hell; pay him salutations. I turned to him, but he preceded me in salutation.

# References


'Abraham' in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds. C. Roth and G. Wigoder (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971-72), Vol. 2 (1971), pp. 111-25

Abramovitch, H. H. (1994), *The First Father: Abraham: The Psychology and Culture of a Spiritual Revolutionary* (Lanham, Md., London: University Press of America)

'Akedah' in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds. C. Roth and G. Wigoder (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971-72), Vol. 2 (1971), pp. 480-86

Ali, Ahmed (1984), *Al-Qur'ān: a Contemporary Translation* (Karachi: Akrash Publishing)

Ali, A. Yusuf (2001, 1st ed. 1989), *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān* (Amana Publications: Beltsville, Maryland, U.S.A)

Al-Ghazali, Muhammad, *A Journey through the Qur'an: Themes and Messages of the Holy Qur'an*, abridged by Abdalhaqq Bewley (London: Dar Al-Taqua Ltd, 1998)

———. *The Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. by Claud Field (New York, London: M. E. Sharpe, 1991)

Al-Hilali, M. T. & M. M. Khan (1997), *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'ān in the English Language: a Summarized Version of Al-Tabari, Al-Qurtubi, and Ibn Kathir with Comments from Sahih Al-Bukhari* (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers and Distributors)

Al-Kisā'ī, Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā* ed. Isaac Eisenberg (1922-23) as *Qiṣaṣ Vita Prophetarum auctore Muḥammed ben 'Abdallah al-Kisa'i* (Leiden: E. J. Brill)

Al-Mawlud, *Maṭharat al-Qulūb*, translation and commentary by Hamza Yusuf (2004) ed. as *Purification of the Heart: Signs, Symptoms, and Cures of the Spiritual Diseases of the Heart* (USA: Starlatch Press)

Al-Mawrid (1999) *English-Arabic, Arabic-English Dictionary*, ed. M. Baalbaki & R. Baalbaki (Dar El-Ilm Lilmalayin)

'Amer Yunis (1995), 'The Sacrifice of Abraham in Islam' in F. Manns, ed., *The Sacrifice of Isaac in the Three Monotheistic Religions'* - Proceedings of a Symposium on the Interpretation of the Scriptures held in Jerusalem, March 16-17, 1995- (Franciscan Printing Press: Jerusalem)

Arberry, A. J. (1955), *The Koran Interpreted*, Vol. 2 (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd)

Aristotelis, *Politica*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxonii: Clarendoniano, 1957)

Bashear, S. (1990), 'Abraham's Sacrifice of his Son and Related Issues' in *Der Islam*, Vol. 67, No. 2, pp. 243-77

Beck, E. (1952), 'Die Gestalt des Abraham am Wendepunkt der Entwicklung Muhammeds' in *Le Museon*, Vol. 65, pp. 73-94

Becker, E. (1997), *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press)

_____. (1975), *Escape from Evil* (New York, London: The Free Press)

Bediuzzaman Saïd Nursi, *The Words: on the Nature and Purposes of Man, Life, and All Things*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler Neşriyat, 2002, 1st ed. 1992) [*The Thirtieth Word,* pp. 557-582]

Behbudi, M. B. (1997), *The Quran: a New Interpretation*, trans. Colin Turner (Richmond: Curzon Press)

Bell, R. (n.d.). 'The Sacrifice of Ishmael' in *Glasgow University Oriental Society Transactions*, Vol. 10, pp. 29-31

_____. (1991), *A Commentary on the Qur'ān*, Vol. 2, eds. C. E. Bosworth and M. E. J. Richardson (Manchester: University of Manchester)

Bijlefeld, W. A. (1982), 'Controversies around the Quranic Ibrahim Narrative and Its Orientalist Interpretations' in *The Muslim World*, Vol. 72, No. 2, pp. 81-94

Brinner, W. M. (1986), 'An Islamic Decalogue' in W. M. Brinner & S. D. Ricks, ed., *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press), pp. 67-84

Brown, M. (1982), 'Biblical Myth and Contemporary Experience: the Akedah in Modern Jewish Literature' in *Judaism*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 99-111

