

ABRAHAM'S SON AS THE INTENDED SACRIFICE (*AL-DHABĪH*, QUR'ĀN 37:99-113): ISSUES IN QUR'ĀNIC EXEGESIS

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The story of the binding of Abraham's son first appears in Genesis 22:1-19 and unfolds in a terse but powerful narrative style that is typical of much of the Hebrew Bible. Modern critics have generally understood the major goal of the story to have been a protest against human sacrifice or an aetiological legend explaining why human sacrifice was abandoned and replaced by the sacrifice of domestic animals.¹

When one examines the legend within its context of the sacred history of the Israelite people, one notes a consistent genealogical agenda as well. The genealogical theme is explicit in many of the early Abraham stories and implicit in many of the pre-Abrahamic legends. We note in the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and the generations of Noah and the Tower of Babel, for example, that the human race as a whole proved itself unworthy of an enduring relationship with God.² After humankind demonstrated its failures, God, though still the God of the entire world, would henceforth carry on an exclusive relationship with only one small tribe represented by Abraham and his progeny, the ethno-(religio-)national group called the people of Israel. Within Israel's sacred history, particularly within the Pentateuch but in other books as well,

¹ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2:480-1.

² Though Noah and his family were chosen for survival because of Noah's righteousness, God's relationship with Abraham and his family is depicted quite differently. The covenant with Noah includes all living creatures (Gen. 9:8-17), while the covenant with Abraham is specific only to him and his offspring (Gen. 12:1-3, etc.).

the issue of who would be included in that sacred genealogy remains an extremely important one.³

The biblical story of the Binding of Isaac includes among its concerns the genealogy of that people having an exclusive covenantal relationship with God. The saga only begins, for example, after Isaac's half-brother Ishmael has been successfully banished from the household and the birthright. Isaac's politically astute and effective mother, Sarah, wins the battle for posterity that was instigated by her rival and contender, Hagar.⁴ By Genesis 22, Isaac is indeed Abraham's 'only son' (*yehidkha*). He and only he can continue the genealogical line established earlier between God and Abraham. The outcome of the biblical legend assures the reader that despite Abraham's terrible trial, God's promise endures. The legend reinforces the power and efficacy of the covenant with Abraham and his line, a genealogically determined covenant which, according to the sacred history of Israel, is to endure forever.⁵

Later rabbinic Judaism reaffirms the message of exclusivity inherent in the biblical story of the Sacrifice, but also invests it with new meaning. The concept of *zekhut avot* or 'merit of the fathers' is assigned to Abraham for his unflinching willingness to carry out God's command. This merit serves the purpose of protecting an erring Jewish people from God's stern hand.⁶

³ Various biblical stories and laws are concerned with determining, for example, which neighbouring peoples cannot marry into the Israelites (Deut. 7:1ff, 23:4), how many generations certain groups must live among the Israelites before assimilating the values and responsibilities of Israelite 'citizenship' (Deut. 23:8), and so forth.

⁴ Gen. 16:4ff. In the Islamic extra-*qur'anic* renditions of this theme (it is not found in the Qur'ān), Hagar is virtually never portrayed as instigating the conflict.

⁵ The exclusivity of the covenant is demonstrated again and again in the Hexateuch. In the following generation, Jacob is destined to continue the struggle with Esau for the birthright and inheritance that began even in the womb of their mother Rebecca (Gen. 25:22). Esau represents an ethnically related people derived from the Abrahamic genealogy as well). The theme is played over again with the story of Dina and the Shechemites in Genesis 34, with the sojourn in Egypt, and again during the conquest of Canaan.

⁶ Part of the daily liturgy for centuries, this concept is clear in the supplication, 'Lord of the world, just as Abraham withheld his mercy to do Your will with a perfect heart, may Your mercy withhold Your anger from us ...' (*Siddur Rumat Yisrael* [Jerusalem 1976], 27).

Additionally, throughout the centuries of persecution, Jews looked to the Binding of Isaac as a paradigm for self-sacrifice. Suffering Jews likened themselves to Isaac on the altar, ready to offer themselves up to an unfathomable God who calls for the ultimate sacrifice: that of their own lives and the lives of their children in the final act of *kiddush Hashem*.⁷

In Christianity, Isaac becomes a prefiguration of Jesus as the Christ,⁸ and his near-sacrifice a paradigm excelled only by the sacrifice of Jesus himself. In the same way that Isaac's willingness to be an offering is seen as merit that effectively atones for Israel's sins,⁹ the sacrifice of Jesus atones for the sins of all humankind.

The unknown author of the Letter to the Hebrews was quite aware of the genealogical importance connected with the Binding of Isaac; its significance is noted clearly in 11:17-19.¹⁰ Elsewhere, however, the covenantal genealogy is re-interpreted in clearly Christian terms. Just as Ishmael was born from a slave and excluded from the covenant of old, Israel had become a slave to the old and outmoded covenant of Sinai. The new covenant is a covenant of the spirit and God's promise; it obtains among the newly chosen: those who have chosen Jesus as Christ.¹¹ The paradigm of Ishmael versus Isaac established in Hebrew Scriptures is expanded and changed in the New Testament. Just as Abraham's rejected son, Ishmael, was excluded from the old covenant that was given to his chosen son, Isaac, the new covenant or testament is passed on through the newly or truly chosen 'son', Jesus. Isaac atoned for his

⁷ Martyrdom through 'Sanctification of the Divine Name'. See Shalom Spiegel's *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice* (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America 1967).

⁸ Gal. 3:16.

⁹ Rabbinic Judaism stresses the faith of Abraham and glosses over Isaac's in reaction to the emphasis placed on Isaac within Christianity. That Isaac's willingness to die on the altar is originally a Jewish concept is demonstrated by Israel Levi, 'Le sacrifice d'Isaac et le mort de Jesus', in *REJ* 64 (1912) and supported by the work of Hans Joachim Schoeps, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac in Paul's Theology', in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, no. 65 (1946), 385-92; and Geza Vermes, 'Redemption and Genesis XXII: The Binding of Isaac and the Sacrifice of Jesus', in his *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden 1973).

¹⁰ The example cited here is meant by the author to demonstrate Abraham's extreme faith, though it indirectly acknowledges the genealogical agenda of Hebrew Scriptures as well.

¹¹ Gal. 4:22-31.

people and inherited the old covenant. But Jesus atoned for all humanity; those who accept that inherit the new covenant. Those who do not will suffer the fate of the rejected Ishmael.

The biblical legend of the Binding of Isaac therefore serves quite important but different roles for both Judaism and Christianity. Judaism sees the legend as part of the history of God's exclusive covenantal relationship with the Jewish people based on a spiritual-genealogical orientation. In Christianity, Isaac's binding served as the paradigm for the ultimate sacrifice of God's only son. As such, it became a foundation for the new definition of covenant: also exclusive, but now based purely on the determination of one's belief.

As the Islamic understanding of the near-sacrifice evolved in the first two Islamic centuries, it too shared a concern for an exclusivist approach. We shall demonstrate below that while the story plays a less central role in Islam than in either Judaism or Christianity, the Sacrifice¹² came to serve as a proof in Islam for the exclusive relationship between God and the Arab Muslim people.

1

The Qur'anic story of the *dhabiḥ* or intended sacrifice of Abraham's son, like the biblical rendition, is noteworthy for its terse style; and like the biblical story, it has remained subject to varied interpretations. Somewhat different from the rendition found in Genesis,¹³ the Qur'an never mentions the name of the son to be sacrificed,¹⁴ and it is impossible to determine conclusively from the Qur'an which son was intended.

¹² Referred to in Arabic as *al-dhabiḥ*, and more accurately translated as 'the intended sacrificial offering'.

¹³ Qur'an 37:99-113. On the issue of the integrity of Qur'anic versus biblical versions of parallel stories found in the Bible and the Qur'an, see Marilyn R. Waldman, 'New Approaches to "Biblical" materials in the Qur'an', in *Muslim World* 75 (1985), 1-16.

¹⁴ Modern scholars are divided over which son is intended in the Qur'anic rendition. Abraham Geiger, in his ground-breaking study, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (1834), supported the belief that Ishmael was the intended sacrifice and based his view on logic and the arguments presented by some Muslim exegetes (translated into English under the title, *Judaism and Islam* [New York 1970], 103-7). Richard Bell supported the argument favouring Isaac, and based his decision on a critical analysis of the structure of the Qur'anic textual rendition ('The Sacrifice of Ishmael', in *Transactions of the Glasgow University Oriental Society* 10 (n.d.), 29-31).

The Muslim exegetes were troubled by a number of aspects of the story, but none more than the issue of which son was the intended victim. Unlike the Bible, the Qur'an is not interested in sacred genealogy, and makes no effort to preserve a holy biological *isnād*¹⁵ from Abraham. Both sons are identified as prophets.¹⁶ Isaac is mentioned more often in the Qur'an than Ishmael,¹⁷ but Ishmael is associated with the all-important act of building the Ka'ba (Qur'an 2:127). Either might be a pious candidate for the honour of being the intended Sacrifice of God, *dhabiḥ Allāh*.

The Qur'anic depiction of the Sacrifice not only fails to name the intended sacrificial victim, it provides no location for the event and alludes only vaguely to a chronological context. As in Jewish and Christian exegesis of biblical narratives, medieval Islamic exegesis of Qur'anic narratives often attempts to fill in the lacunae of sacred Scripture. This study examines a full range of traditional medieval Islamic exegesis on the specific issue of which of Abraham's sons was intended to be the Sacrifice.¹⁸

Satan Attempts to Interfere

According to one series of narrative traditions filling out the Qur'anic story, Abraham is confronted by Satan who tries to divert him from sacrificing his son.¹⁹ In the various renditions,

¹⁵ The term usually refers to the list of authorities in whose names an originally oral tradition is passed on. For example, 'x' heard the tradition from 'y', who received it on the authority of 'z', etc.

¹⁶ Ishmael in 19:54, Isaac in 37:112.

¹⁷ Isaac is referred to by name seventeen times while Ishmael is named twelve times.

¹⁸ Various genres of Islamic literature besides the type referred to specifically as 'exegesis' served this function. Islamic historians, for example, generally began their works with an account of Creation and worked their way through the legends and stories of ancient pre-Islamic history until they arrived at the period which they intended to study in detail. Many of these works include legends and opinions about the life of Abraham and the Sacrifice depicted in the Qur'an. It is well-known that the *Ḥadīth* literature includes comments or anecdotes referring to the acts of the pre-Islamic prophets as well as the prophet Muhammad. Finally, collections of folk literature known as *qissat al-anbiyā'* or 'Stories of the Prophets' often refer in some detail to our story as well. All function as exegesis of the Qur'an, whether or not they carry out this endeavour in a systematic fashion.

