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ISHMAEL, THE QUR'ĀN, AND THE BIBLE

ABSTRACT

As opposed to his younger brother Isaac, Ishmael is a relatively minor character in the patriarchal narratives of the Old Testament. Islam, however, which largely adopts the biblical Pentateuch as a holy book of Islam given by God to Musa (Moses), re-interprets Ishmael's role in one significant event: the offering demanded by God as demonstration of Abraham's faith. In Islam, Ishmael supplants Isaac as the intended sacrificial lamb. This article examines both the biblical and the Qur'ānic Isaac and Ishmael narratives from the perspective of academic curiosity to determine the grounds for, and the validity of the Islamic claim.

1. INTRODUCTION

An occasional instructor in the topic of world religions, I have long been intrigued by the fact that Islam has a perspective on the role of Abraham's son Ishmael diametrically opposed to that elaborated in Genesis. Until recently, I have been unable to respond in any depth to students who questioned the validity of the Islamic claim. An invitation to present a paper on the topic "Hidden voices in the Bible" at the University of the Free State in March 2018 provided the impetus to further explore the issue, and I have subsequently further refined my research and offer it in this article – a very preliminary investigation of the role of Ishmael in Islam versus his role in the Bible – as my response to my students and made available to others who may have the same validity question.

2. ISHMAEL IN THE BIBLE

The Ishmael narratives seem to be important in the Bible – else why are they even there in the patriarchal narratives? But Ishmael never speaks. His presence does not *prima facie* seem to contribute materially to the patriarchal story. He is not held up as an example either to be followed or to be avoided. Take every reference to him out of the biblical narrative, and he will not be missed. Among students of the Old Testament and no doubt among many Jews and Christians, while his name and story are well known, his role in Judaism and Christianity is not considered particularly significant. He is, rather, a side character playing a small part in a tale of – what, exactly? He emerges quietly onto the historical stage, plays his role for a scene or two and, having acted as it were a foil to his much younger brother Isaac, departs as quietly as he arrived, taken out like a chess piece, *en passant*. The later canonisation of the Old Testament cemented his brother Isaac’s pre-eminence, and leaves Ishmael in the dust of history; uninteresting, unimportant, and, perhaps, unappreciated. And thus, he might have remained; a minor, silent Old Testament character, had it not been for one thing: The later religion of Islam claims that, rather than Isaac being the individual God commands Abraham to sacrifice in Genesis 22, it is Ishmael.

The following issue is at hand: Does Islam have reasonable grounds for its assertion?

3. EVALUATING THE CLAIM

Long aware perhaps of the potential problems associated with Isaac being elevated over the first-born son Ishmael, casting the latter into the void of insignificance, the Judeo-Christian response, articulated in Galatians 4:21-23, long before Islam’s birth, is terse – Ishmael is born of a slave, whereas Isaac is born due to divine promise. The fact, however, is that this assertion is an interpretive explanation of a rather more complex issue, as will become evident. In fact, a close study of the Old Testament narratives shows that the story of Ishmael is, as Churchill (1939) once remarked about Russia, something of a riddle, inside a mystery, wrapped in an enigma.

4. UNWRAPPING THE ENIGMA

4.1 Islam and the Qur'ān

Space does not permit too much of an exploration into the birth of Islam. In brief, in the 6th century CE, north of the Arabian Peninsula, two great powers were locked in a seesaw power struggle. The Christian Byzantine Empire was to the northwest, and controlled the Mediterranean Sea, North Africa, and the lands of Palestine. In the north-east lay the Zoroastrian Persian kingdom. As is the case from that day to this, such conflicts create migrants seeking relief from the strife, and many such refugees sought sanctuary in Arabia – particularly in Mecca, which already had a reputation as a place of sanctuary from conflict, and also in Yathrib (later Medina). These migrants brought with them their religious traditions – significant among these being Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. The Arabs of the day were primarily polytheists who worshipped idols. Among them were small groups of individuals who were neither Jews nor Christians, but also professed the monotheism of the Abrahamic tradition and rejected idol worship (Ramadan 2017:1).