Brown, N. O. (1959), *Life against Death: the Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (New York: Viking)

Bukhari, Muhammed Ibn Ismaiel, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans. Muhammad M. Khan, (Lahore, Kazi Publications, 1983-1986)

Burkhardt, J. L. (1829), *Travels in Arabia*, Vol. 2 (London: Henry Colburn)

Burton, J. (1994), *An Introduction to the Hadith* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)

Calder, N. (1988), 'From Midrash to Scripture: the Sacrifice of Abraham in Early Islamic Tradition' in *Le Museon*, Vol. 101, pp. 375-402

Caspi, M. M. (2001), *Take Now Thy Son: the Motif of the Aqedah (Binding) in Literature* (USA: D. & F. Scott Publishing, Inc.)

Caspi, M. M. & Cohen, S. B. (1995), *The Binding [Aqedah] and Its Transformations in Judaism and Islam* (New York: Mellen Biblical Press)

Chittick, W. C. (2005, 1st ed. 2000), *Sufism: a Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld)

Cohen, J. (1990), 'Is this the Meaning of My Life? Israelis Rethink the *Akedah*' in *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 50-60

Combs-Schilling, M. E. (1989), *Sacred Performances: Islam, Sexuality, and Sacrifice* (New York: Columbia University Press)

Crow, D. K. (1986), 'The Amplification of Abraham in Islam' in *Face to Face: an Interreligious Bulletin*, Vol. 12, pp. 21-28

Curtiss, S. I. (1903), 'The Place of Sacrifice among the Primitive Semites' in *The Biblical World*, Vol. 21, No. 4., pp. 248-59

Dagorn, R. (1981), *La Geste D'Ismael d'apres l'Onomastique et la Tradition Arabes* (Geneva: Librairie Droz)

Delaney, C. (1998), *Abraham on Trial: the Social Legacy of Biblical Myth* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press)

Doukhan, J. (1995), 'The *Akedah* at the "Crossroad": its Significance in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue' in F. Manns, ed., *The Sacrifice of Isaac in the Three Monotheistic Religions* (Proceedings of a Symposium on the Interpretations of the Scriptures held in Jerusalem, March 16-17, 1995- (Franciscan Printing Press: Jerusalem)

Du Mesnil Du Buisson, C. (1934), 'Trois Histoires d'Arabes sur Abraham et Moise' in *Revue des Etudes Juives* (REJ), Vol. 99, pp. 119-26

Durkheim, E. (1915), *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. J. W. Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD)

Eliade, M. (1958), *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Sheed (London, New York: Sheed and Ward)

_____. (1959, 1st ed. 1957), *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion*, trans. W. R. Trask (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich)

Eph'al. I. (1976), "'Ishmael" and "Arab(s)": a Transformation of Ethnological Terms" in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (October), pp. 225-35

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1956), *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)

_____. (1954), "The Meaning of Sacrifice among the Nuer" in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 84, No. 1/2, pp. 21-33

Evripides, *Iphigenia in Tavris*, ed. David Sansone (Leipzig: Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1981)

Fakhry, M. (1997), *The Qur'an: a Modern English Version* (Reading: Garnet Publishing Ltd)

Farid, M. G. (1981, 1st ed. 1969), *The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text and English Translation with Commentary* (Oxford: Alden Press)

Fazlul Karim (1988), *Al-Hadis: an English Translation & Commentary on Mishkat - ul - Masabih* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service)

Feiler, B. (2004, 1st ed. 2002), *Abraham: a Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers)

Firestone, R. (2000), 'Comparative Studies in Bible and Qur'ān: a Fresh Look at Genesis 22 in Light of Sura 37' in (eds) Benjamin H. Hary, John L. Hayes and Fred Astren, *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication and Interaction* (Leiden, Boston: Brill), pp. 169-84

_____. (1991), 'Abraham's Association with the Meccan Sanctuary and the Pilgrimage in the pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Periods' in *Le Museon*, Vol. 104, issue 3-4, pp. 359-87

_____. (1990), *Journeys in Holy Lands: the Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press)

_____. (1989), 'Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice (Al-Dhabīḥ, Qur'ān 37: 99-113): Issues in Qur'ānic Exegesis' in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (spring), pp. 95-131

