

Ishmael and the Quran

The Quran is a reminder; making it a useful resource for anyone wanting to gain a better understanding of the Christian faith as revealed in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. The Quran not only reminds us of many of the stories found in the Bible and in eastern Christian traditions, it also helps us to better understand these Biblical stories. One example is the story of Abraham's testing and the intended sacrifice of his son. It is a story of faith and obedience and serves as one of the fundamental stories of the Bible. The Quran tells believers to remember the story, in particular, the testing of Abraham and the blessings given to Ishmael and Isaac.

The story begins with God telling Abram to leave his father's house and the city of Haran and promising:

".. I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." Genesis 12:1-3

This amazing and seemingly impossible promise must have been difficult for Abram to accept since he was not only was 75 years of age, his wife was barren, and the couple had no children. Yet Abram believed God and in obedience; left his home and journeyed into the land of Canaan. However, Abram's blessings were not immediately apparent to him for Sarai still did not conceive. Famine forced Abram to move to Egypt where he feared for his life. yet God blessed him with servants and cattle, silver and gold, and victories over his enemies. Even after ten years had passed, Sarai remained barren, and Abram had "no seed" or heir to even begin fulfilling God's promise of Abram being a father of many nations (Genesis 15:3). So, Sarai devised a plan that would give her a son and give Abram an heir, but it was not the solution that God intended and Sarai ultimately to not carry through fully with her plan. Sarai's hand maiden Hagar did give birth to a child named Ishmael, however, since Sarai did not adopt Ishmael as her own son, the child remained the offspring of a slave and was legally therefore not a son of Abram.

Then when Ishmael was about 13 and Abram was ninety 99 years old, God again spoke to Abram and repeated the promise to "multiply his descendants exceedingly" and confirmed that his descendants would include kings of nations (Genesis 17:1-4). This time God asked nothing of Abram except he walk before God in righteousness.

It was only after God changed the names of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah, that the couple conceived, and Sarah gave birth to a son and heir. Isaac was 14 years younger than Ishmael, but he was the fulfilment of the promise. The story does not end with Isaac's birth but continued to its climax when Abraham took his son to the mountain to offer him as a sacrifice.

The story holds a central position in God's plan as it demonstrates that righteous does not come through our parents or our position within the family or through our actions or through the law, but through faith. Abraham is remembered by Jews, Christians and Muslims as a man of faith; who God credited as righteous because he feared God and believed in His promises (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:1-3, Q 37:102-108).

The story of Abraham is shared by three religions and while each emphasises certain parts of the story, such as the importance of circumcision, there is no difference in how the story is presented in the any of the Scriptures.

When we compare the story found in the Quran, to the Biblical story, the first point a reader will notice is that the Quran provides very little information about Abraham or Ishmael.

While Ishmael (Ismail), is mentioned in eleven verses (Q 2:127, 2:133, 2:136, 2:140, 3:84, 4:163, 6:86, 14:39, 19:54, 21:85, 38:48), the Quran does not identify his mother, nor does it give details of who Ishmael was except that he was a son to Abraham. The Quran also does not specifically mention the name of the son that Abraham intended to sacrifice.

The lack of detail is surprising if we consider the emphasis that later Arab commentators have put on Ishmael, but it is not surprising if we read the Quran simply as a reminder.

The omission of the name of Abraham's son has caused some to imagine that Ishmael was the son that Abraham bound and placed on the alter, but this idea does not come from the Quran. The Quran repeatedly describes itself as a reminder and declares the previous Scriptures and the Gospel to be true and makes no distinction between what the prophets have revealed (Q 2:136). So, there is no need to view the Quran as defective just because it does not repeat all the stories from the Bible or record the Bible stories in the same detail.

The question is not which text is the most reliable, the question has always been, how can we better understand the story of Abraham and his sons? The Quran gives few details about the story of Abraham and his sons but says we are to remember in "*the Book*" (the Bible), story of Abraham (Q 19:41) and the story of Ishmael (Q 19:54). The Bible, or more specifically, the book of Genesis, is our primary source of information on Abraham and his sons. Both the Hebrew Tanakh and the Greek Septuagint record the story in some detail. The apostle Paul also makes several mentions of Abraham and his sons Isaac and Ishmael in Romans 4, Galatians 4 and Hebrews 11, where he uses the story of Abraham to explain our freedom from the law.