4.2 Muhammad and the Hanefites

The earliest history of Islam is shrouded in the mists of time. Much of what is believed of Mohammad's early life is based on tradition, as recorded in the Hadiths.¹ When Hadiths began as oral tradition is unknown;² what is known is that approximately 200 years after Mohammad's death, "six authoritative volumes of traditions, each containing thousands of Hadiths, were produced" (Turner 2006:8).

Later Islamic historians, for example, Ibn Ishaq³ (whose work survives only in edited copies or recensions [Donner 1998:32]) and Tabari,⁴ "drew on these three resources and occasionally upon the accounts of Jewish or Christian scholars" (Ramadan 2017:1-22). These sources suggest that the Hanefites, an eclectic mix of Arab people with a large population in Mecca who had abandoned idol worship and were seeking the one true faith, carefully studied what they knew of the traditions of these imported religions against their cultural background of pluralist paganism. From

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- 1 Collectively Hadith, usually translated "prophetic tradition" (Turner 2006:8).
 - 2 "A written record of their existence did not emerge until 200 years after the Prophet's death" (Turner 2006:8).
 - 3 Muhammad ibn Ishāq ibn Yasār ibn Khiyār, (d. 767 or 761), *Life of the Messenger of God (Sīratu Rasūli l-Lāh)*, ca. 710 CE; Robinson 2003:XV).
 - 4 Abū Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, (839-923 CE), *History of the Prophets and Kings (Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk)* (Turner 2006:8).

time to time, they would withdraw to caves in the mountains surrounding Mecca to meditate, pray, study and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of these various faiths as they quested for clarity, direction, and perhaps even revelation. Mohammed would sometimes join the Hanefites in these exercises, but more often would meditate alone (Turner 2006:16; Ramadan 2017:4). Islamic tradition has it that, while on one of these retreats, Mohammed began a series of trances that eventually led to the “utterances” that became the Qur’ān, Islam’s Holy Book.

While the veracity of Ibn Ishaq’s *Life*, Tabir’s *History* and the Hadith cannot be established, Islamic tradition clearly maintains that Muhammad and early Islam had contact with both Jews and Christians, some form of knowledge of the traditions of both, and possibly access to some form of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible; both are referenced in the Qur’ān; Islam – with some exceptions – adopts the patriarchal narratives of Israel as the ancestral narratives of Islam. In terms of this article, the exception of course concerns Ishmael.

4.3 Ishmael in the Qur’ān

Ishmael has a more prominent role within Islam and the Qur’ān than he does in the Bible, and there is quite a difference between his characterisation in Islam as opposed to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Within the Qur’ān, two surahs, or chapters, illuminate the role of Ishmael in Islam. Surah 37 details the birth and near sacrifice of Ishmael by Abraham, while surah 2⁵ speaks to the building of the Kaaba – the edifice located in Mecca (*Makka*) that represents the absolute centre of the Islamic faith.

Ishmael’s birth is narrated in verse 101 of surah 37. Prior to this, in verses 83-97, Abraham is depicted as “contending” with pagans who worshipped idols and the stars. Abraham destroyed their pagan idols, for which the pagans rose up against him, but God “brought them (that is, the pagans) low” (Surah 37:98) and Abraham then sought refuge in God. Abraham prays: “My Lord grant me a doer of good deeds” (Surah 37:100) and his faith in the one God is rewarded, for God speaks, saying: “So We gave him the good news of a forbearing son” (Surah 37:101). The forbearing son is Ishmael (by implication – he is not named in the text). Verses 102-103 then put us on what appears to be familiar ground: God reveals to Abraham in a dream that he, Abraham, must offer his son – his only son – in sacrifice – except, of course, the son referred to is Ishmael – because, as will be noted later, in Islamic tradition, Isaac is not yet born.

5 The Qur’ān presents Mohammad’s “utterances” (the Surahs), from longest to shortest rather than chronologically.

In verse 103, Abraham tells Ishmael his dream, and Ishmael offers his peaceful acquiescence in verse 104, saying: “O my father, do as thou art commanded; if Allah please, thou wilt find me patient.” This is the only record of him speaking in either of the relevant religious texts.

