The "Other" Ishmael in Islamic Scripture and Tradition

Reuven Firestone

"And Remember in the Book Ishmael:
Surely, he was True to the Promise"
(Qur'an 19:54) اذْكُرْ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِسْمَاعِيلَ ۚ إِنَّهُ كَانَ
صَادِقَ الْوَعْدِ وَكَانَ رَسُولًا نَبِيًّا

1. Ishmael and Arabia

The relationship between ancient Israel and the Arab world has been of interest to scholars for some time, at least since 1921, when David Samuel Margoliouth gave the Schweich Lectures for the British Academy on "The Relations between Arabs and Israelites prior to the Rise of Islam."[1] The Book of Genesis identifies Ishmael in 25:12–18 as a progenitor of Arabian peoples, as does post-HB Jewish tradition in Rabbinic Literature. "Arab" and "Arabian," in the biblical context are defined as referring to the Arabian Peninsula stretching from the Yemen in the south to the Northern Syrian Desert. Rabbinic tradition in Talmud and Midrash may refer to Arab peoples as Ishmaelites, though they are also identified as *arava'e*, the Aramaic for the Hebrew *'aravim*/Arabs, *or ṭayyay'a*, which derives from the Arabian tribal name, *banu ṭayyi'* in Jewish and Christian Aramaic.[2]

Not only does the Biblical Ishmael exemplify traits associated with Arabian social-economic and historical realia such as pastoralizing, etc. (Gen 16:12, 21:21), so do those identified as Ishmaelites, *arava'e* or *ṭayyay'a* in Rabbinic literature of Talmud, Midrash and Targum.[3] Some of the most striking Rabbinic references associate Ishmael with Islam, and even with the family of Muhammad. Ishmael, for example, is described in *Pirkey de-Rabbi*

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[1] MARGOLIOUTH, Relations; see also MONTGOMERY, Arabia; WINNETT, Arabian Genealogies, 171–196; RETSÖ, Arabs, 212–234.

[2] See HOYLAND, Arabia, 235; SHAHID, Byzantium, 421 note 17. The name *ṭayy'a/ṭayyay'a* (טַיָּיעָא/טַיְיעָא) derives from *banu ṭayyi'* (بنو طيء); cf. SHAHID, Art. Ṭayyi', 402–403.

[3] See, for example, Babylonian Talmud *Sukkah* 52b; *Baba Metzi'a* 86a; *Baba Batra* 73b–74a.

Eli'ezer and *Targum Pseudo Yonatan* (or *Targum Yerushalmi*) as marrying two women with the same names of some of the most important women in Muhammad's family entourage: Muhammad's wife 'Ā'isha and his daughter Fāṭima.[4] Ishmael, then, prefigures Muhammad in these post-Muhammad Jewish works. In fact, it would not be far-fetched to consider Ishmael, who married Muhammad's women in these portrayals, as a kind of Muhammad himself, a member of the tribe that crosses over to form a religion that is at once "other" and "same."

In Islamic literature also, Ishmael (henceforth, Ismā'īl) takes on a dual role and serves as a bridge from the Bible to Qur'an. In the Qur'an he is a biblical character of the Banū Isrā'īl. He is not identified as an Arab, but rather a son of Abraham and an Israelite prophet. He appears most often in prophetic lists along with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes (Q.2:136, 140; 3:84; 4:63; cf. 2:133), but also with other biblical prophets such as Al-Yasā' (Elisha?), Jonah, Lot, Idris (Enoch?) and Dhū al-Kifl (Ezekiel or Elijah?) (Q.6:86; 21:85; 38:48).[5] Ismā'īl appears with his father Abraham and assists him in raising up the foundations of "The House" (*al-bayt*) and purifying it, which the Islamic exegetical tradition unanimously identifies as the Meccan Ka'ba (Q.2:125, 127; 13:39; cf. Gen 12:7–8; 13:3–4; 21:33).[6] Ishmael is not associated in the Qur'an with Arabian tribal communities or genealogy.