Other sources that refer to the story include the '*Book of Jubilees*', the '*Antiquities of the Jews*' written by Josephus, the Jewish '*Talmud*' and the '*Book of Jasher*' expound the story in some detail by these are later works. The *Book of Jasher* is considered to be a medieval work, written after the time of Mohammad. The various apocryphal works do add some details to the story, but our primary source is the Bible.

Ishmael is honoured in the Quran, where he is described as "*patient*" (Q 21:85), "*favoured by God*" (Q 6:86), among the best (Q 38:48). He is identified as a man of charity and prayer, a messenger and a prophet of God and acceptable in the sight of his Lord (Q 3:84, 19:54-55) and "*true to the promise*" (19:54).

The Quran says Ishmael is mentioned in the Book, so it is necessary to read the Bible (the Book) to fully understand the details of Abraham's story.

The Bible honours Ishmael and his mother. Ishmael was certainly “patience” for he was twice removed from his father's house yet grew up honouring his father. He was first taken from his father's house when his pregnant mother fled from Sarai into the desert. Hagar but returned after an angel persuaded her to go back to her mistress (Genesis 16:4-8). Then as a young boy, Ishmael was cast out of his father's house after a feast was given for his brother Isaac. When Sarah saw Ishmael mocking her son Isaac, she went into a rage and declared that a son of a slave woman would not share in the inheritance of her son. Hagar and Ishmael were sent away into the Desert of Beersheba, but they did not die for God heard the voice of Ishmael and provided for him and his mother (Genesis 21:14 – 21:21).

Ishmael did receive favour from God, for it was God that told Hagar the name of her son and told her he would live in the presence of his brothers (Genesis 16:10-12). God also spoke to Abraham saying that Ishmael would be blessed and that would be the father of twelve princes and a great nation (Genesis 17:20, 21:13, 21:18).

The Bible says Ishmael was also the seed or offspring of Abraham and would also be the father of a nation, but states Abraham's offspring would be “reckoned” through Isaac (Genesis 21:13). Ishmael was given a long life of 137 years and the Bible lists the sons of Ishmael and tells us that when he died, he “*was gathered to his people*” (Genesis 25:12-17).

However, while Ishmael did receive God's favour, there is no question that Isaac was the “righteous” son that Abraham prayed for (Q 37:100). His birth was the miracle that made him the legal heir to Abraham household. A son born to a slave woman cannot be considered righteous. Isaac was obviously Abraham's favourite; he was the one who also inherited the blessing of God's covenant and also the son Abraham intended to sacrifice. Although Muslims are falsely led to believe that the Biblical stories has been corrupted and that Ishmael was the intended sacrifice, this argument is not supported by the Quran or supported by the earliest Quranic commentators. The respected Muslim scholar Al-Tabari (839-923 AD) accepted the traditional interpretation, arguing that Isaac's name is mentioned at the end of the narrative in Surah 39:100-112, and pointing out that the announcement of a “son”; is given to both Sarah and Abraham with “*glad tidings*” (*basharnāhu*) (Q 11:71) (Q37:101).

Questions that are difficult to answer:

- At what age was Isaac when he was taken as a sacrifice?
- Was Hagar a concubine or a wife?
- Who was the first-born of Abraham?

Age of Isaac

Jewish tradition says the sacrifice of Isaac occurred just before Sarah's death, making Isaac about 36 or 37 years old. The historian Josephus believed that Isaac was 25 years of age. However, the Bible and the Quran suggest that Isaac was much younger. The Bible and Quran describe him as a boy. The Quran says he was old enough to begin working with his father (Q 37:102). He was certainly weaned and strong enough to carry firewood and old enough to know the requirements needed for a sacrifice.

Hagar

While Hagar is often called a concubine, we do not find this written in any of the scriptures. Hagar was a servant of Sarah and reminded a servant after she became Abram's wife for when she first fled into the desert, the angel instructed her to return to her mistress (Genesis 16:9). While we might not call her Abraham's concubine as she was given to Abraham to be his **wife** (Genesis 16:3), she did remain the servant of Sarai.

It was not unheard of for a free man or woman to marry a slave (1 Chronicles 2:34-35), but in Abraham's situation, the situation was the more complex because the owner of the slave was his wife. Under the law, any child of a slave was also a slave and became the property of their owner. Even if a free man married a slave, any children would also be slaves.

The role of a wife and a concubine may have been similar, but their legal status and that of their children was very different. The children of servants and concubines were considered to be slaves or servants and were not given the legal status as a son or daughter. As Paul wrote, often there was little noticeable difference between a son and a slave in a household, except the son will inherit and become the owner of everything (Galatians 4:1).