Paralleling the biblical account, Abraham and Ishmael are both prepared for the ultimate moment when, dramatically, God intervenes, and a surrogate, a ram caught in a thicket, becomes the sacrifice. As reward for his obedience, it is revealed to Abraham in verse 112 that he will have another son, Isaac. It is clear from this surah that Ishmael *had to be* the son to be sacrificed, as Isaac’s birth was only promised following this test of Abraham’s faith.

The Qur’ān includes twelve references to Ishmael in the various lists of prophets (Iqra Islamic Publications [n.d.]). The excerpt just elaborated, along with verses 125 to 127 of Surah 2, are the substance of references to Ishmael and are clearly a good deal less in number than the biblical Ishmael narratives have to offer (8 verses in the Qur’ān versus approximately 37 in the Bible) – and yet Ishmael enjoys considerably more worth to Islam as a revered prophet and patriarch than he does in the Bible, with the Bible offering a more subdued profile for Abraham’s first-born son. Instead of presenting him as a significant figure, the Genesis view of the man, while still respecting him as a son of Abraham, places him on a far lower plane than his younger brother Isaac. While there is a possibility of course that this marginalising of Ishmael in favour of Isaac has to do with Hagar’s social position – servant (and as noted earlier, this is the Jewish and Christian view) – there are grounds for disputing this assertion, as will be shown.

4.4 Ishmael and Isaac in the Bible

Genesis 12:4 tells us that, when Abram was seventy years old, God instructed him to leave Haran, located in the foothills of the Anatolian plateau of modern Turkey, to go to “the land I will show you ... and I will make of you a great nation” (Gen. 12:1-2).⁶ Once arrived in Canaan, God tells Abram (Gen. 12:7): “To your offspring I will give this land.”

Some eleven years pass, and Abram cries out to the Lord that, far from making him a great nation, he remains childless and not only that, in a culture where, it seems, women could not inherit (meaning Sarai could not come into Abram’s estate), then Abram’s servant, Eliezer of Damascus – if we read Genesis 15:2, 3 correctly (the phrase is enigmatic; Wenham 1987:378) – will be his heir.

6 New Revised Standard Bible version (NRSV) throughout, unless otherwise noted.

Sarai, seeing the distress that her barrenness has created for her husband, has an idea. She will give her maidservant Hagar the Egyptian to him. It is important to note, in this instance, that she says as “wife” (Heb. *‘ishah*, Gen. 16:3), in hopes, as the text says, that she, Sarai, can “obtain children by her” (Gen. 16:2b).

These words are significant. The implication is that Sarai will consider a child born to a surrogate – in this instance, Hagar – and sired by Abram, as her own child. Such a solution appears to have been a typical social custom of the time. Brenneman (2000:653) writes: “Hagar was a surrogate mother whom Sarah was obliged by law to give to Abraham to provide an heir”. It has to be said that Sarah waited a very long time (she was 76 years old) before acquiescing to what was either law or, more likely, established tradition.⁷ Hagar, seeing that she is pregnant, becomes haughty (“she looked with contempt on”; Gen. 16:4) Sarai.⁸ Sarai complains to Abram, who says that she should “do to her as you please” (Gen. 16:6). On reflection, this is a little strange, for who is to say at this juncture that this child, a son, from Hagar is not God’s way of fulfilling His promise to Abram?

Regardless, Sarai sends Hagar away into the wilderness. There Hagar encounters an angel of the Lord who encourages her to return to Sarai and submit to her. The angel further says that Hagar’s offspring will be multiplied “that they cannot be counted for multitude” (Gen. 16:10), and that Ishmael shall be “a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him” (Gen. 16:12).⁹ Hagar praises God as the one who has seen and who cares for her, and the place becomes known as Beer-lahai-roi, “the well of the living one who sees me” (Gen. 16:13).¹⁰

Hagar returns to Sarai and submits to her. The child is born. He is called Ishmael, “the Lord has listened”. The Bible tells us that he is so

7 Since barrenness was considered failure in a wife, it may be argued, in this instance, that Sarai’s actions were intended more as a fulfilment of her desires rather than Abram’s. For a discussion of servant/wife roles *vis-à-vis* barren wives, see Fretheim (1994:452).