In the post-qur'anic Islamic exegetical tradition, however, Ismā'īl is transformed into an Arabian rather than Israelite prophet.[7] He is buried in Mecca along with the Arabian prophets known in the Qur'an as Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and Shu'ayb.[8] In the post-qur'anic sources, Ishmael marries a woman of the ancient, original Arabian Jurhum tribe originally from Yemen.[9] According to a number of voices cited by Ibn Sa'd, Ismā'īl was the first human to speak the Arabic language, and all the Arabs are his descendants.[10]

More often, however, Ismā'īl is associated in Islamic sources with only the northern "Arabized Arabs" (*al-'arab al-musta'riba* or *al-muta'arriba*), also known as the 'Adnānī or Mudarī Arabs, while the tribes of Jurhum and Amalek were "original Arabs" (*al-'arab al-āriba*) or *Qaḥtāni* Arabs deriving from

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[4] *Pirkey de-Rabbi Eliezer* 68a–b / FRIEDLANDER, Pirke, 250–251; Targum Pseudo Yonatan Gen 21:21 (henceforth, references to original language and translation are separated by the diagonal, eg. *Pirkey de-Rabbi Eliezer* 68a–b / 250–251).

[5] FIRESTONE, Art. Ishmael, 563–565.

[6] FIRESTONE, Abraham's Journey, 5–24; WITZTUM, Foundations, 25–40.

[7] BRINNER, 'Arā'is, 113 note 9.

[8] AL-THA'LABĪ, 'Arā'is, 215 / BRINNER, 'Arā'is, 113.

[9] AL-THA'LABĪ, 'Arā'is, 88 / 169–170; IBN SA'D, Al-Ṭabaqāt I, 43 / English translation by MOINUL HAQ, Ibn Sa'd I, 44–45; AL-KISĀ'Ī, Qiṣaṣ, 144 / English translation by THACKSTON, Tales, 153.

[10] IBN SA'D, Al-Ṭabaqāt I, 143 (Arabic) / 1:144 (English). Ibn Sa'd cites other traditions claiming that Isma'il did not speak Arabic.

South Arabia.[11] According to this consistent tradition, Ismā'īl was brought along with his mother Hājar from the region of Israel/Canaan to Mecca by Abraham,[12] where they eventually joined up with a local indigenous "original Arabian" Jurhumī tribe. Their offspring thus represent a blend of Israelite and Arabian traditions that would eventuate in the northern Arabs and, from that genealogy, Muhammad and the birth of Islam.[13] Ismā'īl thus becomes a pivotal figure in the genealogy that ties Muhammad to Abraham and Qur'an to Bible. While the *Banū Isrā'īl* derive from Abraham through his son Isaac, the Arab tribes that represent the origin of Islam derive from Abraham through his son Ismā'īl.[14]

The Islamic traditions regarding Ismā'īl are largely consistent with the thrust of the biblical and post-biblical rabbinic traditions associated with Ishmael. He descends from Abraham, the first person privileged to benefit from an ongoing and long-term personal relationship with God. Yet under God's providence, Ishmael departs from the tribal community of his father to give birth to a new federation of Arabian tribes (Gen 17:20; 25:12–16). His persona serves as one of the links that connect Islamic scripture and tradition with the earlier biblical and rabbinic tradition.

But most of the linkage occurs in the post-qur'anic exegetical and literary/folkloristic tradition. The Qur'an has very little to say about Ismā'īl, per se. Aside from his role in assisting his father Abraham in raising up the foundations of the "House,"[15] he appears almost exclusively in prophetic lists.

2. Ismā'īl: "True to the Promise"

However one short qur'anic section refers to Ismā'īl in a manner that seems to diverge from the thrust of the biblical, rabbinic and early Islamic traditions linking him to prior Biblicist lore:

Qur'an 19:54–55

54 وَاذْكُرْ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِسْمَاعِيلَ ۚ إِنَّهُ كَانَ صَادِقَ الْوَعْدِ وَكَانَ رَسُولًا نَبِيًّا
55 وَكَانَ يَأْمُرُ أَهْلَهُ بِالصَّلَاةِ وَالزَّكَاةِ وَكَانَ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِ مَرْضِيًّا

[54]And mention in the Book Ishmael: Surely he was true to the promise, and he was a messenger, a prophet. [55]He commanded his people with the prayer and the alms, and he was pleasing before his Lord.