¹⁹ The parallels between these and Jewish and Christian sources have

Satan, the devil or an old man²⁰ approaches each of the three characters in the story and tempts them through logical arguments to disobey the command of God. Yet in every case, absolute obedience to God prevails. The tempting arguments are ignored and the drama of the sacrifice continues.

This tradition is found in three different versions distinguished in two cases by the ultimate authorities of their *ismāʿīl*, Ka'b al-Aḥbār and Ibn Ishāq. A third version lacks an *ismāʿīl*.²¹

With five renditions,²² the most prevalent of the three versions is that attributed to Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. 32/652-3 or 35/655-6), a well-known and learned Jewish convert to Islam who is credited with bringing many Jewish traditions into the corpus of Islamic religious literature. The Ka'b version understands the intended sacrifice to be Isaac. Considering Ka'b's background, reputation, and era, it would appear quite logical for him to transmit coherent legends based on the biblical version assuming the victim to have been Isaac.²³ And in fact, the traditions attributed to him invariably place Isaac in the role of the intended sacrificial victim. The version attributed to Ka'b appears as follows:

1. Ka'b asks Abū Hurayra if he would like to hear the story of Isaac son of Abraham. Abū Hurayra responds in the affirmative.

often been observed. For the most recent study, see Firestone, *The Evolution of Islamic Narrative: Exegesis on the Abraham-Ismael Legend* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, New York University 1988), 210-310.

²⁰ *Shaykh*. The words *Shayṭān* and *Iblīs* appear to be used interchangeably in these texts.

²¹ Ṭabarī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān* (Beirut n.d.), XXIII, 78 mentions that this tradition does have an *ismāʿīl*, which can be found in the books of Ayyāshī and ʿAlī b. Ibrahim.

²² Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* (Beirut 1405/1984), XXIII, 82; Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (Leiden 1964 [volume 1 cited only throughout]), 292-4; Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾiṣ* (Cairo 1374/1954), 94-5; Ibn al-Aṭhīr, *al-Kāmil* (Beirut 1385/1965), I 109-10; and Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr* (Cairo n.d.), IV, 15.

²³ The honorific *al-aḥbār* is probably a literal (plural) transmission from the Hebrew *haver*, which was a title of scholarship both among Palestinian Jews of the Tannaitic period and later among Babylonian Jews as well. Ka'b was a Jewish scholar or 'learned fellow' before his conversion to Islam during the caliphate of Abū Bakr or ʿUmar. He was well respected for his knowledge, especially of the Bible. Expertise in Bible included knowledge of Haggadah or narrative exegesis, which was mostly in oral form during the seventh century (*I-ʿ2* [new edition] 4:582).

2. After Abraham is shown his vision about the sacrifice, Satan says: '... if I do not beguile the family of Abraham [now] I will never beguile them!'

3. Satan appears as a man known to Abraham and Sarah and goes to Sarah after Abraham and Isaac had already left for the place of sacrifice. Satan asks Sarah where they went and she replies: 'to do an errand' (4/5) or 'to gather firewood' (1/5).²⁴ Satan tells her that Abraham actually took Isaac out to sacrifice him. Sarah responds that Abraham would never do that (4/5) or that he is more compassionate toward the boy than even she (1/5), but asks why he would ever wish to sacrifice him. Satan answers that Abraham claimed God commanded that of him. Sarah replies: 'If God commanded that of him, then he should do it!' (3/5) or that if God commanded that of him, he would do it since he is absolutely faithful to God (2/5).

4. Foiled, Satan leaves and finds Isaac walking next to his father. He tells Isaac that his father is going to sacrifice him (1/5) or asks Isaac where Abraham is taking him. Isaac answers: 'To do an errand' (3/5) or 'to gather firewood' (1/5). Satan counters: 'No by God ... he is going to sacrifice you!' Isaac does not believe him and asks why he would do that. Satan replies that Abraham claimed God commanded that of him. Isaac answers: 'If God commanded that, then he should obey Him!'

5. Foiled again, Satan hastens to Abraham and asks him where he is going. He replies that he must do some errands with Isaac. Satan says: 'Well, by God, you took him in order to sacrifice him!' Abraham says: 'Why would I sacrifice him?' Satan answers: 'You claimed that your Lord commanded that of you' Abraham replies: 'By God, if my Lord commanded that of me, I would do it!'²⁵

²⁴ The visual format for our reproduction of the paradigmatic versions employs the listing of motifs, each designated by a number. The numbers in parentheses (4/5) represent the number of times that particular motif or section of the motif occurs in the sources, compared to the total number of renditions of the version. In the case here, for example, four of the five renditions in the sources listed above have Sarah telling Satan that they went to do an errand; the other rendition has Sarah telling him that they went to gather firewood.

²⁵ The slightly different rendition of Thaʿlabī has Satan reply to Abraham's comment that he went to do an errand by saying: 'By God, I see that Satan came to you in your sleep and commanded you to sacrifice your own son!' But Abraham recognized him as Satan and said: 'Away, O cursed

The anonymous version is found only among Shi'ite exegetes and may represent a Shi'ite version of the tradition.²⁶ The boy's mother is identified here as Sarah, who is engaged in the minor pilgrimage to the Ka'ba in Mecca.²⁷ The story is found as follows:

1. An old man approaches Abraham and asks him what he plans to do with the boy. He tells him that he will sacrifice him. The man responds: 'Heaven forbid!²⁸ You will sacrifice an innocent boy?' Abraham answers that God commanded him. The man counters by saying that it must have been Satan who commanded that. Abraham replies: 'Woe to you! I know that I received a truly Godly revelation'. The man repeats that it must have been Satan, and Abraham refuses to speak with him further. He is resolved to obey his Lord, but the old man says: 'O Abraham, you are a leader whom people follow. If you sacrifice him, then [all the] people will sacrifice their children!' But Abraham spoke with him no longer.

2. The devil²⁹ then comes to the boy's mother when she is engaged in what appears to be the 'Umra pilgrimage to the Ka'ba. He tells her that he just saw an old man, and she tells him that that is her husband. He says that he saw a boy with him, and she tells him that that is her son. He continues: 'Then I saw him laying him down and taking up the knife to sacrifice him!' She says: 'You lie! Abraham is the gentlest of men. Why would he sacrifice his own son?' The devil insists that he saw it and she asks why. He replies: 'He claimed that his Lord commanded him'. She concurs: 'It is true that he would obey his Lord'. She becomes agitated but finishes her ritual responsibilities, and then runs toward Mina with her hand on her head

one! It was God, and I will obey His command!' The Tha'labi rendition of the 'Ka'b' version is actually influenced by the 'Ibn Ishaq' version (see below), as Tha'labi points out himself when he prefaces the story with: 'Abū Hurayra related on the authority of Ka'b al-Aḥbār, and Ibn Ishaq related on the authority of others who said: ...'

²⁶ Qummī, *Tafsīr* (Najaf 1385/1966), II, 225; and Tabarsī, XXIII, 77.

²⁷ Shi'ites have been associated with borrowing more freely from Jewish legends than Sunnis. ... the Shi'a seems to be responsible for the main flow of Judeo-Christian motifs into the Muslim literature already since the first century A.H.' (Uri Rubin, 'Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shi'a Tradition', in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1 (1979).

²⁸ *Subḥān Allāh*.

²⁹ *Iblīs*. The old man (*shaykh*) of section No. 1 is not named as the devil.

saying: 'O Lord! Do not punish me for what I did to the mother of Ishmael!'

The Ibn Ishaq version is represented by two traditions given on his authority, both of which consider Ishmael to have been the son intended for sacrifice.³⁰

1. After Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son and before his son knows about the command, Abraham says to him: 'O my son, take the rope and the knife, and let's go and gather firewood'.

2. When Abraham turns onto the path, the devil (*Iblīs*) appears in the form of a man who tries to deter him, asking: 'Where are you going, old man!'. He replies that he is going to do an errand. The devil says: 'I see that Satan (*shayṭān*) has come to you in your sleep and has commanded you to sacrifice this little boy of yours!' But Abraham recognizes him and says: 'Away, you enemy of God!'

3. Foiled, the devil (*Iblīs*) comes to Ishmael, who is carrying the rope and knife behind his father. He asks him where his father is taking him and Ishmael replies: 'To gather firewood'. The devil tells him that his father will sacrifice him, but Ishmael does not believe him. When asked why, the devil says: 'He claims that his Lord commanded that of him'. So Ishmael replies: 'Then let him do what his Lord commands in perfect obedience!' (*sam'ān wā lā ātan*).

4. Foiled again, he goes to Hagar who is at home and asks her the same question. She tells him that Abraham and Ishmael went to gather firewood. When Saran tells her that Abraham went to sacrifice her son, she says: 'Certainly not! He is even more compassionate toward him than I! But if his Lord would command that of him, then he would submit to the command of God!'

5. So the 'enemy of God' failed in his desire because of God and because Abraham's entire family submitted to God's will.

³⁰ Tabarsī, *Ta'ribh*, 303-4, in which Ibn Ishaq relates the tradition on the authority of some scholars, and Ibn al-Athīr, I 111-2. The rendition found in Tabarsī is fullest and given here. A third reference is that of Tha'labī, 94-1, who claims that his tradition is on the authority of Ka'b al-Aḥbār to Abū Hurayra, and also Ibn Ishaq who heard it from others (see note 25 above). The tradition he cites is essentially the Ka'b version, though it includes some minor influence from the Ibn Ishaq version as well.

Finally, one miscellaneous rendition is given by Kisā'i without an *innād*, in which Isaac is named as the intended victim.³¹

Among our various versions of Satan's attempts to interfere with God's command, most posit Isaac as the intended victim. The earliest according to the chain of transmitters is that attributed to Ka'b (d. c. 652). The only version naming Ishmael as the victim is that attributed to Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767) who lived a full century later.³²

Satan and the Lapidation

A very different tradition independent of the previous Satan traditions is given on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/689-7).³³ This story probably derived from the pre-Islamic pagan custom of stoning the three pillars in Mina, but substituted Satan for the pre-Islamic association of the lapidation ritual.

³¹ *Qisas al-anbiyā'* (Leiden 1922), 150.

