



The Qur'anic View of Abraham

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The most important idea to take away from this paper is that Islam—like Judaism and Christianity and unlike, say, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, or classical Greek paganism—is an Abrahamic religion. In Islam, Abraham is a prominent link in the chain of prophets that begins with Adam, continues with Moses, and eventually culminates in Jesus and then (via the line of Ishmael) in Muhammad. He is a pivotal figure in the Islamic *Heilsgeschichte*, or “history of salvation”; the Qur’an calls him “an imam to the nations” (*li-al-nas imaman*; Qur’an 2:124)

Abraham and both his biological and spiritual progeny play central roles in the Qur’an’s scriptural text (Abraham is mentioned in thirty-five chapters of the Qur’an, second only to Moses, and is named sixty-nine times, again second only to Moses); further, Abraham, his people, and the divine blessings upon them are mentioned in every one of the five daily prayers incumbent upon all Muslims. Not surprisingly, in that light Abraham’s important place in Islam ensures that Islam is a religious cousin to Christianity and Judaism. Indeed, Muslims themselves speak of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the three *adyan samawiyya*, or “heavenly religions,” and of their adherents as *ahl al-kitab*, “people of the Book.” Ibrahim (the Arabic form of Abraham) is a common given name among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Middle East as, in certain regions, are the diminutive forms Brahim and Barhoum.

Incidentally, although the patriarch’s name in Arabic is Ibrahim, I will refer to him throughout this paper—even in translations from the Qur’an, all of which are mine, and even during the portion of the

biblical narrative in which he is called Abram—by the form of his name that is familiar to English-speaking audiences: Abraham.¹

AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE ON ABRAHAM IN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM

The Bible's so-called primeval history extends from Genesis 1 through Genesis 11, covering the creation of the world and of humankind, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the first murder, the destruction of the world in a global flood, and the origin of nations and languages at the Tower of Babel. At Genesis 11:26–32, however, the patriarch Abram—later to be called Abraham—(along with his wife Sarai, later Sarah, and his nephew Lot) is introduced, and the focus of the biblical narrative becomes more local and more conventionally historical, as it will largely remain thereafter.² He is, thus, a transitional figure and a pivotal one.

The narrative of Abraham's life that is recorded in the biblical book of Genesis revolves around the intertwined themes of posterity and land.³ Specifically, after Abraham leaves the house of his idolatrous father, Terah, he is promised the land of Canaan (roughly today's Israel or Palestine) for himself and his descendants. In the end, this promise is inherited by his son Isaac (whose mother was Sarah), while Isaac's half-brother Ishmael (whose mother was Hagar) is promised that he, too, will be the founder of a great nation.

In the Hebrew Bible, Abraham is the progenitor of many nations, including not only the Israelites but also the Edomites, Amalekites, Kenizzites, and Midianites.⁴ Importantly, of course, he is also the forefather, through his son Ishmael, of the desert Arabs, the Ishmaelites. In a somewhat different sense, he is also regarded as the common patriarch of Judaism, of Christianity, and beyond the Bible, of Islam.

In Judaism specifically, Abraham is the father of the special covenant relationship between the Hebrews and God. Jews traditionally call him *Avraham Avinu* (אברהם אבינו), “our father Abraham,” signifying that he is both the biological progenitor of the Jews and, spiritually speaking, the father of Judaism, the first Jew.

In Christianity, which grew very early beyond its originally Jewish ethnic roots, Abraham is the spiritual father of all believers, whether they be Jewish or not. As the apostle Paul put it while addressing the

Saints in Galatia: “Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:26–29).

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul explains that Abraham was called by God and “received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised” (Romans 4:11). Perhaps Paul’s comment about Abraham will be slightly clearer in a more modern rendering: “He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that comes from the faith he had while he still wasn’t circumcised. It happened this way so that Abraham could be the ancestor of all those people who aren’t circumcised, who have faith in God, and so are counted as righteous” (Romans 4:11 Common English Bible).

According to the Qur’an, Abraham “and those with him” are “excellent example” (*uswa hasana*) for Muslims (60:4). God “chose Adam and Noah and the family of Abraham and the family of ‘Imran above the worlds [*‘ala al-‘alamin*]” (Qur’an 3:33). Abraham, the Qur’an says, was chosen in this world and will be among the righteous in the next world (2:130). There is even possibly a slight hint of his having been chosen before his birth (which is, of course, a definite teaching of Abraham 3:22–23): “And we had given Abraham his guidance before [*min qablu*], for we knew him. . . . And when we took from the prophets their covenant—and from you [Muhammad] and from Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus the son of Mary. And we took from them a strong covenant” (Qur’an 21:51; 33:7).

For the remainder of this paper, I will compare the more or less continuous narrative about Abraham that is found in the biblical book of Genesis with the narratives about Abraham and the allusions to him that are widely scattered across the pages of the Qur’an. While summarizing and sometimes citing the Bible’s narrative risks redundancy for those to whom it is already reasonably familiar, doing so will help to put the Qur’anic materials in their context.