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[11] AL-ṬABARĪ, Ta'rīkh, 215 / English translation by BRINNER, History, 13–14.

[12] FIRESTONE, Journeys, 61–103.

[13] He marries al-Sayyidah (or Ri'la) bt. Muḍāḍ b. 'Amr (or 'Amru) al-Jurhumī in most of the sources, but Al-Kisā'ī identifies her as Hāla bt. 'Imrān b. al-Ḥārith (144 [Arabic] / 153 [English]).

[14] IBN ISḤĀQ, Al-Sīra I, 1–3 / English translation by GUILLAUME, Life, 3.

[15] "The House" (*al-bayt*) is understood universally in the Islamic interpretive tradition as a reference to the Ka'ba in Mecca.

The qur'anic context for these two verses provides no additional information about Ismā'īl. The two verses reproduced here are placed within a list of references to biblical prophets, each beginning with the phrase, *wadhkur fīl-kitāb* ... – "And mention in the Book," followed by a brief reference to Moses, to Ismā'īl, and to Idrīs/Enoch. Each prophet has his own descriptive. Moses is described as "devoted, and he was a messenger, a prophet" (*mukhlaṣ^{an} wakāna rasūl^{an} nabiyy^{an}*; 19:51). Idrīs is described as "a man of truth, a prophet" (*ṣiddīq^{an}, nabiyy^{an}*; 19:56). And Ismā'īl is "true to the promise, and he was a messenger, a prophet (*ṣādiq al-wa'd ,wakāna rasūl^{an} nabiyy^{an}*). These three brief descriptions are then followed by the closing phrase: "These are the ones upon whom God has shown favor among the prophets from the descendants of Adam ..." (Q.19:58).

The strange phrase, "true to the promise" (*ṣādiq al-wa'd*) occurs in the Qur'an only here and only in reference to Ismā'īl. The exegetical tradition focuses on this unique phrase. To what promise was Ismā'īl true? What could be the back story to this statement?

Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, the 10th century polymath and collector of ancient Arabian and Biblical traditions, provides a tradition on the authority of Sahl b. 'Uqayl: "Ismā'īl b. Ibrahim promised to come to a man at a [certain] place. He came, but the man had forgotten [about the rendezvous]. Ismā'īl remained [there, waiting] for him, and he stayed the night, until the man came the next day. He said [to Ismā'īl], 'You didn't leave from here?' He answered, 'No.' He said, 'But I had forgotten.' [Ismā'īl said], 'I would not leave until you came.' That is why he is truthful (*fabidhālika kāna ṣādiq^{an}*)."[16] Other versions extend the time he waited to three days (on the authority of Muqātil) or even a year (on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās and also Sufyān al-Thawrī).[17]

Others tried to understand the divinely given appellation as a reward for Ismā'īl's patience and forbearing nature in the face of impending death. They imagine a scenario as part of the qur'anic account of the near-sacrifice of Abraham's son because in the qur'anic version of the story, Abraham turns to his son and asks him for his personal response to God's command in a dream to sacrifice him. When Ismā'īl hears his father's question he responds, "*You will find me, God willing, one of the patient*" (Q.37:102).[18] In the Qur'an's rendering of the narrative, the actual name of Abraham's intended victim is not given, so the early exegetes argued for centuries over whether it was Isaac or Ishmael. By the ninth century, the consensus shifted from Isaac to

[16] AL-ṬABARĪ, Jāmi' IX, 95 (s.v. 19:54). The tradition is repeated by Ibn Kathīr in his Tafsīr IV, 464.

[17] AL-ṬABARSĪ, Majma' V–VI, 669; AL-MĀWARDĪ, Al-nukat III, 376; AL-QURṬUBĪ, Al-Jāmi' XI, 77; SAMARQANDĪ, Baḥr, 326; IBN SULAYMĀN, Tafsīr II, 315.

[18] IBN KATHĪR, Tafsīr IV, 464; AL-QURTUBĪ, Al-Jāmi' VI, 77.

Ishmael, but the Qur'an does not specifically name the intended sacrifice in the narrative.[19]

Still other commentators perceive that the verse seems out of place in relation to the other Ismā'īl references in the Qur'an, which either place him in a line of biblical prophets or associate him with the building and purification of the Meccan Ka'ba with his father Abraham. Some suggest that the Ismā'īl of Q.19:54–55 may actually refer to a *different* Ismā'īl.

