

ABRAHAM AND THE FOUNDING OF ISLAM

I. SCRIPTURE FOCUS:

A. Genesis 12:1-3 *Call of Abraham (Promise)*

1. "go to the land I will show you" (*property*)
2. "I will make you a great nation." (*progeny*)
3. "I will bless you and make you famous . . ." (*prominence*)

This initial introduction of Abraham in Genesis 11:27—12:9 serves as the backdrop the entire Abraham cycle and the drama of the founding of both Judaism and Islam. The "call and promise" pertain to both! As you read the setting what are your initial impressions of Abraham's situation in life?

B. Genesis 16:1-16 *The Birth of Ishmael*

Pay particular attention to verses 9 and 10: "The angel of the LORD said to her (Hagar), "Return to your mistress, and submit to her authority." Then he added, "I will give you more descendants than you can count."

Sarai's reliance on an ancient custom of using a surrogate to secure a male heir sets up an inherent conflict. What is your initial reaction to this idea? Is this a lack of faith, an act of desperation on Sarai's part? One thing that some scholars note is Abraham's silence in matter, other than his willingness to comply with Sarai's request. Domestic tension is almost inevitable, but the "promise" is reiterated as Hagar's hope. Note the word "submit" in the text, which is central in the Muslim understanding of how one relates to Allah.

C. Genesis 21:1-21 *Birth of Isaac and Hagar and Ishmael Sent Away*

Focus on verse 18: "Go to him (Ishmael) and comfort him, for I will make a great nation from his descendants."

Major issue here is: who gets the "birthright?" In the culture of the time, the first son got 2/3 of the property and wealth of the father and claimed the birthright of the family. The question is here: who is the "child of the promise?" Ishmael whose mother is Hagar or Isaac whose mother is Sarah? How would you answer this question because it is the crux of the major issue between Islam and Judaism!

II. COMMENTARY AND NOTES

A. THE CALL: “All of Abraham’s children, whatever their orientation, agree on one thing: God speaks not just to Abraham with these words, he speaks to every person who hears.” The CALL is a code, an encrypted blueprint for humanity; ignore them and we crumble like Babel.

1. Though often referred to as a covenant, God’s call to Abraham appears at first glance to include no tangible obligations on the part of the recipient. Unlike the covenant handed down at Mount Sinai, for example, this agreement comes with no commandments or laws that Abraham must follow in order to receive God’s blessing. It would seem to be an expression of pure generosity on God’s part, a one-way contract.

However, on closer inspection, Abraham is asked to do two things to fulfill his side of the contract. **First**, he must leave his native land and his father’s house. This is an extraordinary request since he doesn’t even know where he is going. And the **second** thing Abraham must do to fulfill the agreement is to accept the legitimacy of the party offering the deal. Later generations concluded that Abraham understood that the voice he heard belonged to God, specifically the one and only God. All three religions are clear on this point. Abraham, rooted in a polytheistic society—a world where gods had form and physicality and were identified with tangible facets of daily life, like rocks and trees—is prepared to put his trust in an a-physical, indiscernible, unprovable god. Abraham is a visionary.

2. Abraham has become God’s proxy on earth. He was chosen not for his sake but for the sake of the world. This is the ultimate power of the CALL: It’s a summons to the world to devote itself to God. God once again sends out an olive branch to humanity. If you put your life in my hands, he suggests, you will be rewarded. Since humans have flouted this branch in the past, God now requires a down payment: Do this today so you can get that tomorrow.

3. Islam stresses Abraham's submission to God and views the Call as a reward for his devotion. "Abraham was a paragon of piety," sura 16 says, "an upright man obedient to God." The word *muslim* actually means "one who submits to God," and the text says Abraham was of such exemplary morality that even as a boy in Babylon he was a *hanif*, one who practices pure monotheism.

The Koran suggests that it was in recognition of these traits that God chose Abraham and made him the leader of a great nation. As sura 2 says: "When the Lord put Abraham to the proof by enjoining on him certain commandments and Abraham fulfilled them, he said: 'I have appointed you a leader of mankind.'" The text calls this moment a covenant, and considers it the start of a nation of muslims that reaches fruition in Muhammad.

Sheikh Abdul Rauf: "I consider Abraham's covenant with God to be not so much a personal one. It's the idea that Abraham will ensure that the belief in one God does not die with him. That he will pass his message along to his progeny and build a nation of people whose collective consciousness is defined by the surrender to God."

"We should take Abraham's viewpoint toward the world. We should try to be Abrahamic in our being."

- a. "First, complete devotion to God, even if it involves leaving your family and leaving your town."
- b. "On another level, making our own contractual agreement with God. Each of us has a covenant to make with God. 'I will worship you as my God and you will take care of me.'
- c. "And finally, knowing yourself on the deepest level. The prime objective of religion is to know God, but the only way to do that is to discover God within our own consciousness. This happened to Abraham, and it can happen to us."

B. BIRTH OF ISHMAEL

1. Genesis 16 reminds us bluntly that Abraham is childless. He has no family! “Sarai, Abram’s wife, has borne him no children.” Sarah now takes matters in her own hands. Though legally Sarah’s action is consistent with ancient practice of surrogate motherhood, morally her act is troubling. The language suggests this. Sarah does not mention the maid’s name, nor does she acknowledge that the resulting child might belong to the other woman. “Perhaps I shall have a son,” she says.

An existential struggle emerges in which Sarah tries to wrest control of creation from God and Abraham. Abraham may have been wavering in his faith, but Sarah seems to have abandoned hers. Her act may be selfless, but it’s also faithless. Sarah’s gesture sets up a tension that will occupy history forever. Abraham’s troubled paternity has now been compounded with even more deeply troubled maternity.