³² There has been great controversy among scholars throughout the past century regarding the reliability of *innāds* and the Islamic claims of early authorship of Islamic traditions. Most recently, Nabia Abbott (*Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri* vols. I-III, Chicago 1965ff) tends to support the traditional view while John Wansbrough (*Quranic Studies*, Oxford 1977, and *The Sectarian Milieu*, Oxford 1978) would place the composition of the tradition literature not earlier than the end of the eighth century. Our research suggests that what is known of the purported authors of our traditions tends to support the logic of their making the statements they make. This observation could result either from their true authorship or to their attribution by later traditionists who were quite familiar with the backgrounds of the early authorities. As we will attempt to demonstrate below, for example, the earliest authorities cited for the traditions tend overwhelmingly to consider Isaac the intended victim, while later authorities as well as later exegetes agree that Ishmael was intended. Few scholars would dispute that early Muslims learned traditions from Jews and Christians (see M. Kister, 'Iḥdithū 'an banī Isrā'īla wa-lā ḥarajā', *Israel Oriental Studies* I (1972), 215-39; Abbott, *Studies* II, 8ff). Unless there were some reason to think differently (such as a discrepancy between the Qur'ān and the Bible), it would be quite logical for early Muslims to agree with their Jewish and Christian neighbours. Thus the attributions do not appear to be inconsistent with the content of the passages.

³³ Ibn Hanbal, *Muwad* (Beirut 1389/1969), I, 306-7; Tabarī, *Tafsīr*, XXIII, 80-1, *Ta'riḥ*, 306-7; and Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, IV, 15. A sixth reference is given by Zamakhshārī, *Kashshaf* (Cairo 1385/1966), III, 349 in very brief form: 'It is related that he threw stones at Satan when he appeared to him and tried to tempt him away from sacrificing his son.'

This substitution would serve to purify an old and accepted cultic ritual of its original pagan meaning.

The three most complete renditions name Ishmael as the intended Sacrifice.³⁴ One names Isaac,³⁵ and one provides no name at all.³⁶ The tradition follows:

1. Abraham is shown the stations of the pilgrimage (3/5), or is commanded with the sacrifice (1/5).
2. Satan appears to him at the place of the Running Ritual (3/5),³⁷ or at al-Mash'ar al-Harām (1/4) and tries to get the better of him, but Abraham surpasses him (4/5).
3. Then Gabriel takes him to al-Jamra al-Aqaba (4/5),³⁸ or Abraham goes there himself (1/5) where Satan appears to him. He departs (4/5) or sinks into the ground (1/5) when Abraham throws seven stones at him.
4. Satan appears again at al-Jamra al-Wustā. Abraham throws the stones, and the scene repeats itself (5/5).
5. He then appears again at al-Jamra al-Quswā (1/5) or al-Jamra al-Kubrā (1/5),³⁹ where the scene is repeated (2/5).
6. Abraham then flings Ishmael, who is wearing a white shirt, on to his forehead (3/5), or begins to go through with the sacrifice of Isaac (1/5).⁴⁰
7. Ishmael says: 'O father, I have no other garment for a shroud, so please take off my shirt and use it for that' (3/5), or Isaac says: 'O father, tie me up so that I will not shake and my blood splash you when you sacrifice me' (1/5).
8. Abraham turns around for a moment and sees a horned ram with dark eyes and white wool (3/5) or is called from

³⁴ Tabarī, *Tafsīr*, XXIII, 80-1; *Ta'riḥ*, 306-7; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, IV, 15.

³⁵ Ibn Hanbal, *ibid*. The *matn* of this tradition has all the appearance of having been tampered with. In fact, it appears to be made up of three short sections joined together by a redactor. Part one refers to the tradition of Ibn 'Abbās. Part two, which is unrelated, refers to Isaac as the intended victim, and part three connects the first two to Qur'ān, 37:105.

³⁶ Kisā'i, 95.

³⁷ *Al-mas'ā' or al-sa'y*. Cf. Norman Calder, 'The *ṣa'y* and the *ḥajj*: Some Notes on Qur'ān 37:102-3, *JSS* 31 (1986), 17-26.

³⁸ The three *jamras* are stations in the valley of Minā where the lapidation ritual of the *ḥajj* takes place.

³⁹ Both are different names for the same ritual station of the *ḥajj* pilgrimage.

⁴⁰ See note 35 above. The Tha'labī rendition ends here with: 'Then Abraham proceeded to fulfill the command of God, and that is the story of the sacrifice.'

behind: *O Abraham, you have already fulfilled the vision!* (Qur'ān 37:105) (2/5).

The Sacrificial Act

The story of the actual sacrificial act occurs in three versions: one attributed to Suddī (d. 127/744),⁴¹ one attributed to Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767),⁴² and one found only in Shi'ite sources.⁴³

The Suddī version places the Sacrifice in Syria and considers Isaac to be the intended victim, thus following Jewish and Christian tradition.⁴⁴

1. When Abraham is given the good news of a son,⁴⁵ he vows to offer him as a sacrifice to God. After the son grows up, Abraham is shown a vision in his sleep telling him that he must fulfill his vow (5/5) and sacrifice his son, Isaac. (4/5).
2. Abraham tells Isaac to come and make a sacrifice (*qurbān*) to God. He takes a knife and a rope (5/5).
3. When they come between some mountains, the boy asks where the offering is (5/5).

⁴¹ Tabarī, *Ta'ārīkh*, XIII, 78; *Ta'ārīkh*, 302-3; Tha'labī, 21; Tabarsī, XXIII, 76-7, and Mujīr al-Dīn, *al-Uns al-jalīl bi-ta'ārīkh al-Quds wa'l-Khalīl* (Amman 1973), I, 40. Tabarsī's *Ta'ārīkh* rendition contains an *ismād* that continues beyond Suddī. The full *ismād* is Musā b. Hārūn + 'Amr b. Hammād + Asbat + Suddī + Abū Malik and Abū Šālih + Ibn 'Abbās and Murra al-Hamdānī + 'Abdallāh and some of the Companions of the Prophet.

⁴² Tabarī, *Ta'ārīkh*, 304-5; Tha'labī, 93-4; Tabarsī, XXIII, 78; Ibn al-Athīr, 112.

⁴³ Ya'qūbī, *Ta'ārīkh* (Leiden 1883), I, 25-6 (no *ismād*); Qummī, II, 224-5, on the authority of Abū 'Abdallāh; Tabarsī, (no. 1), XXIII, 77 without *ismād*, and Tabarsī (no. 2), XXIII, 78-9, on the authority of Barīd b. Mu'awiya al-'Ajali.

⁴⁴ Mujīr al-Dīn's 'Suddī' tradition never names the intended victim. Though attributed to Suddī, it is actually a hybrid tradition incorporating motifs from the Ibn Ishāq version given below. Similarly, Tha'labī's Ibn Ishāq tradition, included in the paradigmatic version given below, is actually a hybrid that includes motifs from the Suddī version as well. In fact, the Tha'labī and Mujīr al-Dīn renditions are virtually identical in their renditions of motifs nos. 5 to 12. Although each is attributed to a different source, they demonstrate the close affinity between the Suddī and Ibn Ishāq versions. Zamakhsharī, (III, 349-50) also provides a hybrid rendition of these two versions, though he provides no *ismād*.

⁴⁵ All exegetes place this during Abraham's sojourn in Syria and connect it to Qur'ān, 11:60-74, 15:51-9, or 51:24-30, all describing the visit of the three angels paralleled in Genesis 18:1-16.

4. Abraham answers with Q. 37:102: '... *O my son, I see in a vision that I will sacrifice you. So look, what is your view?*' The son said: '*O my father! Do as you are commanded. If God wills, you will find me patient and enduring!*' (5/5)⁴⁶

5. Isaac continues by telling his father to:

- a. tighten his bonds so he will not squirm (3/3),
- b. keep back his clothes from him so that no blood will soil them and cause Sarah grief (3/3),
- c. move the knife quickly to his throat so that death will be easiest (3/3),
- d.⁴⁷
- e. give greetings (*salām*) to his mother when he returns (3/3),
- f.
6.
7. Abraham draws near, kisses Isaac, and binds him (3/3). They both cry so much that the ground is soaked underneath Isaac's cheek where he is lying (2/3).
8.
9. Abraham draws the knife on to Isaac's throat but it does not cut (3/3) because God had pounded a sheet of copper over Isaac's throat (2/3).
10. So Abraham throws Isaac on to his forehead and [tries to] make a gash on the back of his neck.⁴⁸ Thus Q. 37:103: *So when they had both submitted, he lay him [threw him] on to his forehead* (2/3).
11. And We called out to him, 'O Abraham! You have already fulfilled the vision!' (37:104-5) (2/3).
12. Abraham turns and sees a ram. He takes it, unties his son, and kisses him (3/3).
13. Abraham says: 'O son, you have been given to me!' Therefore verse Q. 27:107: *We redeemed him with a magnificent sacrifice* (2/3).
14. When Abraham returns to Sarah and tells her what occurred, she is unhappy and says: 'You would sacrifice my son and not inform me?!' (2/3).

⁴⁶ Tha'labī's and Tabarsī's renditions end here.

⁴⁷ Blank lines represent motifs omitted in this version of the legend of the sacrifice, but included in other versions given below.

⁴⁸ *Daraba bihi 'alā jabimihī wa-haṣṣa min qafāhu*.

According to the Ibn Ishāq version, Ishmael is the victim and the sacrifice takes place on the outskirts of Mecca. Abraham spans the distance between his home in Syria and Ishmael in Mecca by riding on the supernatural creature Buraq.

1. Abraham would visit Hagar and Ishmael by riding to Mecca on Buraq. He would leave Syria in the morning and would return from Mecca to Syria before nightfall so that he could spend the night with his wife in Syria. This continued until Ishmael... *reached the age of running with him.* (37:102) (2/4).
2. Abraham tells his son to take some rope and a knife and to come on to a trail to gather firewood.
3.
4. When they are alone on the Thabir⁴⁹ trail, Abraham says (37:102): 'O my son, I see in a vision that I will sacrifice you (3/4). He continues: *So look, what is your view?*' The son said: 'O my father! Do as you are commanded. If God wills, you will find me patient and enduring!' (2/4).
5. Ishmael continues by telling his father to:
 - a. tighten his bonds (4/4),
 - b. keep back his clothes from him so that no blood will soil them (3/4), cause Sarah grief (2/4), and diminish his reward (2/4); or be careful not to allow anything to prevent him from fulfilling his task so that Ishmael's recompense will not be diminished, for death is severe and he may waver (1/4),
 - c. sharpen his knife to finish him off quickly (4/4) to give him rest (1/4) or so that death will be easier, for death is severe (2/4),
 - d. throw him on to his forehead and not on his side,⁵⁰ for Ishmael is afraid that compassion will overcome his father and prevent him from carrying out God's command (3/4).⁵¹
 - e. please return his shirt to Mother, for it may give her some comfort (3/4),
 - f. 'Now proceed!' (3/4).