Sarai was Abram's first wife, but she was barren and could not conceive. So, unless Abram took another wife, he would not have an heir, and his estate would pass onto his servant Eliezer, the son of a concubine.

However, Sarai conceived a plan which would give herself children and also give Abram a son and heir. She planned to give her Egyptian maidservant Hagar to Abram as a wife and then adopt any children as her own. Her plan was similar to that of Jacob's wives, Leah and Rachael who adopted the sons of their servants Bilhah and Zilpah as their own children (Genesis 30:3-8).

However, because of Hagar's hostility to Sarai after she conceived (Gen 16:4), Sarai did not follow through fully with her plan. Sarai did not bear the child upon her knees as Rachel did (Genesis 30:3) nor did she name or adopt the child or declare Ishmael to be her son. This meant that the child was not born to Sarai but was born to Hagar.

The first-born of Abraham

Isaac and Ishmael were both described as the “sons” and “seed” of Abraham, and so, while it could be assumed that Ishmael was the first-born son of Abraham since Ishmael was the eldest, born fourteen years before Isaac, the answer is not that straight forward. It was the younger Isaac who was the son of the promise and the one God made his covenant with (Genesis 17:19). It was also Isaac who was called Abraham’s one and only son (Hebrews 11:17, Genesis 22:2). Ishmael was “true to the promise” (Q 19:54), for unlike Esau who threatened to kill his younger brother Jacob, Ishmael showed no jealousy or animosity towards Isaac, apart from his mocking of Isaac as an infant.

It was Isaac who was the first-born son of Abraham because although Abram and Hagar were married and Ishmael was the biological offspring of Abram, legally Ishmael was a servant. From a legal viewpoint, the situation of Abram and Hagar was complicated. If Sarai had adopted Hagar’s son, then Ishmael would have become her son and therefore would have been the first-born son of Abram. However, because Sarai did not adopt Ishmael when he was born, Ishmael was born as a servant. Therefore, he was never called the first-born, a title that indicated a position of authority and the entitlement to an inheritance

Did Hagar and Ishmael remain servants?

This question is significant because Ishmael is named as a son of Abraham. Abram obviously recognised him since he was the one who named Ishmael when he was born (Genesis 16:15) and Abraham circumcised Ishmael as a “son” (Genesis 17:26). Also, when Abraham died, Ishmael helped to bury his father as a “son of Abraham” (Genesis 25:9). So, it appears that Ishmael did not remain a servant but became a son and did share an inheritance of his father’s estate along with his other brothers.

It may help to look at the birth of Isaac and Ishmael symbolically and consider the chronological order of events. Instead of being the eldest or first-born son of Abraham, Ishmael can be better described as the youngest or last born of Abram. Ishmael was born to Abram at the age of 86, but Isaac was born after God had changed Abram’s name to Abraham.

Isaac was born fourteen years later as the first-born of Abraham after God changed Abram’s name, and gave him a new destiny as the father of many nations and made him the first of what would become a royal line (Genesis 17:19).

Consider also: Hagar was not sold as a slave, nor was she redeemed by Abraham. She did not earn her freedom, but Hagar did not remain in servitude. Ishmael and his mother gained their freedom when they were cast out of the camp into the wilderness when Ishmael mocked the young Isaac (Genesis 21:9).

In a similar way to how the Israelites gained their freedom from servitude in Egypt when they escaped from Pharaoh into the desert. Hagar and Ishmael also gained their freedom when they were cast out. Like the Israelites, their fate rested in God’s hands.

And just as the Israelites did not die in the wilderness, God also provided for Hagar and her son in the wilderness for God heard Ishmael’s cries and saved them both. Ishmael did not remain the son of a slave woman, for God gave him his freedom.

Children of his old age:

The Quran reminds us that God gave Abraham two sons in his old age. Ishmael was born when Abram was 86 and Isaac was born when Abraham was 100 years old.

“Who hath granted unto me in old age Ishmael and Isaac: for truly my Lord is He, the Hearer of Prayer!” Q 14:39.

The Quran reminds us that Ishmael and Isaac were not the eldest of Abraham’s children, but the last and youngest of his children. As the Bible tells us, Abram did have concubines and did have children from these women (Genesis 25:6).