8 The Hebrew is *qālal* – “light, make light of, insignificant” (Scharbert 2004:37-44). There are multiple nuanced translations: “she slighted” [ESV], or “despised” [NASV]; “her mistress was despised in her eye” [ASV & KJV]; “she no longer respected her mistress” [CEB]; “she looked down on her mistress” [HCSB]; “she began to despise her mistress” [NIV].

9 While a contemporary understanding of the phrase “wild ass of a man” may be considered derogatory, in the context of survival skills for the period in which Ishmael lived, it was a high compliment (Brenneman 2000:653).

10 Islam maintains that Beer-lahai-roi is the Zam-Zam well in Mecca, a location important in *Hajj* (pilgrimage).

named because the Lord has listened to Hagar's complaint – "for the Lord has given ear to your affliction" (Gen. 16:11). But Abram names the child (Gen. 16:15). In doing so, is he not acknowledging perhaps that God has listened to *his* earlier plea for a child in Genesis 15:2, and God's response in Genesis 15:4b-6? He asked God for a son, and now he has one.

4.4.1 Ishmael's legitimacy

The Bible is silent on Ishmael's legitimacy; that is to say, his legitimacy is not questioned, which may be because Ishmael's position as son and heir is a given fact arising out of accepted local custom (see note 7 above). This idea is reinforced by the later narratives regarding surrogate motherhood that began with Sarai. Rachel, Jacob's barren wife, invited her husband to "go into" her servant Bilhah, so that she, Bilhah, as Rachel says, "can bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her", Gen. 30:3). Jacob complies and ends up with two sons by Bilhah – Dan and Naphtali (Gen. 30:7, 8) – before God "remembered" Rachel, opened her womb, and she gave birth to Joseph (Gen. 30:22, 23). We might even consider mothers who have become barren in the natural course of things: Jacob's other wife, Leah, having ceased childbearing, celebrates the birth of children (Gad and Asher) by Jacob to her servant Zilpah (Gen. 30:9-13).

Note that, inclusive of Ishmael, no issues of adoption or legitimacy are mentioned in any of the narratives just cited; indeed, absent any commentary to the contrary, the many children born to handmaids and servants appear to be happily absorbed into the various family circles. While some jealousy is evident, especially on the part of Rachel (Gen. 30:1), and a little anger on Joseph's part (Gen. 30:2), other than Ishmael, no child is sent away, nor even sidelined, because of their birth mothers. In fact, it is whom the father is that determines legitimacy and birth rights: Deuteronomy 21:15-17 explicitly prohibits the disenfranchising of the first-born son – regardless of the mother's status – and further provides that he shall receive a double portion of his father's inheritance. While Deuteronomy is generally considered a later contribution to the Pentateuch (see 5.1, below), Boadt *et al.* (2012:109) state that "the protected status of a slave woman who bears her master a son in place of his barren wife is known both at Nuzi and in the famous law code of Hammurabi (1700 BCE)".¹¹

11 See West (1979:112-120).

5. UNPACKING THE MYSTERY

5.1 Isaac supplants Ishmael

In Genesis 17, God again appears to Abram, changes his name to Abraham, and Sarai's to Sarah, tells Abraham to introduce circumcision as a mark of the covenant God is making with Abraham and his descendants, and tells Abraham that Sarah will produce nations and that "kings of people" (*malkê 'ammim*) shall come from her through the son he may now anticipate – Isaac. Abraham then asks if Ishmael might also be blessed: "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" (Gen. 17:18). God replies: "As for Ishmael, I have heard you", and goes on to say that Ishmael shall father twelve *nesî'im* (the word means "elevated ones", or important persons; most translations read "princes") and become a great nation (Gen. 17:20), but Isaac is the one with whom God will establish his covenant (Gen. 17:21, including, presumably, the covenant promise of "land" in Gen. 12:6; Ishmael is pointedly excluded). No reason for Ishmael, as first-born son, being sidelined or usurped is provided at this point. If he has sinned against God or Abram and is thus worthy of demotion, we are not told. Notice again that God's promise is that Isaac will father kings, and Ishmael, princes, a clear statement of the intended future superiority of Isaac over his brother.