⁴⁹ A mountain outside of Mecca (see Qummī, II, 225 note 2). Yāqūt, *Mu'jam* (Leipzig 1868), mentions a number of places by that name, including one near Minā (II, 917-19). Burekhardt, *Travels*, II, 65, places it at the north end of the Mina valley.

⁵⁰ As is proper for most sacrifices in Islamic law.

⁵¹ Cf. note 6 above.

6. Abraham tells his son that he is truly a wonderful help in carrying out God's command (4/4).⁵²
7. Abraham binds his son just as Ishmael had directed him (3/3).
8. Abraham sharpens his knife (2/3) and then, *be lay him onto his forehead* (Q. 37:103) (3/3) and Abraham is careful to avoid looking at him (1/3).
9. He puts the knife to his son's throat but God turns it over to its blunt side in Abraham's hand (3/3).
10.
11. When Abraham is about to draw the knife across his son's throat to end his life, his name is called: 'O Abraham! You have already fulfilled the vision!' (Q. 37:104-5) (3/3).
12. He is told that a different sacrifice will be the redemption for his son, so he should slaughter it in Ishmael's place (2/3).

What we designate as the Shi'ite version is found only in Shi'ite sources.⁵³ The most striking difference between the Shi'ite and the other versions is that the former carefully weaves the sacrificial act into Abraham's precedential Hajj Pilgrimage. This corresponds exactly with the pre-Islamic pilgrimage slaughtering ritual, which was retained also in the Islamic Hajj.

The various renditions of the Shi'ite version name both Isaac and Ishmael as the intended sacrifice. Those naming Isaac are quite striking because they consider him to be the intended sacrifice at the same time that the act occurs within the context of the Meccan Hajj. Both pro-Isaac renditions connect Isaac to Mecca by having him make the Pilgrimage along with his mother Sarah. Each of the four renditions of this version is provided as follows:

Ya'qūbī:

1. After building the Ka'ba and calling the people to the Pilgrimage, Abraham begins his own Pilgrimage under Gabriel's guidance on the 'Day of Watering' (*yawm al-tarwīya*).

⁵² Ṭabarsī's rendition ends here, though he mentions that the story continues similarly to other versions he gave previously.

⁵³ Ya'qūbī, I, 25-6; Qummī, II, 224-5; Ṭabarsī, XXIII, 77; Ṭabarsī, XXIII, 78-9.

2. As part of the Pilgrimage, Abraham sleeps at al-Mash'ar. During the night, God commands him to sacrifice his son.

3. When Abraham arrives at Mina, he tells his son that God commanded him to sacrifice him. Ishmael replies: '*O my father, do as you are commanded*'. (37:102).

4.

5.

6. Abraham takes the knife and lays his son down on top of a donkey saddle over dying embers.

7. Abraham places the blade on his son's throat. When he turns his face away so that he will not look at his son, Gabriel turns the blade over on to its dull side. Abraham notices that it is inverted and turns it over again. He does that three times.

8. Then Abraham is addressed: *O Abraham! You have already fulfilled the vision!* (Q. 37:104-5).

9. Gabriel takes the boy and Abraham puts the sheep that was brought from the summit of Mt. Thabir is his place. He sacrifices the sheep.

10. When Abraham is finished with the pilgrimage and intends to leave [Mecca], he charges Ishmael to dwell in the Sacred Precinct and instruct the people in the [ritual of the] Pilgrimage.

Qummi:

1. Gabriel comes to Abraham on the 'Day of Watering' and takes him on his first Pilgrimage.

2. While staying overnight at al-Nash'ar al-Harām, Abraham receives the vision in his sleep that he must sacrifice his son Isaac, who came along with his mother Sarah to make the Pilgrimage. When they get to Mina, Abraham and Sarah do the Lapidation, and then Abraham tells her to return to the Ka'ba. He keeps the boy with him.

3. Abraham takes Isaac to al-Jamra al-Wustā and says: '*O my son, I see in a vision that I will sacrifice you. So look, what is your view?*' The boy tells him to carry out God's command, as in the verse: *O my father! Do as you are commanded. If God wills, you will find me patient and enduring.* (Q. 37:102). They both submit (*aslamā*) to God's command.

4. The motif of the old man arguing with Abraham about God's command is inserted at this point.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ See the Shi'ite version of Satan attempting to interfere.

5. Then the boy tells Abraham: 'Hide my face and tighten my bonds!'

6. Abraham responds that he will not add to God's command, but will only do the sacrifice. He takes the donkey saddle, lays his son upon it and takes the knife.

7. He places it upon his son's throat, looks toward heaven, and leans to pull the knife, but Gabriel turns it over to its back side.

8.

9. A ram is brought from Thabir. Abraham substitutes the ram for the boy and is called from a distance: '*O Abraham, you have already fulfilled the vision!*' (Q. 37:104-5).

Tabarsī No. 1 (nearly identical with Qummi):

(2.) It is said that Abraham saw in a vision that he would sacrifice his son Isaac.

1. When Abraham and Sarah make the Pilgrimage and come to Mina, they do the Lapidation. Abraham tells Sarah to go visit the Ka'ba, but the boy stays with him.

3. He takes Isaac to al-Jamra al-Wustā and tells him what he must do. The boy answers that his father must carry out God's command. So they both submit (*aslamā*) to God's command.

4. The motif of the old man arguing with Abraham about God's command is inserted at this point.⁵⁵

5. Then the boy tells Abraham: 'Hide my face and tighten my bonds!'

6. Abraham responds that he will not add to God's command, but will only do the sacrifice. He takes the donkey saddle, lays his son upon it and takes the knife.

7. Abraham places it upon his son's throat, looks toward heaven, and leans to pull the knife, but Gabriel turns it over to its back side.

8.

9. A ram is brought from Thabir. Abraham puts the ram in place of the boy and is called from a distance: '*O Abraham, you have already fulfilled the vision!*' (Q. 37:104-5).

Tabarsī No. 2:

(motifs 1 & 2). After the conflict with Sarah in Syria,

⁵⁵ See the Shi'ite version of Satan attempting to interfere.

Abraham has a night vision in which he is told that he must sacrifice his son Ishmael during the festival period in Mecca.⁵⁶ When the month of Dhū al-Hijja arrives, he takes Ilgar and Ishmael to Mecca. After raising up the foundations of the Ka'ba, he goes to Minā in pilgrimage, returns to Mecca to perform the circumambulations for a week, and then does the Running ritual.

3. As Abraham and Ishmael are doing the Running ritual, Abraham says: 'O my son, I see in a vision that I will sacrifice you during this yearly festival. So what is your view? He answers, ... Do as you were commanded'. (Q. 37:102).

4.

5.

3 & 6. When they complete the Running ritual, Abraham takes him to Minā on the Day of Sacrifice (*yawm al-nahr*). He takes him to al-Jamra al-Wustā, lays him onto his left side, and takes the blade to slaughter him.

7.

8. He is called: O Abraham, you have already fulfilled the vision ... (Q. 37:104-5).

9. Ishmael is redeemed with a magnificent ram.

10. He slaughters it and gives its meat as charity to the destitute (*wa-tataddaqa bi-lahmihī 'alā al-miskīn*).

Of the three miscellaneous renditions that fit into none of the major versions outlined here, all name Isaac as the intended victim.⁵⁷ Two renditions of a poem attributed to the early poet Ūmayya b. Abī al-Ṣalt name 'the first born' as the intended Sacrifice.⁵⁸

In summary, then, the Suddī version considers the intended victim to have been Isaac and the context to have been Syria. The Ibn Ishāq version names Ishmael as the victim of the

⁵⁶ *Bi-mawṣim Mukka*.

⁵⁷ Ibn Ḥanbal, I, 306-7 (on the authority of Ibn 'Abbas + the Prophet) places the Sacrifice immediately after the lapidation of Abraham's first Ḥajj. Isaac is the victim. Tha'labī, 78 (on the authority of Sha'bī) has 'The location of the Sacrifice was two miles from Jerusalem, and when Sarah found out what Abraham intended with Isaac, she remained [alive] for two days, and died on the third.' The fullest and most innovative of all renditions is given by Kisā'i, 150-2, on the authority of Ka'b and entitled 'The story of Isaac'.

⁵⁸ Tabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 308-9; Tha'labī, 23-4.

intended Sacrifice in Mecca. The Shī'ite version names Isaac twice and Ishmael twice and provides the Meccan Ḥajj as the context for the action. Such data on citations may be noted in simple visual form in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Citations of Isaac and Ishmael as Intended Sacrifice in our sample of Qur'anic Exegesis

Authority	Intended Victim	No. of Refs.	Context	No. of Refs.
<i>Satan attempts to interfere</i>				
Ka'b	Isaac	3	none	3
Ibn Ishāq	Ishmael	2	none	2
no <i>inād</i> (Qummī)	not given		'Umra	1
no <i>inād</i> (Tabarsī)	Isaac	1	'Umra	1
<i>Satan and the Lapidation</i>				
Ibn 'Abbās	Ishmael	3	Hajj	3
Ibn 'Abbās	Isaac	1	Hajj	
<i>The Sacrificial Act</i>				
Suddī	Isaac	4	Fulfil vow	3
Ibn Ishāq	Ishmael	4	Visit on Buraq	4
Shī'ite	Isaac	2	Hajj	4
Shī'ite	Ishmael	2	Hajj	
b. 'Abbas + Proph.	Isaac	1	Hajj	1
Sha'bi	Isaac	1	Near Jerusalem	1
Ka'b	Isaac	1	Jerusalem	1
b. Abī al-Ṣalt	'First Born'	2	none	2

Isaac is specifically named sixteen times and Ishmael eleven as the intended victim. Aside from the Ibn 'Abbās version describing Satan and the Lapidation,⁵⁹ the 'earlier' sources would have Isaac as the intended Sacrifice. Not until Ibn Ishāq do we find Ishmael a consistent contender for the title of *dhābiḥ Allāh*, the 'intended Sacrifice of God'.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ We will demonstrate below why we understand this as a late attribution to Ibn 'Abbās.