Frazer, J. G. (1963, 1st ed. 1912), *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion.* Part 5, *Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild,* 1 (London: Macmillan & Co LTD)

_____. (1927, 1st ed. 1906), *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion.* Part 4, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris,* I (London: Macmillan & Co LTD)

_____. (1925), *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion*, Part 6, *The Scapegoat* (London: Macmillan&Co)

_____. (1923, 1st ed. 1911), *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion.* Part 3, *The Dying God* (London: Macmillan & Co LTD)

Gayford, S. C. (1924), *Sacrifice and Priesthood: Jewish and Christian* (London: Methuen)

Gätje, H. (1996), *The Qur'ān and its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations*, trans. Alford T. Welch (Oxford: Oneworld Publications)

Geiger, A. (1898), *Judaism and Islam* (Madras) trans. F. M. Young from *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* (Bonn, 1833)

Hamilton A. R. Gibb (1962), 'Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia' in *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 55, No. 4, pp. 269-280

Gibson, T. (1986), *Sacrifice and Sharing in the Philippine Highlands: Religion and Society among the Buid of Mindoro* (London & Dover: The Athlone Press)

Gilchrist, J. (1992, 1st ed. 1986), *Millat-A-Ibrahim: the True Faith of Abraham* (Sheffield, UK: FFM Publications)

Goitein, S. D. (2007), 'Abraham –in Islamic Tradition-' in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, second edition by Fred Skolnik (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House), Vol. 1, p. 286

Goldziher, I. (1970), *Die Richtungen Der Islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden: E. J. Brill)

Gray, B. (1925), *Sacrifice in the Old Testament: its Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)

Guillaume, A. (1961-62), "The Pictorial Background of the Qur'ān" in *Annual of Leeds University Oriental Society*, Vol. 3, pp. 39-59

_____. (1955), *The Life of Muḥammad: a Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Guthrie, A. (1955), 'The Significance of Abraham' in *The Muslim World*, Vol. 45, pp. 113-20

Hain, H. W. (2001), Prologue in ed. M. M. Caspi, *Take Now Thy Son: the Motif of the Aqedah (Binding) in Literature* (USA: D. & F. Scott Publishing, Inc.)

Hayward, R. (1981), 'The Present State of Research into the Targumic Account of the Sacrifice of Isaac', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol. 32, pp. 127-150

Heiler, F. (1923), *Das Gebet: Eine Religionsgeschichteliche und religionspsychologische Untersuchung* (München: E. Reinhardt)

Hjärpe, J. (1977), 'Abraham IV' in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Vol. 1 (Berlin and New York)

Hocart, A. M. (1970, 1936 1st ed.), *Kings and Councillors* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press)

_____. (1954), *Social Origins* (London: Watts)

———. (1952), *The Life- Giving Myth* (London: Methuen)

Homer, *Iliad*, edited as *The Iliad of Homer* by M. M. Willcock (London, Macmillan, 1978)

———. *Odyssey*, edited as *The Odessey of Homer* by W. B. Stanford (London, Macmillan, 1971, 1st ed. 1948)

Horovitz, J. (1925), 'Jewish Proper Names and Derivatives in the Koran' in *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Annual 2, pp. 145-227

Hughes, T. P. (1885), *A Dictionary of Islam* (London: W.H. Allen)

Hubert, H. & Mauss, M. (1964, 1898) *Sacrifice: its Nature and Function*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Cohen & West)

Hurgronje, C. S. (1880), *Het Mekkaansche Feest* (Leiden: E. J. Brill)

Ibn al-'Arīf, *Maḥāsin al-Majālis (The attractions of mystical sessions)* trans. by William Elliott and Adnan K. Abdulla (Avebury, 1980)

Ibn Ḥanbal, Aḥmad (1313) *Hadith* (Cairo)

Ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr*, abridged by a group of scholars under the supervision of Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri (2000), Vol. 8 (Riyadh: Darussalam)

Izutsu, T. (1984, 1st ed. 1966-67), *Sufism and Taoism: a Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press)