Nevertheless, it is fourteen years before God's promise to Abraham is fulfilled. Fourteen years during which it seemed entirely reasonable that Ishmael, as first-born, would be the heir of Abraham. One can only imagine the bond that would have developed between them. According to Wenham (2000:83), Abraham had a "strong paternal affection and particularly [a] deep love for Ishmael". But then, as promised, came Isaac.

The day Isaac was weaned, Abraham made a great feast, during the course of which Sarah sees Ishmael "laughing" (Gen. 21:9),¹² and

12 "Sarah saw Hagar's son laughing, the one Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham." [CEB]; "But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing." [ESV]; "Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking." [NASV]; "But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac." [NRSV]. When God tells Abraham that he would have a son by Sarah, he laughs (Gen. 17:17). In Genesis 18:18, when God again tells Abraham that Sarah will have a child, she overhears the conversation and also laughs. When Isaac is born, Sarah celebrates with laughter (Gen. 21:6). Isaac's name means "he laughs". Clearly, the use of the verb in its various forms is significantly linked to Isaac's role as heir of God's covenant with Abraham. While Isaac is presented as the object of Ishmael's laughter in the Septuagint (which is perhaps trying to make sense of the use of the verb in this particular

determines that both Ishmael and Hagar must go. She entreats Abraham to “drive them off”,¹³ something he is not willing to do: “The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son” (Gen. 21:11), but God tells Abraham: “Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you.” It is no longer Sarah’s demand, but God’s. God adds that, although Abraham’s inheritance will be through Isaac, Ishmael too will become a great nation (Gen. 21:13). It is evident that, while Ishmael is to be eclipsed by Isaac, he will not be entirely forgotten, becoming as it were the moon to Isaac’s sun. But, no reason for demoting Ishmael is provided. Against the desires of his heart, but in light of God’s assurances regarding Ishmael, Abraham reluctantly complies.

5.2 Ishmael and Hagar banished

The banishment narrative begins with Abraham preparing the woman and her child for their departure. He fills a skin with water, provides a package of food, and sends mother and son on their way – a tragic moment for Hagar and Ishmael and, regardless of God’s promises, an event that must have been heartbreaking to Abraham (Gen. 21:14).

In Genesis 21:14-19, Hebrew uses the words *yeled* (vv. 14-16) and *na’ar* (vv. 12-20) interchangeably to refer to the putative Ishmael. According to Schreiner (1990:76-78), *yeled* usually means young child, or baby. For an adolescent, the Hebrew is typically *na’ar* (Fuhs 1998:474-485). According to Fuhs, *na’ar* is rather fluid in its meaning. He writes: “the *ne’arim* Ephraim and Manasseh whom Joseph blesses are also small children” (Gen. 48:12-16); “[T]he *na’ar* Isaac is somewhat older, he walks next to his father and carries the wood of the burnt offering” (Gen. 22:5, 12). To illustrate these occurrences, verse 14 reads: “He (Abraham) filled a skin of water and put it on Hagar’s shoulder, along with the *yeled* – baby.” Verse 15, “she put the baby under one of the bushes”; verse 16, “Do not let me look on the death of the baby”. Verse 17 changes the noun: “and God heard the voice of the *na’ar* – lad”; verse 18, “lift up the lad and hold him fast with your hand”; verse 19, “gave the lad a drink”, and verse 20, “God was with the lad.” In general, the narrative reinforces the notion that the

context), the Hebrew text regarding Ishmael’s laughter omits any reference to Isaac. Connecting Isaac as recipient of the covenant with the verb “to laugh” could perhaps be interpreted that Ishmael, on this occasion, is “playing the Isaac”, in other words, acting as if he were the fulfilment of the covenant (N. deClaissé-Walford, personal communication).