THE IDOLATRY OF ABRAHAM'S FATHER AND ABRAHAM'S NEAR SACRIFICE

At the beginning of Genesis 12, Abraham is already a grown man; indeed, Genesis 12:4 says that he is seventy-five years old. The Lord commands him to separate himself from his father's house and directs him to the land of Canaan, which is promised to him and to his posterity as an eventual inheritance. But he doesn't stay in Canaan. Rather, because of a famine in the area, he continues on to Egypt, where he becomes embroiled in an awkward situation with Pharaoh.

Why does Abraham leave his father's household? The first chapter of the Book of Abraham suggests that it was because of his family's idolatry:

In the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my fathers, I, Abraham, saw that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence. . . . My fathers, having turned from their righteousness, and from the holy commandments which the Lord their God had given unto them, unto the worshipping of the gods of the heathen, utterly refused to hearken to my voice; for their hearts were set to do evil, and were wholly turned to the god of Elkenah, and the god of Libnah, and the god of Mahmackrah, and the god of Korash, and the god of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. (Abraham 1:1, 5–6)

The Qur'an likewise tells of the idolatry of Abraham's father. However, that father's name, as it is given in the Qur'an, is Azar, in contrast to the name Terah that is given in the Bible and the Midrash.⁵ Significantly, though, the early Islamic scholar Ibn Hisham gives his name as Tarih, which seems sufficiently close to the biblical name to be considered essentially identical.⁶

And when Abraham said to his father, Azar, "Do you take idols as gods? Truly I see you and your people in manifest error." . . . You had an excellent example in Abraham and those with him when they said to their people, "We are free of you and of what you worship instead of God. We reject you. The enmity and hatred that have arisen between us and you will remain until you worship God alone"—except for what Abraham said to his

father: "I will seek forgiveness for you, but I cannot avail you against God."⁷

Throughout the Qur'an are scattered allusions to a story—much more fleshed out in the commentators and in the so-called *qisas al-anbiya'* ("tales of the prophets") literature—according to which Azar, Abraham's father, used to actually make idols and then entrust them to his son to sell. Abraham, so the sources say, would go through the town calling out something along the lines of "Who will buy these idols, which will neither hurt him nor benefit him?" Needless to say, his sales pitch was not particularly successful.

Abraham tried to win his father away from idolatry, but his attempt failed:

When he said to his father, "O my father, why do you worship something that neither hears nor sees nor can do you any good?

"O my father, knowledge has come to me that you have not received. So follow me, and I will guide you to the straight path.

"O my father, do not worship Satan. Truly, Satan was rebellious against the Merciful.

"O my father, I fear that punishment from the Merciful will touch you and that you will be Satan's companion."

He said, "Do you reject my gods, O Abraham? If you do not stop, I will stone you. So depart from me for a season."

He said, "Peace be upon you! I will seek forgiveness for you from my Lord. He has been gracious to me." (Qur'an 19:42–47)

The stories relate that eventually Nimrod, the son of Cush and the king over the country, seized Abraham and interrogated him. The following Qur'anic passage may refer to that incident:

Are you unaware of him who argued with Abraham because God had granted him kingship? Abraham said, "My Lord is he who gives life and causes to die." He [Abraham's opponent] said, "I give life and cause to die." So Abraham said, "God brings the Sun up from the East. So bring it up from the West!" Thus, the unbeliever was silenced. (Qur'an 2:258)

But then the captor cast Abraham into a flaming furnace. However, the fire was cool and pleasant to Abraham, and he emerged from it unharmed.⁸ Of course, the story of Abraham's near sacrifice is familiar to Latter-day Saints from the Book of Abraham, but that book doesn't involve fire.⁹ I will share with you four passages in which the Qur'an relates the story:

He [Abraham] said, "What are these statues to which you are devoted?"

They said, "We found our fathers worshipping them."

He said, "You and your fathers have been in manifest error."

They said, "Have you brought us the truth, or are you sporting?"

He said, "Indeed, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, who created them, and I am a witness of that.

By God, I will plot against your idols when you have turned your backs and gone away."

So he smashed them [the idols] into pieces—except for the largest of them, so that they [the idolators] might turn to it.

They said, "Who did this to our gods? Truly, he is a wrongdoer!"

They [others] said, "We heard a youth called Abraham mentioning them."

They said, "Bring him before the eyes of the people so that they may bear witness."

They said, "O Abraham, are you the one who did this to our gods?"

He said, "Indeed, the biggest of them did it. Ask them, if they can talk."

So they came to their senses and they said, "Truly you yourselves are the wrongdoers."

Then they turned right around: "You knew already that these [idols] can't talk."

He said, "So do you worship, instead of God, what can neither benefit you nor harm you in any way?

Shame on you and on what you worship instead of God! Have you no sense?"