3. Ismā'īl bin Ḥizqīl

Who could this Ismā'īl be? The eleventh century Kurdish Shāfi'ite jurist, 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Māwardī identified him as Ismā'īl b. Ḥizqīl, Ishmael the son of Ezekiel. Here is al-Māwardī's explanation:

> According to most people, [the qur'anic reference to "True to the Promise" refers to] Ismā'īl b. Ibrāhīm, but some commentators claim that it is not Ismā'īl b. Ibrāhīm because Ismā'īl died before Ibrāhīm, and that this is Ismā'īl b. Ḥizqīl, whom God sent to his people. [The people to whom he preached] stripped off the skin of his scalp (*fasalakhū jildat ra'sihi*). God Almighty chose him because of what He desired for their punishment [i.e. to those who inflicted these tortures] (*fakhayyara Allāhu ta'ālā fīmā shā'a min 'adhābihim*). God singled him out and approved of his merit (*fa'ista'fāhu waraḍiya bithawābihi*), and he entrusted their situation to divine forgiveness and [or] punishment (*wafawwaḍa amrahu ilayhi fī 'afwihi wa'iqābihi*).[20]

This brief comment needs to be placed into a qur'anic context. The Qur'an frequently depicts prophets as rugged individuals sent by God to warn their own people of impending doom if they would not accept faith in the One Great God along with the attendant moral-ethical requirements associated with monotheist belief. The prophet is usually ignored or opposed by his community. In response to the people's failure to accept their prophet and the associated monotheist belief and behavior required of them, it is then destroyed. This is a repeated qur'anic trope, applied to such ancient and extinct Arabian peoples as the 'Ād and the Thamūd who according to qur'anic and probably pre-Islamic Arabian tradition, failed to heed their prophets Hūd and Ṣāliḥ.[21]

As mentioned previously, Ismā'īl is regarded in the Qur'an as an Israelite prophet, but he is usually regarded in post-qur'anic tradition as an old Arabian prophet. It is possible to identify him in the qur'anic role of the old Arabi-

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[19] See FIRESTONE, Abraham's Son, 95–131; IDEM, Journeys, 135–151.

[20] AL-MĀWARDĪ, Al-nukat III, 376. The thirteenth century Cordoban, Abū 'Abdullah al-Qurṭubī, repeats the same tradition in his Al-Jāmi' VI, 77.

[21] For these peoples and prophets, see the relevant articles in MCAULIFFE (ed.), Encyclopaedia.

an prophet like Hūd and Ṣāliḥ, who preached to their ancient, idolatrous pre-Islamic communities. In the Qur'an, the offending communities sometimes ignore their prophets, argue against them, or even try to kill them. These prophets are always saved from danger, however, while their disbelieving communities are destroyed for refusing to accept the prophetic message. The Qur'an nevertheless refers also to ancient communities killing their prophets. Usually the offending community is the Children of Israel.[22]

Al-Māwardī cites a tradition in which Ismā'īl b. Ḥizqīl was one such prophet who preached to his people and was killed by them, for which they were eventually destroyed. The errant community is not identified. As al-Māwardī noted, this particular interpretation and identification of Ismā'īl as other than the son of Abraham is not as popular as the traditions that tie Ismā'īl b. Ibrāhīm to the story depicting his great patience in waiting for his comrade who failed to show up at the appointed time and place. Despite its less frequent appearance, however, the tradition about the killing of Ismā'īl b. Ḥizqīl does occur intermittently in the sources. In a series of Shi'ite interpretations the killing of Ismā'īl b. Ḥizqil becomes a symbolic prototype for the suffering and martyrdom of Ḥusayn b. 'Alī, Muhammad's grandson.

4. Ismā'īl bin Ḥizqīl and the Suffering of Ḥusayn

The suffering and martyrdom of Ḥusayn lies at the core of Shī'a identity.[23] As is well-known, the rift that eventuated in the division of the Muslim community between Sunnī and Shi'a Muslims occurred over succession to rule the early movement after the death of the prophet, Muhammad. Muhammad's closest relative, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, was repeatedly passed over in favor of others whom the most devoted followers of the Prophet deemed more appropriate leaders. Historians have tended to define the disagreement as one over the issue of authority to rule, though the conflict was much more complex than simply one of political ideology.