13 Hebrew *garāsh*: “To chase away/drive out, away” as Adam and Eve from Eden (Gen. 3:24); Cain from the cultivated land (Gen. 4:14) (Ringgren 1988:68-69).

child is young – curiously, about the age of Isaac, in fact!¹⁴ Compounding the problematic nature of the passage is the fact that the *yeled/na'ar* is not named. It is assumed to be Ishmael. But remembering that fourteen years elapsed between the birth of Ishmael and the birth of Isaac, and that a further two or more years have passed before Isaac was weaned, Ishmael would now be sixteen or seventeen years old – a man, not a baby.¹⁵ Among several interesting options she proposes relating to the difficulty of Ishmael's age in the passage, Pigott (2018) suggests that

[T]his narrative portrays Ishmael as a young boy in order to more closely parallel his near demise while in the care of his mother with Isaac's near death at the hands of his father in Genesis 22. In other words, the narrator wants us to see the two stories mirroring one another (with important differences).

The last words about Ishmael occur in Genesis 25. In verse 9, he shows up, with Isaac, and at the exclusion of their half-brothers, to bury their father in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron, the son of Zohar the Hittite. Verses 12 through 18 list Ishmael's twelve sons, "twelve princes according to their tribes", their settlement locations, "from Havilah to Shur, opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria" (Gen. 25:18), and his age at death, 137 years. The traditional link between Ishmaelites and the Bedouin Arabs is based on this tribal list (Brenneman 2000:653).

5.3 Isaac as sacrificial offering

We turn now to the issue central to this article – the story of the proposed sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. God speaks to Abraham and tells him to take his son, his only son, Isaac, and offer him to God as a burnt offering. We already know that Isaac is not Abraham's "only" son. Thus, the words further marginalise Ishmael, almost as if he never existed. Yet, according to the biblical text, he did indeed exist, and it was he who for fourteen years was Abraham's only son. How are these facts to be reconciled? A clue, perhaps, is in the way the command is given: "Take your son, your only son, whom you love" (Gen. 22:2a). The command is deliberate and explicit. "Your son, your only son" reminds Abraham that, as far as Abraham should be concerned, the banished Ishmael no longer exists;¹⁶ "whom you love"

14 NIV, ASV, and CEB use "boy" throughout; ESV and JSB use "boy" and "child" interchangeably, as does NRSV. NASV uses "lad" and "boy"; JSB uses "child" and "boy".

15 In Genesis 22:3, 5, 19, Abraham's servants are called *na'arim*, "lads".

16 Islam, on the other hand, takes the view that, regardless of the banishment of Ishmael, he is still Abraham's "only son" (Ali 1991:860, footnote 2116).

certainly implies that, while Abraham had expressed concern regarding Ishmael's future (Gen. 17:18), his deep and abiding love was for Isaac.

5.4 Summary of inconsistencies

In the Bible, Isaac appears to be the patriarch of Israel. But, as noted earlier, there are clearly some issues or inconsistencies throughout the Isaac/Ishmael narratives as well as the apparent abandonment of the traditional status in the Ancient Near East of the first-born son. Islam highlights these inconsistencies in the biblical narratives: Ishmael being disenfranchised from his rightful place in opposition to the cultural norms of the time; Ishmael as opposed to Isaac as heir; the identity of the unnamed child cast out with Hagar into the wilderness, and the identity of the son to be sacrificed to God ("your son, your only son").

In Islamic thought and tradition, these inconsistencies collectively suggest that the sacrificial offering in Genesis 22 is more likely to be Ishmael than Isaac. For additional support, Islam calls on its fundamental premise that, while God has revealed God's self on many occasions in the past, the recording of God's revelations became distorted or misrepresented. Such distortions are traditionally believed in Islam to be corrected by revelations to Mohammed as written in the Qur'ān, which is, according to Islam, God's last and most accurate – indeed perfect – revelation.

Against these inconsistencies is, first, that the structure of the biblical narratives, while never stating the fact explicitly, certainly implies through subsequent events that Abram and Sarai "jumped the gun" of God's promise by having Ishmael, meaning that Isaac was indeed the promised son of the covenant. Secondly, that Islam has long accepted that the covenant made with Abram was indeed conveyed to Isaac and his descendants. Thirdly, Islam has also long accepted the later Israelites to be, legitimately, People of the Book.