They said, "Burn him in support of your gods, if you must do something."

We said, "O fire, be cool and safe for Abraham."

They conspired against him, but we made them the worst losers.¹⁰

Recite to them the news of Abraham,

When he said to his father and to his people, "What are you worshipping?"

They said, "We worship idols, to which we will remain devoted."

He said, "Do they hear you when you call upon them
Or do they benefit you or harm you?"

They said, "No. We found our fathers doing likewise."

He said, "Do you see what you are worshipping,
You and your ancestors?"

Truly, they are all enemies to me, except the Lord of the Worlds,

Who created me and guides me,
Who provides me with food and drink,
And who heals me when I am ill.

He is the one who will cause me to die and then return me to life

And who, I hope, will forgive me my sins at the Day of Judgment.

My Lord! Grant me wisdom and join me with the righteous
And make me of honorable mention among later generations!

Make me one of those who inherit the Garden of Bliss!

And forgive my father, for he is certainly one of those who have gone astray.

And do not disgrace me on the Day of Resurrection,

The Day when neither wealth nor posterity will be of any benefit,

Except for those who come before God with a sound heart.

And the Garden will be brought near to the pious

And Hell will be manifest to those who deviated.

And it will be said to them, ‘Where are those whom you used to worship

Besides God? Can they help you, or even help themselves?’

Then they will be cast head over heels into Hell, they and those who deviated

And the armies of Iblis altogether.

They will say, while they are disputing [with their false gods],

‘By God, we were in manifest error

When we made you equal with the Lord of the Worlds.

It was criminals who led us astray

And now there are no intercessors for us,

Nor a close friend.

If only we had a second chance, we would be believers.’”¹¹

And Abraham, when he said to his people, “Worship God and fear him. That is best for you, if you only knew.

What you worship instead of God is idols, and you invent lies. Truly, those that you worship instead of God cannot provide for you. Seek provision with God, and worship him and be grateful to him. It is to him that you will return.” . . .

But the only response of his people was to say, “Kill him or burn him!” So God saved him from the fire. Truly, in this there are signs for a people who believe.

He said, “Truly, you have taken to yourselves idols instead of God out of a desire for harmony in the life of this world. On Resurrection Day, though, you will deny each other and curse one another. Your home will be the Fire, and you will have no helper.”¹²

When he said to his father and his [father’s] people, “What are you worshipping?

Do you prefer false gods to God?” . . .

He turned to their gods and said, “Will you not eat [of the offerings given to you]?

What is wrong with you that you don’t speak?”

So he turned on them and struck them with his right hand.

So they rushed hastily toward him.

He said, “Do you worship that which you [yourselves] carved

While it is God who created you and whatever you do?”

They said, “Build a structure for him and throw him into the flames!”

They plotted against him, but we humiliated them.¹³

SODOM AND GOMORRAH AND THE PROMISED SON

Abraham returns to Canaan in Genesis 13, and the Lord renews the promise to him that the land will be his and that his posterity, his “seed” [*zara*], will be “as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered” (Genesis 13:16).

Genesis 14 continues Abram’s story, and then in a revelation involving the night sky that is described in Genesis 15, God reiterates his promise of a vast posterity: “And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell [that is, count] the stars [*kowkabim*], if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed [*zara*] be.”¹⁴

Parenthetically, it’s worth noting here that the connection between Abraham and astronomy—so familiar to Latter-day Saints from Abraham 3:1–15 and Facsimile 3 in the Book of Abraham—is also apparent in the Qur’an:

And thus we showed Abraham the kingdom of the heavens and the earth [*malakut al-samawati wa al-'ard*], that he might be among the certain.

And when the night covered him, he saw a star and he said, “This is my Lord!” And then, when it set, he said, “I do not love things that set.”

Then, when he saw the Moon rising, he said, “This my Lord!” And then, when it set, he said, “Truly, if my Lord does not guide me I will be among the people who have gone astray.”

And then, when he saw the Sun rising, he said, “This is my Lord! This is the greatest.” And then, when it set, he said, “O my people! I am free from what you have associated [with God in worship].

I have turned my face as a monotheist toward him who created the heavens and the earth, and I am not among the polytheists.” . . .