Jalal al-Din Rumi, Maulana, *Mathnawi*, translation and commentary by Reynold Nicholson (London, Luzac, 1925-40)

James, E. O. (1933), *Origins of Sacrifice: a Study in Comparative Religion* (London: John Murray)

Kant, I. Streit der Fakultaten, trans. Emil Fackenheim (1973) in *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy: a Preface to Future Jewish Thought*, ed. Emil Fackenheim (New York: Schocken)

Kant, L. H. (2003), 'Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text: Abraham's Binding of Isaac and the Horror of Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22)' Part 1 in *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 77-110

_____. (2003), 'Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text: Abraham's Binding of Isaac and the Horror of Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22)' Part 2 in *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 161-94

Kaltner, J. (2002), 'Abraham's Sons: how the Bible and Qur'an see the Same Story Differently' in *Bible Review*, Vol. 18 (2002), pp. 16-23 and 45-46

Kassis, H. E. (1983), *A Concordance of the Qur'an* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press)

Katsh, A. I. (1954), *'Judaism in Islam: Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and its Commentaries'* (New York University Press)

Khatib, M. M. (1986), *The Bounteous Koran: a Translation of Meaning and Commentary* (London: Macmillan Press)

Kierkegaard, S. (1941), *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness unto Death*, (originally published as *Frygt og baeven*, 1843) trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press)

Kuschel, K. L. (1995, 1st ed. 1994), *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims*, trans. John Bowden (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company)

LaHurd, C. S. (1990), 'One God, One Father: Abraham in Judaism, Christianity and Islam' in *Dialog*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 17-28

Lane, E. W. (1956), *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.)

_____. (1879), *Selections from the Ḳur_ān* (London: Trübner&Co.)

Lerner, B. D. (1999), 'Saving the Akedah from the Philosophers' in *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 167-73

Levenson, J. D. (2004), 'The Conversion of Abraham to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam' in Hindy Najman and H. Judith Newman (eds), *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (Leiden, Boston: Brill)

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1966), *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson)

Leviant, C. (1999), 'Parallel Lives: the Trials and Traumas of Isaac and Ismael' in *Bible Review*, 15, pp. 20-25, 47

Lord, A. B. (1960), *Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press)

Maulvi Muhammad Ali (1920), *The Holy Qur-ān: containing the Arabic Text with English Translation and Commentary* (Lahore, India: Ahmadiyya Anjuman-i-ishāat-i-Islam)

*Midrash Rabbah, Genesis*, Vol. 1, trans. and ed. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (London: Soncino Press, 1951, 1st ed. 1939)

Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963)

Muhammad Ali (1920), *The Holy Qur-an: Containing Arabic text with English Translation and Commentary* (Lahore, India, Ahmadiyya anjuman-i-isháat-i-Islam)

Muhammad Asad (1980), *The Message of the Qur'ān* (Gibraltar: Dar al-andalus)

Murata, S. & Chittick, W. C. (2006, 1st ed. 1994), *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House)

Nagel, T. (1981), *Staat und Glaubensgemeinschaft im Islam*, Vol. 1 (Zürich and Munich)

Naudé, J. A. (1971), 'Isaac Typology in the Koran' in I. H. Eybers, ed., *De Fructu Oris Sui: Essays in Honour of Adrianus Van Selms* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 121-29

Newby, G. D. (1988), *A History of the Jews of Arabia: from Ancient Times to their Eclipse Under Islam* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press)

Niccacci, A. (1995), 'Opening Remarks' in F. Manns, ed., *The Sacrifice of Isaac in the Three Monotheistic Religions'* - Proceedings of a Symposium on the Interpretation of the Scriptures held in Jerusalem, March 16-17, 1995- (Franciscan Printing Press: Jerusalem)

Nietzsche, F. (1990), *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin)

Obermann, J. (1963), 'Islamic Origins: a Study in Background and Formation' in Nabih Amin Faris, ed., *The Arab Heritage*, (New York: Russel and Russel), pp. 58-80

Oesterley, W. O. E. (1937) *Sacrifices in Ancient Israel: Their Origin, Purposes and Development* (London: Hodder and Stoughton)