6. ADDITIONAL ISSUES TO BE CONSIDERED

Three other issues must be addressed: the evolution of the biblical narratives under discussion; in light of that discussion, God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, and the nature of the exposure of early Islam to the Hebrew Old Testament.

6.1 Excursus: The Books of Moses¹⁷

That the “Books of Moses” (Genesis through Deuteronomy) essentially achieved their final form (canon) at an early date is well known. It was not, however, until the mid-19th century that scholarship made concerted efforts to establish their age with any degree of certainty, and indeed, to a certain extent, the jury is still out in terms of universal agreement in this regard. While the broad consensus of agreement with Julius Wellhausen’s 1878 documentary hypothesis throughout the 20th century has largely collapsed in recent years (Viviano 2007:154-155; Blenkinsopp 1994:312-313), enough established data remains to support some of Wellhausen’s assertions. These include evidence that, while many “hands” were involved, certain writing characteristics are evident that allow the identification of particular writers being responsible for certain blocks of content. Wellhausen labelled these writers J, E, D, and P, and the order of these letter identifications is generally agreed to represent the order of their appearance in history – J first, followed almost contemporaneously by E, later by D, and finally by P. Friedman (2003) also identified two other writers, RJE and R. RJE is a writer who edited J and E together, and R is a writer who later edited all of the Pentateuch into a whole. While the major contentions against the documentary hypothesis generally coalesce around the approximate ages of the various narratives and the number of editors (redactors) involved, the sequence of the material (JIE/RJE/D/P/R), though not as firmly established as heretofore, remains a convenient reference tool. In terms of age, the original hypothesis was that J appeared in the early 9th century BCE, and E in the late 9th century BCE, the earliest D material and the P material in the mid-6th century BCE, with some material possibly being fairly ancient (Viviano 2007:154-155). We must remember, in this instance, that we are largely dealing with the *Textus Receptus* – the Hebrew Bible in the form that we have it today. We must not overlook the fact that, before the material became canon (an event that itself was staggered over several centuries), it existed in many forms. Before the more recent discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other material, the oldest Old Testament in Hebrew was Leningradensis, dated to 1008 CE. Regardless of recent discoveries (Aleppo Codex, Cairo Geniza), for much of its history, the exact nature and content of the Hebrew Bible remained fluid.

6.2 The insertion of “P”

The excursus above is relevant to our discussion, because the covenant made by God with Abraham (Gen. 17), a pivotal event *vis-à-vis* Ishmael/

17 The “Books of Moses” is both the Islamic and the Judaic reference to the Pentateuch.

Isaac, is, according to at least one scholar, an insertion of later P material (Friedman 2003). In other words, for a period of perhaps 300 years (from early 900 BCE to approximately 550 BCE), the Ishmael/Isaac narrative did not include the covenant narrative that establishes Isaac as the preferred patriarch of Israel.

6.3 Islam's exposure to the Books of Moses

The last consideration of this inquiry is the issue of the nature and extent of early Islam's exposure to Jewish Scripture traditions – specifically the Pentateuch – and here we are very much in the realm of *terra incognita*. Was it largely a transfer of oral material obtained by Mohammad from Jewish residents in Mecca or elsewhere during his time as a caravan master? Was it part of the knowledge base of his Hanefite companions as they pondered the nature of the “true” religion in the caves above Mecca? Or did Mohammed and/or his early followers have, or have access to, a written version of at least the Pentateuch? And if they did – and bearing in mind that there were then, as there are now, versions of the Pentateuch (for example, Masoretic, Samaritan, Septuagint, Vulgate) – which version or versions did they have? The paucity of biblical material in the Qur'ān does not help in establishing the source or sources of such material, which may even have been a variety of written Hebrew Scripture or oral material that has not survived the vagaries of history.