This is the argument that we gave to Abraham against his people. We raise in rank whomever we will. Truly, your Lord is wise and knowing.¹⁵

In Genesis 16 (in what might at first seem to be a step toward fulfillment of that twice-repeated promise of posterity), Sarah gives her bondservant Hagar to Abraham as his wife so that the thus-far childless Abraham can have a child. Intrafamilial strife ensues, but Hagar does eventually bear a son, Ishmael. According to Genesis 17:1–8,

When Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

In Genesis 17:15–16, just as he had changed Abram’s name to Abraham, the Lord changes Sarai’s name to Sarah. And he goes much further. As Abraham will be the father of many nations and of kings, the newly renamed Sarah will be a *mother* of nations and of kings. At hearing this, Abraham, father of the faithful, laughs in disbelief: “Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?” He already *has* a son, he implicitly reminds the Lord, and realistically, that is enough for him: “And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!” (Genesis 17:17–18)

But the Lord does not back down:

And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year. And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.¹⁶

In Genesis 18:1–4, the story continues:

And the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; and he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground, and said, My Lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant: let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.¹⁷

Following traditions of hospitality that have remained largely unchanged among desert-dwelling Bedouin Arabs today, Abraham hastens to prepare food for his heavenly guests while his wife, who helps with the preparations, remains secluded in the family's tent. After they had eaten, though, his guests address Abraham:

And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent. And he [presumably the Lord] said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? And the Lord said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a

child, which am old? Is any thing too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son. Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh. (Genesis 18:9–15)

The conversation then takes an unexpected turn, with the focus now shifting to the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah:

And the men rose up from thence, and looked toward Sodom: and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way. And the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him. And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know. And the men turned their faces from thence, and went toward Sodom: but Abraham stood yet before the Lord. And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? (Genesis 18:16–23)

There follows, in Genesis 18:24–33, the famous scene of bargaining between Abraham and the Lord over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 19 relates the dramatic conclusion of the story of those two towns when two angels make a reconnaissance visit and, excepting the actions of Lot and his family, are confronted with flagrant violations of the rules of hospitality that Abraham, by contrast, had just illustrated so very beautifully. Lot is told to escape immediately and is warned that neither he nor any of those escaping with him should so much as look back at what was about to happen.

Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew

those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt. And Abraham gat up early in the morning to the place where he stood before the Lord: and he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace. And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in the which Lot dwelt. (Genesis 19:24–29)

The Qur'an knows this story too, and as in the Genesis version of it, the announcement of the promised son is inextricably bound up with the decree of doom upon the cities of the plain.

And our messengers came to Abraham with the good news. And they said, "Peace!" And he said, "Peace!" And it was not long before he brought a roasted calf.

And when he saw that their hands did not reach [for] it, he became suspicious and afraid of them. And they said, "Do not fear. We have been sent to the people of Lot."

And his wife was standing there, so she laughed. So we gave her the good news of Isaac and, after Isaac, of Jacob.

She said, "Woe is me! Shall I bear a child, being aged and this my lord being an old man? Truly this is a strange thing!"

They said, "Are you astonished at the decree of God? The mercy of God and his blessings be upon you, the people of the house. Truly, he is praiseworthy and glorious!"

Then, when the agitation had departed from Abraham and the good news had come to him, he began to argue with us for the people of Lot.

Truly, Abraham was clement, persistently imploring.

"O Abraham! Give this up. The decree of your Lord has already come, and unavoidable punishment is coming upon them."¹⁸

It seems clear from this account that the angels appeared to Abraham in human form without disclosing their identity. That is

why he initially took them simply as strangers in need of hospitality and nourishment. The Qur'an also relates,

Inform them about Abraham's guests.

When they entered upon him they said, "Peace!" he said, "Truly, we are afraid of you."

They said, "Do not fear! Truly, we bring you good news of a knowledgeable son."

He said, "Do you bring me good news despite my old age? What kind of good news is this that you bring?"

They said, "We bring you good news in truth. So do not be one of those who despair."

He said, "Who despairs of the mercy of his Lord except those who have gone astray?"

He said, "So what is your mission, O messengers?"

They said, "We have been sent to a criminal people,

Except for the family of Lot. Truly, we will save all of them

Except for his wife. We have determined that she will be one of those who are left behind."¹⁹

It should be noted that in the passage just quoted, it is the angelic messengers—not Lot's wife's own choice—that determine the fate of Lot's wife. Subsequent Islamic theology tended very strongly toward the doctrine of predestination.

When our messengers came to Abraham with the good news, they said, "We will destroy the people of this village. Its people have been wrongdoers."²⁰

Has the story of Abraham's honored guests come to you?

They came in upon him and said, "Peace!" He said, "Peace!" (An unknown people.)

He went to his people and brought a fat calf.

He brought it near to them and said, "Will you not eat?"

Then he became afraid of them. They said, "Do not fear," and they gave him the good news of a knowledgeable son.

Then his wife came forward with a cry. She struck her face and said, "An old barren woman?"

They said, “Thus said your Lord. Truly he is wise and all-knowing.”

Abraham said, “What is your mission, O messengers?”

They said, “We have been sent to a criminal people,

To send upon them stones of clay

Marked with your Lord for transgressors.”

So we evacuated the believers from [the city].

But we found only one house of *muslims* in it

And we left in it a sign for those who fear the painful punishment.²¹

ABRAHAM AS PROPHET

Genesis 20, with its story of Sarah, Abraham, and the lustful Abimelech, has no clear analogue within the Qur'an. However, speaking of Abraham, God warns Abimelech, “Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine” (Genesis 20:7).