Palmer, E. H. (1880), *The Qur'ān*, Part 3, series: The Sacred Books of the East ed. F. M. Müller, Vol. 9 (Oxford: Clarendon Press)

Paret, R., "Ibrāhīm" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed.2 (Leiden, Brill, 1960-2004), Vol. 3, pp. 980-81

_____. "Ismā'īl" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed.2 (Leiden, Brill, 1960-2004), Vol. 4, pp. 184-85

_____. (1973), 'Der Islam' in Ulrich Mann (ed.), *Theologie* und *Religionswissenschaft: der Gegenwärtige Stand ihrer Forschungsergebnisse und Aufgaben im Hinblick auf ihr Gegenseitiges Verhältnis* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft)

Peters, F. E. (1994), *The Hajj: the Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)

_____. (1990), *Judaism, Christianity and Islam: the Classical Texts and their Interpretation*, Vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press)

_____. [1984, 1982 (1st ed)], *Children of Abraham* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)

Pickthall, M. M. (2000), *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an: an Explanatory Translation* (Birmingham: Islamic Dawah Centre International)

Riffat Hassan (1994), 'Eid al-Adha (Feast of Sacrifice) in Islam: Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael' in *Commitment and Commemoration: Jews, Christians, Muslims in Dialogue* (Chicago: Exploration Press)

Renard, J. (1994), *All the King's Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation* (State University of New York Press)

_____. (1986), 'Images of Abraham in the Writings of Jalāl Ad-dīn Rūmī' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 160, No. 4, pp. 633-40

Rippin, A. (1986), 'Sa'adya Gaon and Genesis 22: Aspects of Jewish-Muslim Interaction and Polemic' in W. M. Brinner & S. D. Ricks, ed., *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press)

Rodinson, M. 'preface' to R. Dagorn (1981), *La Geste D' Ismael d'apres l'Onomastique et la Tradition Arabes* (Geneva: Librairie Droz)

Rosenthal, E. I. J., (1961), *Judaism and Islam* (Thomas Yoseloff: London & New York)

Rubin, U. (1990), 'Ḥanīfiyya and Ka'ba: an Inquiry into the Arabian pre-Islamic Background of dīn Ibrāhīm' in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, Vol. 13, pp. 85-112

_____. (1979), 'Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shī'a Tradition' in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, Vol. 1, pp. 41-65

Samanta, S. (1994), 'The "Self-Animal" and Divine Digestion: Goat Sacrifice to the Goddess Kali in Bengal' in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 3, pp. 779-803

Sandmel, S. (1979), *Philo of Alexandria: an Introduction* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Schapiro, M. (1943), 'The Angel with the Ram in Abraham's Sacrifice: a Parallel in Western and Islamic Art' in *Ars Islamica*, X, pp. 134-47

Scudder, L. R. (1990), 'Ishmael and Isaac and Muslim-Christian Dialogue' in *Dialog*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 29-32

Seale, M. S. (1974), *The Desert Bible, Nomadic Tribal Culture and Old Testament Interpretation* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson)

Sebouhian, G. (1981), 'From Abraham and Isaac to Bob Slocum and My Boy: Why Fathers kill their Sons' in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Spring), pp. 43-52

*Septuaginta*, ed. Alfred Rahlfs (Stuttgart: Privileglerte Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1952, 1st ed. 1935)

Sherwood, Y. (2004), 'Binding-Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the "Sacrifice" of Abraham's Beloved Son' in *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 72, No. 4, pp. 821-61

Shils, E. (1981), *Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press)

Smith, B. H. (1980), "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories" in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, pp. 213-36 and in ed. W. J. T. Mitchel (1981), *On Narrative* (University of Chicago Press), pp. 209-32

Smith, M. (1975), 'A Note on Burning Babies' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 95, No. 3, pp. 477-79

Smith, W. R. (1927, 1st ed. 1889) *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: the Fundamental Institutions* (London: A. & C. Black LTD)

Spencer, H. (1969), *Principles of Sociology* (London: Macmillan)

Speyer, H. (1961, 1st ed. 1931), *Die Biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, (Hildesheim: G. Olms)