The Bible refers to these children as servants and only names Eliezer, the eldest of them. Eliezer was the senior servant in charge of all Abraham’s household was the one destined to inherit since Abram did not have an heir (Genesis 24:1). Usually a servant has no claim of inheritance; however, there were exceptions such as a man dying without an heir (See Proverbs 17:2).

The Bible identifies Eliezer as “dammasek Eliezer”, and while the Hebrew text is usually translated to mean “Eliezer of Damascus”, Eliezer cannot have been from Damascus because he was born in Abram’s household (Genesis 15:2-3). A better translation of the term “dammasek Eliezer” is found in the Septuagint, which describes Eliezer as a “son of Masek”, a concubine of Abram.

Abraham put his house in order.

After the death of Sarah, Abraham began to prepare for the eventuality of his own death (Gen 24:67 – 25:1).

First, he sent (Eliezer) to find a wife for Isaac. Then after Isaac married Rebekah, Abraham married his concubine Keturah (1 Chronicles 1:32) and adopted her sons as his own. The six sons of Keturah, Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah (Genesis 25:1, 1 Chronicles 1:32) became the brothers of Isaac and Ishmael. But since they were born to Abram, these were older much older than Ishmael and Isaac.

The usual interpretation is that Abraham fathered these six sons after he married Keturah and that they remained servants and were not legally sons of Abraham. However, the term "she bore" can mean both a biological birth and also the adoption of children. We see an example of adoption by David's first wife Micah, who bore five children (1 Samuel 2:18), yet we know that these sons were children she adopted from her sister for she died childless (2 Samuel 6:23).

By marrying Abraham, Keturah's status changed from a servant to a wife, and by Abraham adopting her sons, they were no longer unnamed servants but legally sons of Abraham.

The name Abram means father or exalted father, and it appears that Abram was the father of many children. There was never any question that Sarah was barren and the one responsible for not bearing a child because Abram had already demonstrated his fertility. To imagine that Abraham took on concubines and produced numerous sons after Sarah died does not fit the established pattern of the last-born sons gaining authority over their elder brothers. According to tradition, Abraham was at least 137 years of age when he married Keturah, so there is no reason to believe that he then had more children to his concubines.

One of Abraham's final acts before his death would have been to give a share of his estate to his eight sons; however, this is not mentioned. The statement that Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac may be misleading because if Abraham had divided the estate amongst his sons, his remaining share would have also been everything he owned. When the father's share was given to the first-born son, it becomes the double portion as required by law (Deuteronomy 21:17).

Then finally, Abraham gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the east (Genesis 25:6).

The double inheritance given to Isaac confirms his position as the first-born of Abraham. And although there is no mention of Isaac's brothers sharing in the inheritance, there is reason to believe that they did receive a share of his inheritance as would be expected.

- Ishmael was not sent away to the east with the sons of concubines because Ishmael "dwelt with his brothers" and helped bury his father.
- As a son, Ishmael and the sons of Keturah were entitled to a share of their father's estate.

The story of Abraham is usually presented as a story of hope for those wishing to have children, but Abraham was not "childless" as we might understand today. Rather, the main focus of the story is not about fertility but how God would fulfil his promise of Abram becoming the father of a great nation since Abram and Sarai did not have a son and heir to fulfil this promise. It is a story about faith in God promises and the righteous that was accredited to Abraham because of his faith.

Why is the Donkey mentioned?

Donkeys were common in ancient Israel. The Israelites used donkeys as beasts of burden to carry people and produce and the Bible makes numerous references to donkeys. It recognises their lowly status and lists them among the beasts whose home was the wilderness (Job 39:6). However, the Bible also recognises their service in the salvation story. In the story of Balaam and his talking donkey, it was the donkey who saved Balaam from the angel (Numbers 22:21-39), and Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem as the king. The donkey is significant in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem because it was a young untrained animal, and Zachariah had prophesied the Messiah would come "*lowly and riding of a donkey*" (Zachariah 9:9).

The Bible does not mention Ishmael being involved when Abraham took Isaac to the mountain to present him as a sacrifice, but it does mention a donkey (Genesis 22:3-5). The Quran though does not mention the donkey but does say that Ishmael assisted his father to raise the foundations of the House (Q 2:125-127). This raises the questions, did Ishmael accompany Abraham on his journey to Mount Moriah and did he assist his father to build the first altar on Mount Moriah?