This identification of Abraham as a prophet is striking because biblically, Abraham never delivers divine messages to a wider public in the manner of Isaiah or Jeremiah, and he does not foretell the future. Still, while he is not a foreteller of events, he is definitely a forth-teller, a mouthpiece or spokesman of the will of God.²² The Qur'an, too, expressly recognizes him as a prophet (*nabi*; Qur'an 19:41). In a verse addressed to Muhammad, the Qur'an represents God as speaking in the first-person plural: “Truly, we have granted revelation to you just as we granted revelation to Noah and to the prophets after him. And we granted revelation to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, and Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon. And we gave David the psalms” (Qur'an 4:163).

ISHMAEL, ISAAC, AND MECCA

In Genesis 21, the Lord's promise to Abraham—who is now said to be a hundred years old—is fulfilled when Sarah bears a son, Isaac.²³ But as the boy grows, strife erupts between his mother and the bond-
maid Hagar, who had borne Abraham's previous son and onetime heir apparent. “And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy

sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called. And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed” (Genesis 21:12–13).

So Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away, and the mother and child wander in the wilderness of Beersheba. They run out of water, and Hagar despairs, hiding herself away so that she isn’t obliged to watch her child die.

And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation. And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink. And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. (Genesis 21:17–20)

Interestingly, Islamic tradition places this story in Mecca, in the Hijaz region of the Arabian Peninsula rather than in the wilderness of Beersheba.²⁴ And the Qur’an itself provides a sacred history for that region.

In association with his son Ishmael, Abraham is said to have established *al-bayt* (“the House”), which is understood to be the Ka’ba in Mecca—believed by many Muslims to have been the first house of worship on earth. Closely associated with it is the *maqam Ibrahim*, “the place of Abraham,” which is a specific location of prayer.²⁵ “And when We designated for Abraham the site of the House, [saying], ‘Do not associate anything with me and purify my House for those who perform *al-tawaf* [the ritual circumambulation of the Ka’ba] and those who stand [in prayer; *al-qa’imin* (compare *maqam Ibrahim*, which is, literally, “the standing place of Abraham”)] and those who bow and prostrate themselves” (Qur’an 22:26).

At Sura 2:126–128, Abraham prays regarding the Ka’ba that God “show us our rites” (*arina manasikana*).²⁶ He prays for Mecca and its people. His prayer includes a petition directed to God to “make us *muslims* [*muslimina*] to thee and [to make] from our seed (‘our

descendants,' *dhurriyyatina*) a *muslim* community [*ummatan muslimatan*] to thee."²⁷

“THE SEED OF ABRAHAM”

This is an appropriate place, I think, for a brief discussion of Abraham's literal and figurative descendants, although a more comprehensive treatment of them is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper.

At Sura 2:132–133, both Abraham and Jacob are depicted as having exhorted their sons to die as *muslimun*—which obviously suggests the possibility of being simultaneously a descendant of those two patriarchs and not remaining faithful to their religious legacy. This term, again, is not referring to any modern sense of religious affiliation but rather refers to the idea of dying still faithfully submissive to God.²⁸ The *millat Ibrahim*, the “community of Abraham,” is distinct from Judaism and Christianity. It is not polytheistic. It is what Muslims follow—“we are *muslimun*”—but it is neither precisely identical to nor completely exhausted by the historical religion of Islam.²⁹

Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and *al-asbat* were neither Jews nor Christians. (Qur'an 2:140)

Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian but a *muslim*, a monotheist [*hanif*], and he was not a polytheist. (Qur'an 3:67; compare 22:78; 42:13)

Muslims believe in God and in what has been revealed to them and what was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and *al-asbat* and what was given to Moses and Jesus and what was given to the prophets from their Lord, making no distinction between any of them. (Qur'an 2:136; compare 2:285; 3:84)

According to the Qur'an, the original religion of Abraham was a simple primordial monotheism—not, uncoincidentally, unlike Islam itself:

Truly, my Lord guided me to the straight path, a correct religion, the community of Abraham the monotheist, who was not among those who associated others [with God].³⁰

I [Joseph of Egypt] follow the community of my fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is not for us to associate anything else with God.³¹

Those were some of the prophets of the descendants of Adam [*dhurriyyati adama*] and among those whom we carried [in the Ark] with Noah and among the descendants of Abraham and Israel, upon whom God bestowed his grace, those whom we guided and chose. When the signs of the Merciful were recited to them, they fell prostrate, in tears.³²

Truly Abraham was a “nation” obedient to God, a monotheist, and he was not among those who associated others [with God]. . . . Then we revealed to you, “Follow the community of Abraham, a monotheist, and he was not among those who associated others [with God].”³³

He decreed to you [Muhammad] of religion what he enjoined upon Noah and what we revealed to you and what we enjoined upon Abraham and Moses and Jesus, that they establish religion and that they not be divided in it.³⁴

THE BINDING OF “HIS SON”

In Genesis 22 comes one of the most difficult and disturbing stories in all of scripture: “And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.”³⁵ Happily, in the end, Abraham is not actually required to sacrifice his son; his willingness to do so, to offer up the heir for whom he had yearned for most of a century, has abundantly demonstrated his commitment to faithfully follow the will of God.