According to the standard view, the leading group opted for any man they believed was best inclined to represent the leadership of the community, while the minority was in favor of Muhammad's closest male blood relative. 'Alī was Muhammad's closest male relative, but he was passed over three times until, after the assassination of the third caliph 'Uthmān, 'Ali was finally chosen as the fourth caliph. He was immediately opposed by a power block that favored a relative of the assassinated caliph 'Uthmān, and 'Alī was accused of collusion in 'Uthmān's assassination.

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[22] Q.2:61, 91; 3:110; 5:71. See REYNOLDS, Qur'ān, 9–32, who makes a convincing argument for the origin of this qur'anic trope.

[23] AYOUB, Suffering.

ʻAlī's followers were referred to as *shīʻat ʻAlī*, the faction or party of ʻAli, hence the term Shiʻa as a designation for this group of Muslims. War ensued. ʻAlī prevailed through battle and negotiation, but was soon thereafter assassinated, after which the ʻUthmānic faction gained control and consolidated power under Muʻāwiya, a cousin of ʻUthmān, who established the ʻUmayyad dynasty of Muslim rulers.

Upon Muʻāwiya's death, his son Yazīd assumed the title of caliph. ʻAlī's son Ḥusayn, however, contested the rule of Yazīd and the ʻUmayyads and refused to give allegiance to the caliph. On his way to meet a group of supporters in Kūfa (today's Iraq), he and a small contingent of his family and followers were intercepted at Karbala by Yazīd's army and massacred. Ḥusayn was beheaded along with most of his family and companions.

The story of the battle is told with great emotion in Shiʻa communities to this day. Ḥusayn's small group of fighters was overwhelmed by Yazīd's massive army, and virtually everyone was wounded by arrows flung from great distance. Yet they agreed, one by one, to engage their advantaged and uninjured attackers in single combat in order to prolong the life of Ḥusayn and his family. They fell, one after another, with fearless heroism, their deaths described in agonizing detail, until Ḥusayn himself was killed. The entire scene is commemorated and often reenacted annually by Shiʻa communities throughout the world on the day of ʻAshūra, the tenth day of the month of Muḥarram. It is a day in which Shiʻa Muslims engage in personal suffering as a kind of vicarious atonement for the evil perpetrated against their hero and what they believe is the rise of sin through evil Islamic government. The ʻAshura, which in Arabic means "ten," is related to and perhaps even derives from the biblical 10th day of the 7th month in the Biblical calendar, which Jews commemorate to this day as the most sacred "Day of Atonement."[24]

This story of Shiʻa martyrdom lies behind the reference to Ismāʻīl b. Ḥizqīl in the Shiʻa commentaries. In the Shiʻa versions of the story, not only Ismāʻīl's scalp is flayed. The skin of his face is also torn off (*fasalakhū jildat wajhihi wafarwat raʾsihi*). This is followed by an intentional contextualization. The following is from the commentary of the well-known Persian Shiʻite scholar, Abū ʻAlī Faḍl ibn Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī:[25]

[24] MARÇAIS, Art. 'Ashūrā', 705.

[25] AL-ṬABARSĪ, Majmaʻ V–VI, 669. A slightly more elaborate rendering of most of the traditions found in al-Ṭabarsī can be found also in the 17th century Safavi Shiʻa scholar, AL-JAZĀʾIRĪ, Al-nūr, 1402.

> Our comrades transmitted [this narrative] on the authority of Abū Abdullah.[26] Then [Abū Abdullah] said: "At the end an angel came from his Lord and greeted him saying, 'I saw what was done to you, and He commanded me to obey you, so pass on to me (i.e. inform me) what you wish.' He answered, 'Let me be an exemplar for Ḥusayn' (*yakūn lī bilḥusayn uswa*) ... *And he was* with that *pleasing to his Lord* (Q.19:55). [God] was pleased with his acts because they were all pious deeds without among them [any] shameful acts. And it is said, the meaning of *pleasing* is virtuous, pure, pleasant (*ṣāliḥ*^{an} *zakīy*^{an} *raḍiy*^{an}) so he achieved thereby the greatest [possible] status."