2. Once Hagar becomes pregnant, Sarah grows jealous. Predictably, she lashes out at Abraham. “This wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem.” Abraham once again ducks responsibility. “Your maid is in your hands,” he says. “Deal with her as you think right.”

Sarah “afflicts” Hagar, the text says, using the same words later invoked to describe how the Israelites are treated by the pharaohs in Egypt, and Hagar responds the same way, by fleeing into the desert. The place Hagar goes—the wilderness of Shur—is the exact same place the Israelites go immediately after crossing the Red Sea. Again the Bible is sending a subtle message. All God’s children are afflicted in some way. And when they are, God looks after them.

Angel of the Lord responds sending Hagar back into the arms of affliction—not with the word “submit.” But with submission comes God’s protection and deliverance. The first thing God

promises Hagar is innumerable children. “I will greatly increase your offspring.” But God is specific with Hagar. She will bear a son and call him Ishmael, or “God hears.” Ishmael, God says, shall be a “wild ass of a man;/his hand against everyone,/And everyone’s hand against him.”

Scholars dispute the meaning of these words, though most agree the term wild ass, instead of being a pejorative, refers to the character of the Bedouin, specifically the wild desert ass that roams in herds. The subsequent line, “his hand against everyone,” does suggest Ishmael’s wilderness lifestyle will bring him into conflict with the world.

Hagar is the only woman to receive personally the divine blessing of descendants, making her, in effect, a female patriarch. As Carol Newsom put it, “Hagar, who earlier occupies the same place as Sarah, now occupies the same place as Abraham.” Hagar then speaks to God directly, “You are *El-roi*,” or “God of my vision.” Hagar is the only person in the Bible—male or female—ever to call God by name. Sarah may still not be able to create anyone in her image, but Hagar creates God in hers.

C. BIRTH OF ISAAC AND ISHMAEL SENT AWAY

1. Sarah finally conceives and Isaac is born. Sarah is happy. “God has brought me laughter.” The instant Sarah senses competition between Isaac and Ishmael, she orders Abraham, “Cast out that slave-woman and her son for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” The inevitable conflict emerges full-blown.

Abraham, however, does not share Sarah’s preference for Isaac. Ishmael is still his firstborn. “The matter distressed Abraham greatly.” But God confronts Abraham with a startling announcement. “Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed.”

God sends a mixed message. On the one hand, God sides with the oppressor, and encourages Abraham to disinherit his firstborn son. God actually calls Isaac by name, and says it's through him that Abraham's offspring shall be counted. The land, in other words, goes to the second-born.

Ishmael, by contrast, goes unnamed, though God vows to make him a nation, the exact promise he initially made to Abraham. Isaac gets no equivalent grant. Also Ishmael carries Abraham's seed. The net effect of these intricacies is an uncomfortable but still purposeful balance: Isaac receives the land, but he does so in part through the malice of this mother. Ishmael goes into exile, but does so with God's most exalted blessing and Abraham's deepest remorse.

Hagar leaves and wanders around the wilderness of Beersheba until she runs out of water, at which point she places Ishmael under a bush. The text plays their pain for maximum pathos. "Let me not look on as the child dies," Hagar wails. Then she bursts into tears.

Once again God hears. "Fear not," an angel cries to Hagar. "Lift up the boy and hold him by the hand." God then reveals a well of water. Ishmael has faced death directly, has done so at the hand of his father, but has been rescued at the last minute by God. This is the version of the Call: Cast out from his father's house, he survives only because of God's munificence. Created by Abraham, he is re-created by God. God refuses to give up the power of creation entirely.

Once Isaac is born, Jewish interpreters turn on Ishmael. Genesis says that after being rescued Ishmael marries an Egyptian and fathers twelve tribes. In the late first millennium B.C.E., these descendants came to be associated with Bedouin tribes around the Middle East, first in the Negev, later in Arabia. Jewish writers identified Ishmael as the progenitor of the Arabs.

Early biographers of Muhammad traced the lineage of the prophet's tribe back to Ishmael, through him to Abraham, and then back to Adam. Muhammad wanted to unite all Arabs under his tribe, the Qurysh, and to do so he needed to tie their heritage to a sacred source.

Ishmael was an important link in this chain, though he's hardly a major character in the Koran. Ishmael is mentioned only twelve times in the Koran's one hundred fourteen suras, and only one gives any indication of his character. Sura 19 says Ishmael was "a man of his word, an apostle, and a prophet. He enjoined prayer and almsgiving on his people, and his Lord was pleased with him."

The biggest contribution the Koran and its interpreters made to the life of Ishmael involves relocating him to Mecca. Instead of banishing Hagar and Ishmael to the Negev, Abraham actually takes them to Mecca, settles them there, then returns home. Left alone in the desert, Hagar runs seven times between two rocks looking for water before an angel appears and saves her. A vital shift is under way, moving the locus of the story away from the Fertile Crescent to Arabia, where Ishmael grows up to become a prominent Arab. Abraham even visits Ishmael in his new home. Sarah permits him to go, provided he doesn't dismount his steed.

CONCLUSION: As is apparent beginning with the Call, the God of the Bible is interested in creating a great nation, on a specific piece of land, beginning with Abraham. Isaac is definitely the inheritor of that tradition. He is the winner of the struggle, so to speak, and Ishmael is the displaced rival. However, Ishmael is personally salvaged by God, fathers a dozen princes, and becomes the leader of a great nation. The crystalline moral here is that while God's land may go to one of Abraham's sons, God's blessing goes to both.