And the angel of the Lord called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, and said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the

heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice. So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beer-sheba. (Genesis 22:15–19)

The Qur'an also knows this story, but perhaps—though not certainly!—with a twist.³⁶ In the following passage, Abraham is depicted as petitioning the Lord for offspring, and God is shown responding in the first-person plural:

“My Lord! Give me [one] of the righteous!”

So we gave him the good news [*bashsharnahu*] of a fore-bearing youth.

And then, when the boy reached the age to work with him, he said, “O my son, I have seen in a dream that I am to sacrifice you. So tell me what you think.” He said “O my father, do what you have been commanded. If God wills, you will find me submissive.”³⁷

And when they both submitted, and he laid him on the side of his forehead,

We called out to him “O Abraham!

You have already fulfilled the vision.” Thus we reward those who do good.

That was truly a clear test.

And we ransomed him with a great sacrifice.

And we left upon him among those who came afterward.

“Peace be upon Abraham!”

Thus we reward those who do good.

Truly, he was among our believing servants. (Qur'an 37:100–111)

To this point, the story is obviously closely parallel to the account in Genesis. But there is an interesting omission: the son who is nearly sacrificed is not named. Nevertheless, the overwhelming consensus among modern Muslims is that it was Ishmael rather than Isaac. And, in my experience, Muslims have often been surprised when I point out to them that he isn't actually identified as such in the story. Why

are they so confident? I have little doubt that contemporary Middle Eastern politics play a role. But there is also the fact that the verse immediately following the passage just cited mentions the birth of Isaac, thus suggesting that his birth *follows* that famous near sacrifice: “We gave him the good news [*bashsharnahu*] of Isaac, a prophet and one of the righteous” (Qur’an 37:112).

ABRAHAM’S POSTERITY, BOTH BIOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL

Important though he is in and of himself, Abraham is also significant as the founder of both a line of biological descendants and a spiritual posterity. The latter is plainly recognizable, of course, in the great religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (as well as in the smaller traditions of the Druze and Bahá’í faiths, which historically speaking, emerge out of Islam).

The Qur’an mentions “Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, [and] the tribes [*al-asbat*].”³⁸ It refers to “the people of Abraham,” “the people of Abraham and the people of Lot” (Qur’an 9:70; 22:43).

Abraham’s literal progeny are promised very specific blessings:

But we had already given the family of Abraham the book (or “the scripture”) and wisdom (*al-kitaba wa al-hikmata*) and conferred upon them a great kingdom (*mulkan azima*).³⁹

And thus will your Lord choose you and teach you the interpretation of narratives and complete his favor upon you and upon the family of Jacob, as he completed it upon your fathers before, Abraham and Isaac. Indeed, your Lord is knowing and wise.⁴⁰

Remember our servants Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, men of strength (literally, “hands”) and vision.⁴¹

But divine blessings are not simply automatic for Abraham’s descendants: According to Sura 2:124, Abraham was tested by his Lord with commandments (literally, “with words” [*bi-kalimatim*]), “and he fulfilled them” (*fa-atammahunna*, “he completed them”). At which, the Lord said, “I will make you a leader (*imam*) of the people.” Then Abraham asked, “And what of my seed [*dhurriyyati*, ‘my

descendants')?" to which the Lord answered, "My covenant (*'ahdi*) does not extend to wrongdoers."⁴²

Indeed, the most worthy of Abraham among the people are those who followed him and this Prophet [Muhammad], and those who believe. (Qur'an 3:68)

And indeed we sent Noah and Abraham and placed prophet-hood and scripture among their descendants (*fi dhurriyati-hima*). Some of them receive guidance, but most of them are corrupt. (Qur'an 57:26)

And when Abraham said to his father and his people, "Truly, I am free of what you worship, except him who created me. And he will guide me." And he made it a lasting word among his descendants, that perhaps they might return. (Qur'an 43:26–28)

THE END

In Genesis 23, Sarah dies and is buried in the cave of Machpelah in the Old City of Hebron, which Abraham buys from Ephron the Hittite. Genesis 24 relates the story of Isaac and Rebekah, while Genesis 25 tells of Abraham's remarriage, his additional descendants, and finally, his own death and burial in the cave of Machpelah. In addition to Jews and Christians, Muslims venerate the cave for that reason, and in Arabic, the city of Hebron itself is commonly called *al-Khalil*, "the Friend": "And who is better in religion than he who submits [*aslama*] his face to God, doing good, and follows the community of Abraham the monotheist [*hanif*]. God chose Abraham as a friend [*khalil*]" (Qur'an 4:125).