7. APPEALS TO TRADITION

Judeo-Christianity, the older religion, traditionally believes that Isaac was the sacrificial offering, and has textual support in the Bible. Islam, the younger religion, advances certain inconsistencies in the biblical narratives to assert its tradition that the offering was Ishmael, and supports this with an appeal to the Qur'ānic text. The undeniable truth is that both religions are based on what is and has been traditionally believed. But tradition is not truth, and absent any verifiable historical facts, both religions rely on what they believe to be true. In this regard, Judaism, with the longer history, has the upper hand. Even if, as some believe, the Pentateuchal traditions were more a product of the Jews in exile in Babylon, based on redacted, embellished oral traditions with much new material added (Moberly 2009:438), those traditions pre-date the founding of Islam by 1,000 years.

8. ANALYSIS

The question posed at the beginning of this study was: “Does Islam have a reasonable claim in asserting that Ishmael, not Isaac, was the intended sacrifice demanded of Abraham in Genesis 22?”

It is evident that the inconsistencies identified above, notwithstanding the underlying theme of the biblical texts surrounding Isaac, from the time of the promise to Abraham of his coming to his final days, overwhelmingly indicate that, regardless of Ishmael’s first-born status, the author(s)/editor(s) of the biblical texts intended to show that Isaac was indeed the envisioned son of God’s covenant promise to Abram, and was indeed the son God called Abraham to sacrifice before being redeemed at the last possible moment as a sign and foretaste of the future of Israel, a nation condemned to sacrificial obscurity in Babylonia, but ultimately redeemed by faith. It is similarly evident that Islam early on recognised the identified inconsistencies and has thus long maintained that Ishmael was the sacrificial offering. But, while it is evident that in the Bible Ishmael is a key part of a narrative that has Isaac as its centrepiece and the ongoing God-driven history of Israel as its vehicle, Islam appropriates Ishmael but briefly, using his and his father’s act of submission as cause for the announcement of the impending birth of Isaac before consigning Ishmael to relative obscurity.

9. SOLVING THE RIDDLE

As with any jury, much as it wants to be impartial, unless the evidence is overwhelming, people are generally swayed by their personal biases. An Islamist will no doubt conclude that the evidence, along with the assertion that the revelations to Mohammad “correct” the biblical narrative, is sufficient to support the Muslim position. A Judeo-Christian, on the other hand, will point both to the larger body of texts that, regardless of the inconsistencies, chiefly support Isaac as a great patriarch of Israel, and also to the fact that, with the exception of its position regarding Ishmael elaborated above, Islam broadly accepts this proposition. For both religions, tradition is the pillar of their claims. In view of the grip that tradition – especially religious tradition – holds on its believers, the conflict between Islam and Judeo-Christianity regarding the identity of the sacrificial son in Genesis 22 is a debate unlikely ever to be resolved to the satisfaction of all parties.

There is, however, one possible middle ground. Returning to the narrative of the “driving out” of Hagar and Ishmael, we must consider the sense of finality of the event. Abraham certainly had a right to believe that Ishmael was God’s heir to him as a result of his request in Genesis 15:3, and the fourteen

years between the birth of Ishmael and the birth of Isaac had unquestionably cemented Abraham's deep affection for him, not least because he was truly his first born. Because of his deep love for the boy, driving him away must surely be considered a form of sacrifice of his first-born son, especially since there is no record of him ever seeing Ishmael again. In this perspective, Isaac does not supplant Ishmael as "first-born son" but rather in the permanent absence (= "death") of Ishmael, Isaac does become Abraham's "only" son, thereby conforming to God's assertion in Genesis 22:2.

The nature of the proposed sacrifice of Ishmael is not clear in the Qur'ān. Previously, the Qur'ānic text simply mentioned that Abraham asked God for a "doer of good deeds (Surah 37:100). When the son is grown, God asks Abraham to offer him in sacrifice. In precisely what way is not clear, and neither is what exactly happens. Surah 37:105 reads: "Thou hast indeed fulfilled the vision", suggesting that the sacrifice has occurred. Verse 107 reads: "And we ransomed him with a great sacrifice." The implied "him" is Ishmael. Thus, like Isaac in the biblical account, Ishmael was sacrificed, yet lives. In this view, Islam does then appear to have a sustainable claim in terms of Ishmael being a sacrificial offering, but in addition to, rather than in place of Isaac.

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