Spiegel, S. (1969, 1st ed. 1967), *The Last Trial: on the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: the Akedah.* trans. Judah Goldin (New York: Schocken Books)

Sprenger, A. S. (1869, 1st ed. 1861-1865), *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mo*ḥ*ammed*, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung)

Stieglecker, H. (1962), *Die Glaubenslehren des Islam*, 3vols (Munich, Paderborn and Vienna)

Stillman, N. (1974), 'The story of Cain and Abel in the Qur'ān and the Muslim Commentators: Some Observations' in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. 19, pp. 231-39

Tabari, *Tarīkh*, trans. by W. M. Brinner (1987) as *The History of al-Ṭabarī* (State University of New York Press)

Thaiss, G. E. (1973), *Religious Symbolism and Social Change: the Drama of Husain* (Ph.D. thesis in Anthropology, Washington University)

*The Babylonian Talmud*, trans. into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of I. Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1952)

*The Book of Jubilees or the Little Genesis*, trans. from the editor's Ethiopic text and edited by R. H. Charles (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1902)

*The Holy Bible*, (New King James Version, Thomas Nelson, 1982, 1st ed. 1979)

*The Interpreter's Bible: the Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible* (eds) George Arthur Buttrick et al. (New York: Abingdon- Cokesbury Press, 1951-57)

*The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 Vols. (New York, London: Funk&Wagnalls, 1901-1906)

*The Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca [PG]* ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris, 1857-1866)

Torrey, C. (1933), *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press)

Tottoli, R. (2002), *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature*, trans. M. Robertson (Richmond: Curzon)

Trimingham, J. S. (1979), *Christianity among the Arabs in pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longman)

Tucker, A. (1999), 'Sins of our Fathers: a Short History of Religious Child Sacrifice' in *Zeitschrift fur Religions und Geistesgeschichte*, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp. 30-47

Turner, C. 'Wealth as an Immortality Symbol in the Qur'an: a Reconsideration of the *māl / amwāl* Verses' (in press)

_____. (2006), *Islam: The Basics* (London, New York: Routledge)

_____. (2000), *Islam without Allah? The Rise of Religious Externalism in Safavid Iran* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press)

Tylor, E. B. (1958), *Religion in Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper), Vol. 2 of *Primitive Culture*, 1st ed. 1871

Van Biema, D., 'The Legacy of Abraham' in *Time*, September 30, 2002

Van Seters, J. (1987), "Abraham" in M. Eliade ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Vol. 1, pp. 13-17 and second edition by Lindsay Jones (New York, London: Thomson Gale, 2005)

Waldman, M. R. (1986), 'New Approaches to "Biblical" Material in the Qur'an' in W. M. Brinner & S. D. Ricks, eds, *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press), pp. 47-64 and in *The Muslim World*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (1985), pp. 1-16

Wansbrough, J. E. (1978), *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (New York: Oxford University Press)

_____. (1977), *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Watt, W. M. (1980), *Der Islam*, Vol. 1 (Stuttgart and Mainz)

_____. (1953), *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)

Wherry, E. M. (1896), *A Comprehensive Commentary on the Qur'ān*, Vol. 3 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co)

Wellhausen, J. (1887), *Reste Arabischen Heidentumes*, Vol. 3 of his *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten* (Berlin: Georg Reimer)

Wensinck, A. J. (1927), *A Handbook of Early Muhammadan Tradition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill)

Westermarck, E. (1933), *Pagan Survivals in Mohammedan Civilisation* (London: Macmillan & Co)

Zwemer, S. M. (1946), 'Atonement by Blood Sacrifice in Islam' in *The Moslem World*, Vol. 36, No. 3, pp. 189-92

_____ . (1916), 'The 'Akika Sacrifice' in *The Moslem World*, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 236-52

http://www.iiu.edu.my/deed/hadith/muslim (Muslim, ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, trans. `Abdul Hamid Siddiqi; last updated: 17 November 2005)

http://www.renaissance.com.pk/JanIslamiShari12y5.htm (Ghamidi, Javed Ahmad, 'The Ritual of Animal Sacrifice', trans. Shehzad Saleem from Ghamidi's 'Qanun i 'Ibadat')