⁶⁰ The early reference of Ibn Abī al-Ṣalt (who was a contemporary of Muḥammad) to 'the first born' must be viewed with caution. Some consider

Isaac's IIndish

A recurring legend describes a scene in which God offers to grant Isaac a wish after the ordeal of the Sacrifice. This legend, which is found in two versions, originates with Ka'b al-Aḥbār, and what appears to be the earliest version consists of four renditions attributed to him directly.⁶¹ The wording varies among the renditions, but the message remains constant. Immediately after Isaac's redemption, God tells him directly that He will answer any prayer that Isaac wishes. Isaac replies: 'O God, I pray to you that you grant me [this]: When any person in any era who does not attribute any partner to You meets You [at the gates of heaven], allow him to enter Paradise' (3/4); or 'Lord, I ask that you do not punish anyone who believes in You' (1/4).

The second version is attributed to Abū Hurayra who reports that the Prophet said:

God allowed me to choose between having Him forgive half of the Muslim people or responding to my intercession on their behalf. I chose my own intercession, for I hoped [that would bring God's] forgiveness for most of the Muslim people. If a pious Muslim dies after me, then let my prayer hurry [on his behalf]. When God comforted Isaac from the terror of the Sacrifice, it was said to him: 'O Isaac, ask and you will be granted!' So he said: 'O He who has my soul in His hand, will you hasten it [into Paradise] before Satan incites it to evil? O God, whoever dies and does not associate any partner with You, forgive him and bring him into Paradise.'⁶²

Ibn Kathīr criticizes this tradition for coming from only a single source and for being inferior and objectionable.⁶³ He is particularly concerned with the fact that Isaac is listed as the intended sacrifice since he maintained that the intended

his poems genuine, while other sources regard them the work of much later qur'anic exegetes (ẓā'ir ʿUmayyā). The lack of a specific name given, the controversy regarding the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry, and the Jewish parallel of two interpretations of *yehideha* ('your only son') of Gen. 22:2 in *Berešit Rabba* I.V, 7 and other early sources, place Ibn Abī al-Ṣalt's poem outside of our sample.

⁶¹ Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, XXIII, 82-3 (Ka'b al-Aḥbār), *Ta'rikh*, 294 (Ka'b tells Abū Hurayra); Ibn al-Aṭhīr, 110 (no *isnād*); and Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, IV, 15 (Ka'b tells Abū Hurayra).

⁶² Tha'labī, 92; Ibn Kathīr, IV, 16.

⁶³ *Hādith al-ḥadīth ghayr al-munbar*.

victim was Ishmael.⁶⁴ We note again that Ka'b is associated with traditions in which Isaac is the intended Sacrifice. Abū Hurayra, who learned this tradition from Ka'b, is also associated with the pro-Isaac school.⁶⁵

Isaac or Ishmael? The Arguments

The exegetes did not hesitate to posit arguments and reasoning in support of either candidate. As Yāqūbī writes in the ninth century, 'There are many traditions about each view and people disagree about them'.⁶⁶ The final argument often rested upon where the Sacrifice took place. If it took place in Syria, Isaac was the intended victim. If it took place in Mecca, then Ishmael was intended.

The arguments cited in support of either candidate are based on the words of the Qur'ān and sometimes on fine points of grammar, on geographical considerations, chronology, or on simple logic. It appears from the views expressed by the exegetes, however, that the finer points of argumentation had little influence on their ultimate opinions. The final deciding factor was the period in which the exegetes lived.

It becomes clear from our reading of the sources that Isaac was originally understood to have been the intended victim, but that this view was eclipsed by a new perspective which held Ishmael to have been intended. Ṭabarī was the first to record the various arguments supporting each son. While he tried to demonstrate that Isaac was the proper reading, the arguments supporting Ishmael were already quite imposing by his generation. After Ṭabarī, the exegetes citing arguments and giving their own opinions were unanimous in considering Ishmael to be the intended victim, though most cited arguments supporting both views. Even the Shi'ite Ṭabarī, who quoted Shi'ite versions considering Isaac to have been the intended sacrifice, held that it was Ishmael.⁶⁷ And Tha'labī,

⁶⁴ See p. 116 below. Ibn Kathīr is particularly opposed to the traditions told on the authority of Ka'b, who is credited by the sources with passing the tradition of Isaac's wish to Abū Hurayra.

⁶⁵ See p. 127 below.

⁶⁶ *Ta'rikh*, I, 25.

⁶⁷ XXIII, 74-5.

who often followed Ṭabarī, seemed to consider Ishmael the intended Sacrifice as well.⁶⁸

Like the other exegetes after Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr believed that the intended sacrifice was Ishmael and did not hesitate to give his own views on the matter. His major argument was based on the weakness of those sources claiming that it was Isaac:

The account that it was Isaac came from Ka'b al-Aḥbār All of these statements, and God knows best, are taken from Ka'b al-Aḥbār. Now when he converted to Islam during the caliphate of Umar, he began to report traditions to Umar on the authority of his ancient books. Sometimes Umar listened to him and permitted the people to listen to what he had with him and to transmit what he had on his authority. [both] the corrupt ones and the superior ones. Now this Islamic community (*umma*) has no need for one word of [those traditions] he possessed Those who follow Ka'b al-Aḥbār's traditions include Sa'īd b. Jubayr, Qatāda, Masrūq, 'Ikrima, 'Aṭā', Muqātil, al-Zuhri, and Suḍdī. Even Ibn 'Abbās uses him in one of his two *isnāds*. A *ḥadīth* is given with it. If it were reliable, I would gladly give it [myself], but its chain of authorities is not sound.⁶⁹

To summarize our findings, we note that until the time of Ṭabarī, there appeared to be little argument about who was the intended victim of the sacrifice. The earlier Ibn Iḥanbal (d. 241/855-6) gave a tradition on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās + the Prophet that it was Isaac, and Yā'qūbī (d. 277/891-2) mentioned the existence of different opinions on the matter expressed in his day.⁷⁰

Isaac was most likely the original understanding. Ṭabarī tried to demonstrate that this view was the proper reading, though he appeared to be losing the battle. After Ṭabarī, the exegetes were unanimous in considering Ishmael to be the intended victim, though many dutifully cited arguments in favour of both views.

⁶⁸ P. 92. The *qīṣas* work attributed to Kisā'i, on the other hand, considers Isaac to have been intended by virtue of the traditions cited therein, though no argumentation is included.
⁶⁹ IV, 17.

⁷⁰ The name of the boy is never mentioned in Yā'qūbī's rendition until the story of the Sacrifice is completed: 'When Abraham finished with his pilgrimage and wished to depart, he charged his son Ishmael that he dwell at the Sacred House and that he teach the people their pilgrimage and their ritual stations.' (I, 26). This is most likely an insertion. The original text probably omitted any name, just as in the Qur'ān.

Incidental References to Either Son as the 'Intended Sacrifice'

Certain legends innocently identify the intended sacrificial victim in the course of detailing a different story. Others refer in passing to either Isaac or Ishmael with the *laqab* or honorific title, 'Sacrifice of God' attached to the name. Five recurring traditions are found in the sources considered for this study. Three are cited in support of Isaac and two in support of Ishmael.

The three pro-Isaac traditions cite the Israelite patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in a formulaic manner in which Isaac's connection with the Sacrifice is explicitly pointed out. All reflect a style of citation found among the Jews before the sixth century.⁷¹ They appear to reflect an early view, held first among Jews and Christians but later held by Arab Muslims as well, that Isaac was the intended Sacrifice.

One brief tradition has Joseph giving his genealogy to a king identified in one rendition as Egyptian.⁷² The honorific title he uses for his grandfather Isaac is *dhabīb Allāh*: 'the intended sacrifice of God': 'Joseph told the king to his face: "Do you wish to eat with me, for by God, I am Joseph, son of Jacob the prophet of God, son of Isaac the intended sacrifice of God, son of Abraham the friend of God"'.⁷³

The second legend has God telling Moses that Isaac was given exceptional merit for submitting fully to the Sacrifice. This tradition occurs seven times with great consistency and is given on the authority of a family *isnad* connected to 'Ubayd b. 'Umayr:⁷⁴

⁷¹ Exodus, 32:13, etc.

⁷² Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, XXIII, 83 (on authority of Abū Maysara), *Ta'riḥ*, 295 (Abū Maysara), *ibid.* (Ibn Abī Hudhayl); Ṭaḥabī 91 (Abū Maysara); Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, IV, 17 (Abū Maysara), *ibid.* (Ibn Abī Hudhayl). The traditions attributed to Ibn Abī Hudhayl are not given in full, but are mentioned as 'Joseph said the same thing to the king' or 'the same thing was said'.

⁷³ One rendition identifies the king as being the king of Egypt, but none call him Pharaoh (*Fir'aun*).

⁷⁴ Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, XXIII, 82 ('Abdallāh b. 'Umayr), *ibid.* ('Abdallāh b. 'Ubayd b. 'Umayr), *Ta'riḥ*, 294 (the father of 'Abdallāh b. 'Ubayd b. 'Umayr), *ibid.* (*idem.*); Ṭaḥabī, 91, (the great-grandfather of 'Ubayd Allāh b. 'Ubayd b. 'Umayr); Ibn al-Athīr, 110 ('Ubayd b. 'Umayr); Ibn Kathīr, IV, 17 (the father of 'Abdallāh b. 'Ubayd b. 'Umayr). On the issue of family *isnāds*, see Abbott, II, 36-9.

Moses said: 'O Lord, why will you be called, "O God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?"' God replied: 'Abraham never considered anything equal to me but always chose Me above all things. Isaac was generous to Me in the Sacrifice and was most generous in other things. As for Jacob, the more I put him through trials, the better he thought of Me'.⁷⁵

The third pro-Isaac tradition is attributed to Abū al-Aḥwas:⁷⁶ 'A certain man boasted before Ibn Mas'ūd saying: "I am so-and-so son of so-and-so son of noble shaykhs". Abdallāh [b. Mas'ūd] said: "That is Joseph son of Jacob, son of Isaac the intended sacrifice of God (*dhahīb Allāh*), son of Abraham the friend of God".

All three Isaac traditions are quite similar and employ a style reminiscent of the Jewish recitation of the most important daily prayer in which is recited: 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob ...'.⁷⁷ The Islamic traditions cite the patriarchs in the opposite order because they provide a genealogy rather than a sacred history. They include a formulaic use of the *laqab* or honorific title in the Arabic name. Abraham is the 'friend of God' (*khalīl Allāh*) and Isaac [or Ishmael] is the 'intended sacrifice of God' (*dhahīb Allāh*).⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Note possible parallels in BT *Shabbat* 30a and BT *Nahedrin* 107a. A variant of this tradition is found in *Zamakhsharī*, III, 350, on the authority of Muhammad b. Ka'b al-Qurazī, in which the intended victim is Ishmael: 'A pious Israelite (*mujtabid Banī Isrā'īl*) used to say when praying, "O God, God of Abraham, Ishmael and Israel". And Moses said: "O Lord what should the pious children of Israel say when praying? Oh God of Abraham, Ishmael and Israel. I should be included among them. You let me hear Your words. You have chosen me as Your messenger!" God replied: "O Moses, no one ever loved me with Abraham's love and nothing ever tempted him away from Me. Ishmael was most generous with his own blood. And as for Israel, he never despaired of My spirit despite the hardships that befell him." Muhammad b. Ka'b al-Qurazī is a well-known traditionist of the school of Ibn 'Abbās, who lived in the first Islamic century (d. c. 735) and was of Jewish origin.