Q&A

MATTHEW L. BOWEN. Thank you, Dan. First question: are there any differences between how Sunni, Shi'i, and Ismaili commentators later understood the Qur'anic traditions of Abraham?

DANIEL C. PETERSON. I would expect that there are no fundamental differences. They would see them in the same way, though they view it in a little different fashion. The Ismailis have, still to this day, a continuing line of imams, and they would see Abraham as an earlier one in that series and as the possessor of mysterious secret knowledge. That's a really important principle for them. But it's not a fundamental difference, I think.

MATTHEW L. BOWEN. Do you think we could view Ishmael's being cast out into the desert as a typological sacrifice similar to Isaac's?

DANIEL C. PETERSON. Oh, yeah, I think so. Remember the promises given to Ishmael that he, too, will have twelve princes come of him. He's kind of a counterpart to Isaac. We don't make a big deal of that, but he's also a child of promise. There are promises given to him about the great destiny of his people and that he would become a ruler, a mighty man out in the desert, and so on. And he does.

If you take it with any seriousness, the idea that today's Arabs—and I realize that defining the word *Arab* is a little difficult; basically today it's just anyone who speaks Arabic as a primary language. There might be a little bit of an admixture of Ishmaelite genetics in a lot of those people. And so in that sense, the prophecy has certainly been fulfilled. He's become the fountain of a great nation.



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NOTES

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all biblical quotations are from the King James Version, familiar to English-speaking Latter-day Saints.
2. This is not to say that scholars are unanimous with regard to the historicity of Abraham. Prominent biblical scholars such as Albrecht Alt and John Bright, along with archaeologists such as G. Ernest Wright and the enormously influential W. F. Albright, believed that Abraham was a real historical person (however embellished his story might later have become) of the second millennium BC, the so-called patriarchal age. Since the 1970s, however, several revisionist scholars have argued that he is an essentially fictional character, and whether solidly based or not, that view has gained relatively wide currency.
3. See Genesis 11:27–31 and 12:1–3, which gives Abraham’s lineage, followed by the seemingly irreconcilable ideas of Sarah’s barrenness and the promise of posterity (and land) to Abraham.
4. Through his nephew Lot, Abraham is also related to the Moabites and the Ammonites.
5. See Genesis 11:25–26. The origin of the name Azar poses an interesting question that is beyond the scope of this paper.
6. Ibn Hisham XXXX.
7. Qur’an 6:74; 60:4. Sura 9:114 reads, “Abraham’s prayer for forgiveness for his father was nothing but the fulfillment of a promise that he had made to him. However, when it became clear to him [Abraham] that he [Abraham’s father] was an enemy to God, he disassociated himself from him.”
8. W. St. Clair-Tisdall, *Sources of Islam: A Persian Treatise* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1901), 16–17, quoting Abdul Feda, *Ancient History from the Mukhtasar fi Akhbar il Bashar*.
9. See Abraham 1:7–20. The medieval Gospel of Barnabas, which probably dates from the fourteenth century or later and which otherwise betrays some signs of Islamic influence, mentions Abraham’s near death by fire at Barnabas 26, as does the apocryphal Book of Jasher. XXXX. St. Clair-Tisdall, *Sources of Islam*, 21–24, quoting the Midrash Rabbah, suggests that the error (as he views it) arose from confusing the city name mentioned at Genesis 15:7 (“I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees”) with the Hebrew word אֵשׁ (*ur*, “fire”).
10. Qur’an 21:52–70. In the last two verses, God speaks in the first-person plural.
11. Qur’an 26:69–102. In the first verse, the singular imperative is addressed to Muhammad and comes from the same root (*nb*) as the Arabic word for “prophet.” Later in the passage, Iblis, an Arabic name for Satan, derives from the same Greek word (διάβολος [*diábolos*], “slanderer”) as the English *devil*.