We understand from the Bible that the altar for the sacrifice that was built on Mount Moriah was on the site of the later Israelite temple (Genesis 22), but when reading Genesis, there is no direct mention of Ishmael going with Abraham to Mount Moriah. The Bible only tells us that a donkey and two servants accompanied Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22:3).

Was Ishmael one of the servants? According to Jewish tradition, the two servants were Ishmael and Eliezer. Or was Ishmael symbolised as the donkey? The donkey is mentioned twice in the story and reminds us that Ishmael was called a “wild donkey of a man” (Genesis 16:12).

The reference to the donkey could be a hidden reference to Ishmael or a reminder that Ishmael was one of the servants that accompanied Abraham. We know that Ishmael remained with his brothers and was present at Abraham’s burial; it is likely that he also accompanied his father.

The Quran might be reminding us that Ishmael did accompany his father and did assist him; if not in the building of the altar, certainly with the gathering and carrying of the firewood for the sacrifice.

A reminder

While the understanding that Ishmael and Isaac were the youngest of Abraham's children might challenge our assumptions, the Quran does not contradict any part of the story as presented in the Bible. Instead, the Quran helps us to better understand the story. The point of the story of Abraham still remains, which is a story of faith. Abraham's faith and his willingness to even sacrifice that which he most loved, his son. The Quran makes no conflicting statements but stresses that Abraham's son acted in obedience and submitted himself willingly as a sacrifice (Q 37:102-105). A foreshadowing of Jesus as the great sacrifice to come.

For anyone not convinced of the reliability and truth found in the Quran, then consider the following points:

- The Quran speaks to the unbelieving Jews and tells them to believe in the Book (the Bible) and remember when Abraham was tested (Q 2:121-124).
- The Quran emphasises that the intended sacrifice was Abraham's son, but does not give his name (Q 37:101-102). One reason that Abraham's son is not named may be because the Quran is reminding us that Jesus is the son of Abraham, the "*forbearing son*" (Q 37:101), the sacrifice that God would ultimately provide.
- The Bible tells us that Abraham built the altar (Genesis 22:9). The Quran says that says Abraham and Ishmael built the first house (Q 2:127). In both accounts, the intended sacrifice (Isaac) was never described as the builder of the altar.
- The Quran says that God ransomed Abraham's son with a "*mighty sacrifice*" (Q 37:107). A reminder of the **lamb** of God, rather than the ram caught in the thicket which Abraham offered in the place of his son (Genesis 22:12-13). Jesus is the greatest and mightiest of sacrifices. He is the lamb which God has provided (Genesis 22:8).

The Quran tells us that Isaac was the child of his old age, but if you are not convinced that Isaac was the youngest son of Abraham, then consider the pattern given in Genesis where God continually blessed the youngest son over the elder. Consider too, Jesus' words which remind us that God does not choose the first or the greatest but instead chooses the least and the foolish. Jesus declared: "the last shall be first and the first shall be last" (Matthew 20:16). The Quran reminds us that Isaac was the last of Abraham's children and reminds us we are ransomed with a great sacrifice, a sacrifice that only God can provide.

A beautiful Reminder

Despite the many errors in translation, the Quran is still a beautiful reminder that confirms Jesus to be the Messiah and confirms that believers should trust in the Scriptures and the Gospel. While Muslims today still struggle to understand the Quran and do not necessarily appreciate that the Quran is a reminder, it does not change the fact that the Quran, when it is read in its original language and its original context, helps us to better understand the Bible.

Yes, there is the false theory that the Quran abrogates or supersedes the earlier scriptures and itself, but this teaching is not evident from the Quran. The Quran does not attempt to reconstruct any of the Bible stories, nor does it indicate that there are any errors in the Bible. However, what this theory of abrogation does show, is that the original text of the Quran has not been changed.

Since it is a long-held belief that Ishmael was the son Abraham intended to sacrifice and since there are Hadiths written as early as the ninth or tenth centuries that argue the Bible has been corrupted, then we might expect Muslims would have been tempted to rewrite the Quran to specifically mention Ishmael's name. However, since references to "the son of Abraham" have not been replaced with the name "Ishmael", it strongly indicates that the Quran's verses have not been changed, at least in the last thousand years.

*'My son, I see in a dream that I shall sacrifice thee; consider, what thinkest thou?' He said,
'My father, do as thou art bidden; thou shalt find me, God willing, one of the steadfast.
'When they had surrendered, and he flung him upon his brow, We called unto him,
'Abraham, thou hast confirmed the vision; Q 37:102-105*