⁷⁶ Tabarī, *Tafsīr*, XXIII, 81; *Ta'riḥ*, 292; Tha'labi 91; Ibn Kathīr, IV, 17.

⁷⁷ *Kināz Yīra'el* pp. 67, 144, 165, etc. This, of course, is based upon the repeating motif throughout the Bible of God recognizing the three patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex. 3:6, 15; 4:5; 6:3; 1 Kings 18:36; 2 Kings 13:33, etc.).

⁷⁸ The common Arabic honorific for Abraham, *al-Khalīl* 'the friend (of God)', is probably derived from Jewish sources: 2 Chronicles 20:7, 'O our God, You dispossessed the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel, and You gave it to the descendants of Your friend (*obaiḥāh*)

Unlike the Isaac traditions, the two Ishmael traditions differ from one another in form and style. One occurs on the authority of al-Sunabihī,⁷⁹ who says:

We were with Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān⁸⁰ when they said: 'Was the intended sacrificial victim Ishmael or Isaac?' He answered: 'You have come to someone well-informed about the matter! We were with the Apostle of God when a man came up and said: "O Apostle of God, repeat to me [the knowledge] that God has bestowed upon you, O son of two intended sacrifices!" So he laughed. Then I said to him, "O Commander of the faithful, who are the two intended sacrifices?" He answered: "When 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib was commanded to dig Zamzam, he vowed to God that if it were made easy for him, he would sacrifice one of his sons."⁸¹ The lot [arrow] fell on 'Abdallāh. But his maternal uncles prevented him, saying, "Redeem your son with one hundred camels!" So he redeemed him with camels. Ishmael was the second.'

The second tradition referring to Ishmael as the intended victim is a story which takes place in the court of the Umayyad caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz.⁸² Muhammad b. Ka'b al-Qurazī reports that he asked 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz in Damascus who he believed was the true intended victim of the sacrifice.⁸³

Abraham for ever.' Even more revealing is Isaiah 41:8: 'But you, Israel, My servant (*arīḍī*), Jacob, whom I have chosen (*ashir baharīkha*), Seed of Abraham My friend (*ahavī*) ...'. Isaac is not mentioned. To my knowledge, Jewish tradition does not refer to Isaac with a special honorific title such as *al-dhahīb*, though he is referred in the Midrash as the one bound up for slaughter: "'And the two of them walked on together" (Gen. 22:6): one to bind and the other to be bound (*qeb la aqod veqeb le'aged*), one to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered (*qeb liṭṭhof veqeb liṭṭahet*).'" (BR 56:3). It would be natural for the special names for Abraham and Isaac to have evolved within a Jewish community living in an Arabic-speaking environment that commonly used the honorific title. To my knowledge, however, no further evidence for this has been found.

⁷⁹ The full tradition is found in Tabarī, *Tafsīr*, XXIII, 85 (al-Sunabihī), *Ta'riḥ*, 290-1 (al-Sunabihī); Tha'labi, 93 (al-Sabāhī); Ibn al-Athīr, 108 (al-Sunabihī); Ibn Kathīr, IV, 18 (al-Sunabihī); and Mujīr al-Dīn, I, 41 (al-Sabāhī). *Zamakhsharī*, III, 350 gives a slightly shorter tradition without *inīd*. Four references to the tradition simply have 'I am the son of two intended sacrifices (*anā ibn dhahībayn*) and can be found in Qummi, II, 226; Tabarī, XXIII, 75; Kisā'i, 152; and Ibn Kathīr, *Ta'riḥ*, I, 235.

⁸⁰ A Companion of the Prophet who eventually became caliph, and was proclaimed as such in Jerusalem in 660 CE.

⁸¹ Cf. Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, 97-100.

⁸² Also known as 'Umar II, who ruled from 717-20 CE, and is considered the most (or only) pious Umayyad caliph by later Islamic tradition.

⁸³ Tabarī, *Tafsīr*, XXIII, 84-5, *Ta'riḥ*, 299; Tha'labi, 92; *Zamakhsharī*,

'Umar said to him: 'I had not considered that issue before, but I think it is as you say.' Then he sent for a man who was with him in Syria. He was a Jew who had converted to Islam and became a good Muslim. It became apparent that he was one of the religious scholars⁸⁴ of the Jews, so 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz decided to ask him about it. Muḥammad b. Ka'b al-Quraẓī said: I was with 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz when he said: 'Which of Abraham's two sons was he commanded to sacrifice?' He answered: 'Ishmael. And by God, O caliph, the Jews know that. However, they envy the Arab community because their father was the one commanded [to be sacrificed] and he is the one who is ascribed for merit for this steadfastness. But they deny that and claim that it was Isaac because Isaac was their father.'

Unlike the Isaac traditions, the Ishmael traditions vary in form and style and appear to be later Islamic (as opposed to pre-Islamic) legends. Sunabihī's tradition that Muḥammad was the son of two intended sacrifices emphasizes the story of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib and only refers to Ishmael in the last sentence as a kind of afterthought. The reference has all the earmarks of a late addition to an early legend. The story of 'Umar II and the Jew is clearly late. The Isaac traditions, on the other hand, reflect the form and content of pre-Islamic sources, thus adding support to the theory that the traditions considering Ishmael as the intended victim of the sacrifice are late.

The Context for the Legend

The exegetes placed the isolated incident of the Sacrifice into the larger context of the Qur'anic Abraham cycle in various ways.⁸⁵ Some understood the meaning of *dhābiṭh* to be a sacrifice that fulfilled a personal vow. According to those holding this view, Abraham's vision of Qur'ān 37:102 was interpreted to be

III, 350; Tabarsī, XXIII, 75; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, IV, 18, *Ta'riḥ*, 235-6; Muḥīr al-Dīn, I, 40-1.

⁸⁴ 'Ulamā'.

⁸⁵ Some considered Qur'ān verses 37:6 (*For this was a clear trial*) and 2:124 (*Remember that Abraham was tried by his Lord with kalām which he fulfilled*) to refer to the same incident (Tabarsī, *Ta'riḥ*, 309, Tabarsī, I, 453; Ibn al-Athīr, 114). The context supplied by the Qur'ān is non-specific and the exegetes who cite this connection assume the Sacrifice to have taken place at some unspecified time after Abraham's experience in the land of Nimrod (See Tabarsī, *Ta'riḥ*, 260ff., Tha'labī, 77ff., Kisā'i, 138ff.).

the divine call to fulfil a vow he had previously made regarding his son. The 'trial' referred to in Q. 37:106 was to determine whether Abraham would be willing to carry out his word. According to this view, Abraham's original vow was a response to the divine message of the impending birth of Abraham's son given by the angels on their way to destroy the people of Lot.⁸⁶ According to this interpretation, the son was Isaac because it was his birth that was announced by the angels.⁸⁷

The tradition was first reported by Ṭabarī on the authority of Suddī:⁸⁸

Gabriel said to Sarah, 'I am giving you the good news of a son named Isaac, and after Isaac, Jacob.' She slapped her forehead in surprise. Thus the verse, *She struck her forehead and said: 'A barren old woman! That is a strange thing indeed! ... (11:72).* Sarah said to Gabriel: 'What is a sign of this?' He took a dry twig in his hand and bent it between his fingers. It quivered and turned green. Then Abraham said, 'He will therefore be a sacrifice to God!' When Isaac grew up, Abraham was visited in his sleep and was told, 'Fulfill your vow that you would offer your son as a sacrifice if God bestowed upon you a boy from Sarah!' He said to Isaac, 'Let us go and offer a sacrifice⁸⁹ to God'. He took a knife and rope and set out with him until they came between some mountains. The boy said to him, 'O Father, where is your offering?' He answered, 'O my son. I see in a vision that I will sacrifice you. So look, what is your view?' The son said: 'O my father! Do as you are commanded. If God wills, you will find me patient and enduring!' (37:103).⁹⁰

The major significance of this tradition lies in the context it provides for the Qur'anic story of the Sacrifice. The Qur'anic rendition vaguely places the episode after Abraham's emigra-

⁸⁶ Qur'ān 11:69-74, 51:24-30, 15:51-9, etc.

⁸⁷ *And We gave her the good news about Isaac, and after Isaac, Jacob (Qur'ān 11:71).*

⁸⁸ *Tafsīr*, XXIII, 78. It occurs in three other places and is referred to five more times among our sources: Tha'labī, 93; Tabarsī, *Ta'riḥ*, 301, 302, and *Tafsīr*, XXIII, 77-8; Zamakhsharī, III, 348; Tabarsī, XXIII, 768; Ibn al-Athīr, 111.

⁸⁹ *Qurbān*.

⁹⁰ Note the parallel motifs found in the Bible. On the vow of child sacrifice, see Judges 11:30-40; on a sprouting stick, see Numbers 17:16-26 and possibly Gen. 30:37ff. The story of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's vow to sacrifice a son in Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra* (pp. 97-100) represents a possible parallel with pre-Islamic Arabia.

tion from his people in the land of Nimrod.⁹¹ He asks God for a son (Qur'ān 37:100) and is told that his request will be granted (Q. 37:101). But the following verse is confusing and is understood to mean that a number of years pass during which the son grows up. Abraham then has a vision in which he learns he must offer that son in sacrifice (Q. 37:102). The obvious lacuna in the Qur'anic text is the period between the granting of Abraham's request and his vision. Yet other sections of the Qur'an can be made to provide narrative material to fill that gap: namely, the visit of the angels on their way to destroy the people of Lōt. All this would suggest that the Sacrifice took place in Syria before the transfer to Mecca. If this were the case, then the intended sacrifice must have been Isaac, though some exegetes argued that this notion was contradicted by Q. 37:12.⁹²

Ṭabarī followed this contextualization of the Sacrifice and held that this was also the view of Suddī⁹³ and 'Abdallāh and Companions of the Apostle of God.⁹⁴ The Sacrifice took place before Abraham raised up the foundations of the Ka'ba (*al-hayt*) in Mecca and before he established the stations of the Ḥajj Pilgrimage.⁹⁵ Ṭabarī also quoted Shu'ayb al-Jabā'ī as saying that 'Isaac was sacrificed when he was seven The location of the Sacrifice was about two miles from Jerusalem.'⁹⁶

Most of the traditions which Ṭabarī cited, however, place the location of the Sacrifice in the area of Mecca. Ibn 'Abbās placed it at Minā during Abraham's first Pilgrimage.⁹⁷ Others considered it to have taken place in Minā but did not connect it with Abraham's Pilgrimage. This was the view of many of Ṭabarī's sources which described the ram or goat that

⁹¹ Q. 37:83-99.