12. Qur'an 29:16–17, 24–25.
13. Qur'an 37:85–86, 91–98. Again, God speaks in the first-person plural in the last verse.
14. Genesis 15:5. Compare the *kokaubeam* of Abraham 3:13. For the verb *to tell* in the sense of counting, compare the German verb *zählen*, “to count.” Incidentally, too, the rather strange account given at Genesis 15:8–21 may have a parallel in Qur'an 2:260: “And when Abraham said, ‘My Lord, show me how you give life to the dead.’ He [God] said, ‘Have you not believed?’ He said, ‘Yes, but only that my heart may be set at rest.’ [Allah] said, ‘Take four birds and train them to come to you. Then [after slaughtering them] put on each hill a portion of them; then call to them. They will come to you in haste. And know that God is mighty and wise.’”
15. Qur'an 6:75–79, 83. In this passage, God speaks in the first-person plural. The mention of rank, or “degrees” (*darajat*), at the end of the passage is reminiscent of Abraham 3:16–19.
16. Genesis 17:19–22. The name Isaac means, roughly, “he laughs.” “I have heard thee” in verse 20 is a play on the meaning of Ishmael's name, and the twelve princes are obviously a mirror image for the twelve tribes of Israel who will emerge among Isaac's posterity. Note the reference in verse 22 to going up (Hebrew *אָעַל*), which plainly suggests a spatio-physical location for God.
17. The New International Version of the Bible renders the Hebrew behind the King James Version's “in the plains of Mamre” as “near the great trees of Mamre”; the Common English Bible has “at the oaks of Mamre.”
18. Qur'an 11:69–76. In this passage, God speaks in the first-person plural. He does not do so universally throughout the Qur'an. In verses 69 and 70, “sent” is translated from the Arabic root *rsł*, which also provides *rasul* (“messenger, or apostle”), perhaps the most common title in the Islamic tradition for the Prophet Muhammad. The term that is translated in verses 69 and 71 as “good news” (*bushra*) is the same Arabic word that is commonly used for “gospel,” the “good news” of Christianity. The word translated in verse 69 as “peace” is *salam*, a cognate with Hebrew *shalom*. Both words continue to be commonly used as greetings in Arabic and Hebrew. The term rendered in verse 73 as “the people of the house,” *ahl al-bayt*, continues to be used in both Shi'i and Sunni Islam today for the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. That line is of especial significance and is especially revered in Shi'i thinking.
19. Qur'an 15:51–60. The singular imperative at the beginning of the passage is addressed to Muhammad and comes from the same root as the Arabic word for “prophet” (*nb*).
20. Qur'an 29:31–32.

21. Qur'an 51:24–37. The Arabic pronoun rendered in verse 24 as “you” is singular, so the question is presumably addressed to Muhammad. Please note my lack of capitalization in verse 36 for the word *muslims*. This is by no means intended to indicate any disrespect for Islam. Rather, it reflects the fact that at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, *Islam* and *Muslim* were not yet proper nouns. They had not yet come to represent a separate religious movement. In early seventh-century Arabia, hearers or readers of the Qur'an would simply have heard in the Arabic words *islam* and *muslim* the meanings of “submission” and “submitter,” respectively. “And who is better in religion than one who submits (*aslama*) himself to God?” Qur'an 4:125.
22. See, for example, Genesis 12:7; 13:14; 15:1; 18:10.
23. At Genesis 21:6, an explanation is given for the boy's name: “And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me.”
24. Western scholarship has been dubious of such traditions. For example, Alfred Guillaume wrote that “there is no historical evidence for the assertion that Abraham or Ishmael was ever in Mecca, and if there had been such a tradition it would have to be explained how all memory of the Old Semitic name Ishmael (which was not in its true Arabian form in Arabian inscriptions and written correctly with an initial consonant Y) came to be lost. The form in the Quran is taken either from Greek or Syriac sources.” Alfred Guillaume, *Islam* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1956), 61–62.
25. See Qur'an 2:125, 127, 128; compare 14:35. [Check these!]
26. Partial fulfillment of this request may be reflected at Qur'an 22:26, quoted just above.
27. *Islam* is a verbal noun from the Arabic verb *aslama* or *yuslimu* (“to surrender, to submit”), while *Muslim* is the masculine form of that verb's active participle.
28. Of course, to a faithful modern Muslim, dying as a *muslim* would ideally refer to a lifelong adherence to Islam—that is, as a Muslim with a capital *M*.
29. Qur'an 2:136; compare 22:78. See 2:130, 135; 3:95; 12:38; 16:123; 22:78.
30. Qur'an 6:161.
31. Qur'an 12:38.
32. Qur'an 19:58. In this verse, God speaks in the third person and then in the first-person plural and then, again, in the third person.
33. Qur'an 16:120, 123.
34. Qur'an 42:13. In this verse, God is initially represented as speaking in the third person and then in the first-person plural.
35. Genesis 22:1–2. The reference here (and again at 22:12, 16, 23) to “thine only son Isaac”—strictly speaking, in the Hebrew and the Septuagint Greek, to “thine only Isaac”—is striking.

36. The Islamic holy day 'Eid al-Adha is celebrated in commemoration of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son on God's command and marks the end of the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.
37. Plainly, Ishmael is depicted here as being relatively mature.
38. Qur'an 4:163. The term *al-asbat* probably refers to the twelve biblical tribes of Israel, descendants of Jacob. But not necessarily. Ishmael also had twelve sons (see Genesis 17:20).
39. Qur'an 4:54. Latter-day Saints might understandably be intrigued that the Qur'an refers in two places to "the scriptures of Moses and Abraham." Qur'an 53:36–37; 87:18–19.
40. Qur'an 12:6. The addressee in this verse is the biblical Joseph of Egypt.
41. Qur'an 38:45.
42. Compare the words of John the Baptist he spoke to the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to watch his baptisms: "Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: and think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham." Matthew 3:8–9.