

## Isaac and Ishmael According to Islam

Jews, Christians and Muslims agree; Abraham, the friend of God, is an example of pure and unconditional righteousness and faith. The love that Abraham displayed towards God is clearly seen in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only beloved son. All three religions do not dispute this fact. Where they do disagree on, however, is the identity of the sacrificial child. The Bible states that this child was Isaac:

"After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He said, 'Take your son, *your only son Isaac*, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you'." (Genesis 22:1-2, R.S.V.).

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, *offered up Isaac*, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up *his only son ...*" (Hebrews 11:17, R.S.V.).

"Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up his son *Isaac* upon the altar?" (James 2:21, R.S.V.).

Muslims on the other hand feel that Ishmael was the one offered up by Abraham. They believe that the Holy Bible supports this by its declaration that Abraham offered his *only son* (see above verses). Ishmael was Abraham's only son for over 13 years, which would make it impossible for Isaac to be the child of sacrifice. (Cf. Genesis 16:16, 21:5).

Muslims believe that scribes later corrupted the original reading from Ishmael to Isaac.

Since this idea stems from the Muslim misunderstanding of the phrase "only son", it becomes necessary to explain what this phrase exactly means in relation to Isaac. A careful reading of the Holy Bible shows that the phrase is used to affirm Isaac's unique status, a status based on the following:

- Isaac was the only *promised* child of Abraham, a fact which the Quran agrees with (cf. Genesis 17:15-21; Surah 11:69-73, 37:112-113, 51:24-30). Ishmael was never a promised child.
- Isaac was conceived miraculously to a barren mother and a very aged father, with the Quran likewise agreeing (cf. Genesis 17:15-17, 18:9-15, 21:1-7; Galatians 4:28-29; Surah 11:69-73, 51:24-30). Ishmael was conceived normally without the need of any miraculous intervention.
- God promised that it would be Isaac's descendants who would inherit the land given to Abraham. (Genesis 13:14-18, 15:18-21, 28:13-14). Ishmael had no part in the inheritance and promise given to Isaac through Abraham.

It is for these reasons that Isaac is called Abraham's only son since God himself reckoned him as the child of promise and blessings, an honor never bestowed upon Ishmael.

Even more amazing is the fact that the Quran never mentions the name of the sacrificial child; amazing indeed considering how overzealous some Muslims have been in their attempts to prove that Ishmael, not Isaac, was that son:

"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 a 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 God so wills one practicing patience and constancy!'

"So when they had both submitted their wills (to God), and he had laid him prostrate on his forehead (for sacrifice), we called out to him, 'O Abraham! Thou hast already fulfilled thy vision' - thus indeed do we reward those who do right. For this was obviously a trial - And we ransomed him *with a momentous sacrifice ...*" (Surah 37:99-106).

### **Ishmael in the Qur'an**

Ishmael is mentioned over ten times in the Qur'an, often alongside other patriarchs and prophets of ancient times. In XIX: 54, the Qur'an says: "And make mention in the Scripture of Ishmael. He was a keeper of his promise, and he was a messenger, a prophet. He enjoined upon his people worship and almsgiving, and was most acceptable in the sight of his Lord." Later on, in XXXVIII: 48, Ishmael is mentioned together with Elisha and Dhul-Kifl as one of "the patiently enduring and righteous, whom God caused to enter into his mercy." It is also said of Lot, Elisha, Jonah and Ishmael, that God gave each one "preference above the worlds" (VI: 86).

These references to Ishmael are, in each case, part of a larger context in which other holy prophets are mentioned. In other chapters of the Qur'an, however, which date from the Medina period, Ishmael is mentioned closely with his father Abraham: Ishmael stands alongside Abraham in their attempt to set up the Kaaba in Mecca as a place of monotheistic pilgrimage (II: 127-129) and Abraham thanks God for granting him Ishmael and Isaac in his old age (XIV: 35-41). Ishmael is further mentioned alongside the patriarchs who had been given revelations (II: 136) and Jacob's sons promise to follow the faith of their forefathers, "Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac", when testifying their faith (II: 133). In the narrative of the near-sacrifice of Abraham's son (XXXVII: 100-107), the son is not named and, although the general interpretation is that it was Ishmael, Tabari maintained that it was Isaac. Most modern commentators, however, regard the son's identification as least important in a narrative which is given for its moral lesson.

*\*Excerpt from research brief compiled for Tim Hawks by the Docent Group.*