⁹² And *We gave him the good news of Isaac — a pious prophet*. For a full discussion of the traditional arguments supporting the candidacy of each brother, see Firestone, 271-81.

⁹³ *Tafsīr*, XXIII, 78.

⁹⁴ *Ta'rikh*, 301-2.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁹⁷ *Tafsīr*, XXIII, 80, *Ta'rikh*, 306f. In *Tafsīr*, XXIII, 87 and with a second tradition in his *Ta'rikh*, 306, Ibn 'Abbās connects it to Minā, but it is not clear from the incomplete text whether or not the context is Abraham's Pilgrimage. Ṭabarī, however, also uses an *imād* in which Ibn 'Abbās is cited as considering the Sacrifice to have taken place in Syria with Isaac as the intended victim (*Ta'rikh*, 301-2).

redeemed Abraham's son. 'Alī is credited with saying that the ram was found bound to a tree in Thabīr.⁹⁸ Others said that it was sacrificed at the place of sacrifice⁹⁹ in Minā¹⁰⁰ or at a variety of other places in that vicinity. According to Ibn Ishāq's tradition, Abraham commenced with the sacrifice of Ishmael on one of his day-long journeys from Syria to Mecca on the supernatural steed Buraq. The exact location was on a trail at Mt. Thabīr just outside Mecca.¹⁰¹

On the other hand, Ṭabarī credited 'Ubayd b. 'Umayr al-Laythī with a full narrative tradition detailing Abraham's first Pilgrimage, during which Abraham took Ishmael and the people he called to the Pilgrimage and showed them the entire ritual sequence of the Ḥajj.¹⁰² Although the ritual sacrifice of the Ḥajj was counted among the many stations they completed, there is no hint of this sacrifice having been equated with the attempted sacrifice of Abraham's son.¹⁰³

Al-Azraqī (d. 858) referred only in passing to the Sacrifice, though he included a large number of traditions pertaining to Abraham and Ishmael establishing the Ka'ba. In his explanation of the origin for the Mosque of the Ram outside of Mecca, he related two traditions, each referring to a different son and a different location for the Sacrifice. In the first tradition (attributed to Ibn 'Abbās), Isaac was redeemed from the Sacrifice with a ram that was offered on a rock brought from Thabīr and located in the plain of Minā. The second tradition is attributed to the father of 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Ḥasan b. al-Qāsim. Ishmael was redeemed from the Sacrifice with a ram brought down from Thabīr. When Abraham released Ishmael to get the ram, it ran away until it came to Uqaysir, which is at the base of the

⁹⁸ *Ta'rikh*, 307.

⁹⁹ *al-Manbar*.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 303f.

¹⁰² Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 287-8.

¹⁰³ The lack of reference to the Sacrifice in traditions treating Abraham's first Ḥajj Pilgrimage is common and probably typifies traditions that pre-date the connection between the Abrahamic *dhahīb* and the sacrifice of the Ḥajj. Even as late as Burckhardt (early nineteenth century), the sacrifice of the Ḥajj was not connected in any way to the near sacrifice of Abraham's son. He mentions that only after the completion of the Pilgrimage do some of the faithful return to Minā and make another sacrifice in commemoration of the *dhahīb* (*Travels*, II, 65).

hill al-Safā, and this is where the Mosque of the Ram was built.¹⁰⁴

The Shi'ite Qummī cited a tradition attributed to Abū 'Abdallāh in which the Sacrifice was to have taken place in Minā during Abraham's first Pilgrimage. The sacrificial victim, however, was to have been Isaac, who had made the Pilgrimage with his mother Sarah.¹⁰⁵

Mas'ūdī's sequence of the Abraham-Ishmael story begins with Ishmael's birth, soon after which he was brought to Mecca, where the Jurhumites and Amalekites befriended him and his mother Hagar. God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah¹⁰⁶ and then commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. After the attempted sacrifice, Abraham and Ishmael raised up the foundations of the Ka'ba. Only after all this had transpired was Isaac born.¹⁰⁷ According to Mas'ūdī's chronology, the intended sacrifice must be Ishmael, though he provides the standard explanation that if the Sacrifice took place in Syria, it was Isaac.¹⁰⁸

The later exegetes, Tha'labī, Zamakhsharī, Ṭabarsī, Kisā'i, Ibn al-Athīr, and Ibn Kathīr repeated traditions cited by the earlier exegetes. They clearly expressed the confusion apparent in their own sources as to where and when the Sacrifice took place.

The data gleaned from the contexts established by the exegetes tend to confirm the trends noticed earlier. Traditions cited on the authority of Ka'b al-Ahbār set the location in Syria and understand the victim to have been Isaac. Most of the traditions cited on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās and all those attributed to Ibn Ishāq give a Meccan setting and consider the victim to be Ishmael.¹⁰⁹ The Shi'ites provided a Meccan setting but often noted that Isaac was the intended sacrifice.

Ṭabarī considered Syria to be the location and Isaac to have

¹⁰⁴ According to this tradition, the ram was brought back to al-Manhar in Mina, where it was sacrificed. Both traditions can be found in al-Azraqī's *Akhhār Makka*, edited by Wüstenfeld as *Chroniken der Stadt Mecca* (Leipzig 1858; repr., *Akhhār Makka al-Musharrifa* (Beirut, n.d.) I, 401.

¹⁰⁵ II, 224-6. This, as we have suggested above, seems to typify a particularly Shi'ite understanding of the Sacrifice.

¹⁰⁶ *Al-mu'jaḥid*.

¹⁰⁷ Mas'ūdī, *Murāj al-dhahab* (Beirut 1385/1965), I, 57-8.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 74.

¹⁰⁹ Though a few of the Ibn 'Abbās traditions also consider Isaac to have been intended.

been the victim. Most exegetes after him took the opposite view. It is important to note that the two classic folk-tale collections (*qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*) of Tha'labī and Kisā'i tend to follow Ṭabarī's view, yet they and the *genre* of literature they represent are often criticized as preserving distorted and incorrect traditions that pervert the truth of Islam. In fact, they often followed the folk-traditions of Jews and Christians, which Ṭabarī sometimes followed unselfconsciously as well. By the generation after Ṭabarī, however, it appears that a more monolithic approach was established which placed the Sacrifice in Mecca and held that Ishmael was the intended victim. Only the Shi'ites and the unauthorized folklore collections continued to posit that Isaac may have been the intended sacrifice.

The Traditionists Supporting each Candidate

There appears to be little discussion in the earliest written works regarding who was the intended Sacrifice. Goldziher attributes this to a consensus among the early Muslims that Isaac was the intended victim.¹¹⁰ Among our exegetical works, the earliest to name the victim of the Sacrifice was Ibn Hanbal, who referred to the near sacrifice of Isaac while relating a tradition concerned with the Lapidation ritual of the Hajj. He failed to make any mention of Ishmael.¹¹¹

Ibn Qutayba (d. 890) was the first in our sample actually to list those who believed the intended Sacrifice to be Isaac and those who believed it to be Ishmael.¹¹² Most exegetes after Ibn Qutayba followed his practice of recording a list of the traditionists supporting each view. When all of the data is tallied from the ten exegetes listing the supporters of Isaac and

¹¹⁰ He also felt that Muhammad intended Isaac in the Qur'ānic rendition (*Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* [Leiden 1970], 79). See also Michel Hayek, *Le Mystère d'Ismael* (Paris 1964), 115 ff.

¹¹¹ I, 306-7: 'When Abraham desired to sacrifice his son Isaac, he said: "O father, tie me up so that I will not shake and my blood splash onto you when you sacrifice me." In references to Abraham in Mecca, however, Ibn Hanbal invariably associates him with Ishmael (I, 253, 347-8, 360, V, 121, etc.) The problem of which son was the intended Sacrifice begins to stand out when all of Ibn Hanbal's traditions associate Abraham with Ishmael in Mecca, aside from the single act of the Sacrifice, when the son appears to be Isaac. Ibn Hanbal, who died in 856, cannot be considered an early exegete. Nevertheless, he appears to provide no traditions considering Ishmael as the Sacrifice.

¹¹² *Kitāb al-Ma'ārif* (Cairo, n.d.), 35-8.

Ishmael, we find that thirty-nine early traditionists are quoted 131 times as supporting Isaac in the role of intended Sacrifice. Twenty-nine are quoted 133 times in support of Ishmael. Ten famous and respected early traditionists such as 'Alī b. Abī Tālib, 'Aṭā', Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid, al-Sha'bī, al-Suddī, and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, are quoted variously as believing it was Isaac and that it was Ishmael.

Goldziher pointed out long ago that conflicting opinions were not infrequently attributed to the same well-respected and early traditionists and/or Companions of the Prophet, or even the Prophet himself.¹¹³ This is clearly the situation here. An 'Isaac school' and an 'Ishmael school' apparently formed. Each tried to gather evidence in favour of its own view, and both probably tried to attribute their position to the most famous and well-respected early traditionists.

It is clear that a significantly larger number of early traditionists believed Isaac to be the intended victim. This fact reflects the probability of a greater general acceptance of the pro-Isaac view during the early period. Our examination of the list of Isaac supporters reveals that Ka'b al-Aḥbār is the authority quoted most often in support of this view.¹¹⁴

Far fewer exegetes are cited as exclusively considering Ishmael to be the intended victim of the Sacrifice. The major supporters of Ishmael are also cited as supporting Isaac. Ibn 'Abbās is quoted most often by far, with thirty-five references supporting Ishmael, and ten supporting Isaac.

The full listing of traditionists as reported in the source is provided in Table 2.

Because of the great uncertainty and the general unreliability of the sources regarding *isnāds*, any conclusions we draw exclusively from *isnād* studies cannot be considered more than conjectures. Yet our conclusions here correspond well with the trends noted earlier. The number of supporters of Isaac exceed those supporting Ishmael by a ratio of 3/2. This alone suggests that more early traditionists may have believed Isaac to be the intended victim.

Ka'b was the primary source for the Isaac supporters, but because of his association with Jewish traditions, his authority

¹¹³ *Richtungen*, 80.

¹¹⁴ Thirteen times.

TABLE 2: Opinions of the Traditionists regarding who was the Intended Sacrifice¹¹⁵

<i>Supporters of Isaac</i>	<i>Supporters of Ishmael</i>	
al-'Abbās b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib	'Āmir	2
+ the Prophet	'Āmir b. Wā'ilā	3
al-'Abbās b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib	(see also 'Āmir)	8
'Abdallāh b. Ma'sūd	'Abdallāh b. 'Umar	2
'Abdallāh b. Shaqīq	(see also 'Ibn 'Umar')	2
'Abd al-Rahmān b. Abī Thābit	Abū Abdallāh	2
Abū Hudhayl	(al-'Abbās b. 'Abd	3
Abū Hurayra + Ka'b	al-Muṭṭalib?)	3
Abū Mālik	Abū Ja'far	3
Abū Maysara	(inc. Abū Ja'far	3
'Alī b. Ma'sūd	Muhammad b. 'Alī	1
Husayn	Abū Sālih	2
Ibn Abī Burka	Abū al-Tufayl	3
Ibn Abī al-Hudhayl	Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal	2
Ibn Ma'sūd	'Āmir b. al-'Ulā	1
Ibn Thābit	Dahhāk	1
'Ikrima	Father of Ibn Abī Ḥatim	2
al-Jabā'ī	Ibn Ishaq said that he heard	1
Ka'b al-Aḥbār	Muhammad b. Ka'b al-Quraẓī	10
Makḥūl	say often that it was	2
Ma'rūq	Ishmael	4
al-Qāsim	al-Kalbī	2
al-Qāsim b. Abī Barra	Muhammad b. Ka'b al-Qurtubī	1
al-Qāsim b. Abī Yarza	Mujāhid + Ibn 'Abbās	2
Qatāda	al-Rabī' b. Anīs	3
'Ubayd b. 'Umayr	Sa'īd b. al-Musayyib	6
'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb	al-Sha'bī + Ibn 'Abbās	5
'Uthmān b. Abī Ḥādir	Yūsuf b. Mihrān	6
'Uthmān b. Ḥādir		1
al-Zuhri		4
Total no. of citations:	Total no. of citations:	91 49

<i>Supporters of both</i>	Isaac	Ishmael
'Abdallāh	1	1
'Alī	7	2
'Aṭā'	4	4
al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī	3	11
Ibn 'Abbās	10	30
Ibn 'Umar	1	10
Mujāhid	2	12
Sa'īd b. Jubayr	5	4
al-Sha'bī	2	9
al-Suddī	5	1
Total no. of citations:	40	84
Grand totals:	131	133

declined by the ninth century. The best respected traditionist of all is Ibn 'Abbās, who was cited as supporting both. It is our contention that he supported Isaac as the intended victim.¹¹⁶ But because of his universal respect among the traditionists by the mid-eighth century, the Ishmael school began attributing their traditions to him. As Ibn 'Abbās came to be considered the highest authority of early exegesis a century or so after his death, he became the one upon whom more traditions were pegged than any other traditionist. Other famous early traditionists were chosen by the Ishmael school because they were not on record as holding an opinion on the matter. They would therefore be immune from elimination for supporting both sons. But because of the high status of these early traditionists, some pro-Isaac traditions came to be attributed to them as well. They are therefore on record as supporting both, though statistically their citations for Isaac are basically insignificant.

It is interesting to note that Abū Hurayra, one of the most prolific early traditionists and also a student of Ka'b al-Aḥbar, supports only Isaac. He was probably disregarded by the Ishmael school because of his prior record of supporting Isaac. The Ishmael supporters probably felt compelled to latch on to Ibn 'Abbās because of his importance, despite the fact that he too was already on record as supporting Isaac. But by loading the evidence in favour of Ishmael, the numbers tended to render Ibn 'Abbās's past record less significant.

The particular make-up of the ultimate authorities of the *isnāds* therefore suggests that Isaac was originally considered the intended victim of the sacrifice. Later, when the status of Ishmael became more important to Islam, traditions evolved or were attributed to respected early authorities that supported his position as the intended sacrifice.

Conclusion

More early traditionists are on record as considering Isaac the intended victim. The earliest narrative exegesis on the Qur'ānic

¹¹⁵ This list includes only the tally of those traditionists listed by the exegetes. It does not include the authorities cited in the *isnāds* of the traditions analysed above. The number following each name represents the number of times that authority is listed by all the exegetes who provided tallies.

¹¹⁶ Ibn 'Abbās was a student of Ka'b's (EI² 4:582ff).

story of the Sacrifice suggests Isaac, and the legends referring to Isaac as the *dhābiḥ Allāh* predate those so naming Ishmael. The earliest exegetes supported Isaac's candidacy as the Sacrifice, while virtually all exegetes after Ṭabarī (d. 923) supported Ishmael. Finally, the context for the Isaac legends predominantly parallels that of the Bible and Jewish narrative exegesis; indeed, the historical record has demonstrated that the early Muslims went to Christians and Jews in order to learn their traditions. All the evidence suggests that early Islam considered Isaac to have been the chosen son for Abraham's great and pious act of sacrifice.

The context and message of the legends considering Ishmael to have been intended are completely at variance with the Jewish and Christian view. In all likelihood, this approach developed only after the character of Isaac was found to be irrelevant to the destiny and religious needs of Islam. The evidence from the sources suggests that the Islamic view began to shift increasingly toward the pro-Ishmael school during the early second Islamic century and became almost universally accepted by the end of the third. The question that must be asked at this juncture is, why the change?

A number of factors are at issue. First of all, it would appear from the recent research of René Dagnon that the genealogical connection between Ishmael and the Arab people does not predate Islam.¹¹⁷ Without a deep-felt genealogical connection between the Northern Arabs and Ishmael, it would appear to matter little whether Isaac or Ishmael were the intended victim and ultimate hero of the Sacrifice. However, as the genealogical relationship between Ishmael and the Northern Arabs became more firmly established during the first two Islamic centuries, the importance of the progenitor of the Quraysh and the family of Muḥammad would have naturally grown.

An unlikely source of support for this view can be found in the comments of Ibn Kathīr, the respected fourteenth-century exegete who argued staunchly in support of Ishmael as the intended sacrificial victim. Ibn Kathīr argued that the Jewish convert Ka'b was the major source of the pro-Isaac school, and despite the fact that he was an unreliable source, he was a

¹¹⁷ *La Geste d'Ismā'īl d'après l'onomatique et la tradition arabe* (Paris 1981).

strong influence upon early traditionists.¹¹⁸ In fact, he argues, the pro-Isaac view is a product of the *Isrā'īliyyāt*, a genre of Arabic literature composed of stories and legends brought into Islam by Jews and full of distortions.¹¹⁹

But why would the Jews wish to distort the truth? Through a unwitting reverse of the likely historical situation, he accuses the Jews of 'forcing this understanding because Isaac is their father while Ishmael is the father of the Arabs.'¹²⁰ Elsewhere he states:

... a group of scholars are of the opinion that the intended sacrifice was Isaac. They relate this on the authority of the sages (*al-salaf*) who quote the authority of some of the Companions of the Prophet. though it is not in a book nor is it *sunna*.¹²¹ I am of the opinion that this comes from none other than the sages (*al-hār*) of the People of the Book. It was taken [into Islam] uncontested and without proof.

The very sources to whom the Muslims turned in the early period were subsequently rejected, but for logical reasons. Islam could not countenance a dependence upon obviously foreign sources of authority and tradition when it could boast of the greatest civilization on earth.

With the advent of the 'Abbāsīd Empire in the middle of the eighth century, Islam began to reach the pinnacle of power and influence. Militarily, scientifically, intellectually, and artistically, Islam had demonstrated its superiority to other contemporary powers. Yet according to the theological claims of both Judaism and Christianity, Muslims remained outside of God's covenant. Despite the portrayal of Ishmael's strength in the Bible, both Judaism and Christianity acknowledged his rejection. God's covenant would exist only with the genealogical (Judaism) or spiritual (Christianity) descendants of Isaac. To the older and established monotheistic creeds, Ishmael, the progenitor of the Arabs and of the greatest prophet of Islam, remained the symbol of the rejected covenant.

The ambiguous story of the Sacrifice in the Qur'ān became an excellent basis for the claim that God's true covenantal relationship would obtain neither with the biological nor the

spiritual descendants of Isaac. The Qur'ān would be understood to prove that Ishmael was the true hero of the Sacrifice. By demonstrating his willingness to obey God's ultimate command of personal annihilation, Ishmael would reflect the true character of the Arab Muslims, whom God had chosen because of their excellent virtues. The Jews and Christians, claimed the Muslim exegetes, knew the truth about Ishmael from their own scripture, but denied it and even distorted their holy books in order to support their false claims supporting Isaac as the intended sacrifice of God.

Most likely, the change within Islam from Isaac to Ishmael was largely a case of reactive theology.¹²² Despite the inability of Judaism and Christianity to carve out a large niche of temporal power after the near miraculous successes of the Muslims, they could still take the theological offensive based on their sacred scriptures. The changing Islamic view toward the Sacrifice was probably influenced by this phenomenon. It is true that the Qur'ān passage itself is unavoidably problematic, yet the issue of which son was the intended victim was largely a non-issue until the theological battle was waged.

Finally, the height of the 'Abbāsīd Empire experienced a strong attempt at consolidating and standardizing Islamic practice and belief. Not only was the relationship between Islam and Judaism and Christianity at issue, at issue was also the the unification of the empire and the relationship between the Arabs and other Muslim ethnic groups. This was the period of the *Sihabiyya*, the anti-Arab movement of intellectuals of Persian descent in the 'Abbasid court and intelligentsia. This conflict may have also influenced the views of some Arab scholars, who could have looked to the legend of the Sacrifice as a source of support.

¹¹⁸ *Tafsīr*, IV, 17, quoted above, p. 116.

¹¹⁹ *Ta'rikh*, I, 232-3.

¹²⁰ *Tafsīr*, IV, 14.

¹²¹ *Wā-laysa dhālika fī kitābin wa-lā sunna*.

¹²² This is not to imply that a group of religious believers gathered together one day to think out a refutation of Jewish and Christian claims. The process of change was gradual and resulted from the unique development of Islamic tradition literature during the first two Islamic centuries. A theoretical reproduction of the process is the topic of a forthcoming article.

JOURNAL OF SEMITIC STUDIES

EDITED BY

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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

ISSN 0022-4480

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