We learn from this juxtaposition that Ismāʿīl b. Ḥizqīl, who suffered the agony of torture and martyrdom for his piety and prophethood, prefigures the suffering and martyrdom of Ḥusayn. But why Ismāʿīl? Many prophets suffered and died for their steadfast commitment to God. And why do the sources, both Sunni and Shiʿa, depict this Ismāʿīl b. Ḥizqīl as having his scalp and in many cases, also his face torn off from his head? And why do they insist that this particular Ismāʿīl is not the son of Abraham, but rather the son of Ezekiel? And finally, why do the Islamic sources not identify Ismāʿīl b. Ḥizqīl? Who was he? Who was his father Ḥizqīl? Where did he live? We know virtually nothing about him.

One could simply credit these strange aspects of the tale to what was once disparagingly referred to as "the oriental imagination." But upon closer examination one can detect a direct and interesting connection with an earlier tradition of pious martyrdom. This is the Rabbinic Jewish martyrdom tradition known as the *ʿasarah harugey malkhūt*, literally, "the Ten Killed by the Authorities." Commonly translated into English as the "Story of the Ten Martyrs,"[27] this legend of mass martyrdom depicts the excruciating demise of ten of the best-known rabbis of the Mishnah, set during the great Hadrianic persecution of the 2nd century. It became so important and embedded in Jewish memory that it was rendered into poetic form and called *Eleh Ezkerah* – "These will I remember," recited annually in the *mussaf*, or "Additional" Service of Yom Kippur among Ashkenazi Jews.[28]

Raʿanan Boustan has shown how *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* evolved over centuries from the period roughly contemporary to the third century

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[26] References to Abu Abdullah are to Imam Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq, the sixth Imam according to the Twelver Shiʿa genealogy of imams. Note that Jaʿfar has the same *laqab*, the honorific or descriptive appellation in traditional Arabic names, as found in Q.19:54 in reference to Ismāʿīl. *Al-Ṣādiq* means "the truthful" or "the reliable." On the *laqab* within naming traditions in the Arabic/Islamic tradition, see VAN DONZEL / LEWIS / PELLAT, Art. Ism, 179–181.

[27] STERN, Midrash.

[28] BOUSTAN, Martyr, 91. The poem does not occur in the traditions of Jews deriving from the Muslim world, the so-called Sefardi/Mizraḥi tradition, though these communities would be familiar with it from earlier Rabbinic literature.

canonization of the Mishnah through the Middle Ages. A stable, repeated narrative "... crystallized as a fully formed literary composition in Byzantine Palestine between the late fifth and early seventh centuries."[29] The *terminus ad quem* for its development is thus shortly before the generally accepted date of the collection of the Qur'an, which marks the emergence of what could be called "Islamic" literatures of all kinds.

The Story of the Ten Martyrs is a complex narrative with many variants. I will retell here only the parts that are relevant to our topic. The tale begins with the Roman emperor having decided to put to death the ten foremost Jewish scholars of the age. He found a reason in his reading of Exod 21:16: "One who kidnaps a man – whether he has sold him or is still holding him, shall be put to death."[30] Despite the biblical condemnation and explicit punishment prescribed for such an act, there is no mention in the Hebrew Bible of proper punishment having been carried out for that very crime committed against Joseph by his brothers, the progenitors of the tribes of Israel and the Jewish people. The emperor called for ten great Jewish sages to be brought before him and then charged them, as representatives of the Jewish people, to be put to death for the sins of their forefathers. The following is my translation from Jellinek, *Beit HaMidrash*.[31]

> ... The Caesar entered with all the Roman nobles after him. He said to them, "Who shall be killed first?" Rabbi Shim'on ben Gamliel answered, "I am the *Nasī* (head of the Sanhedrin), son of the *Nasī* from the seed of David king of Israel, the servant of God. I will be killed first." Rabbi Yishmael answered also and said, "I am the High Priest, son of the High Priest from the seed of Aaron the Priest. I will be killed first so I will not see the death of my comrades." The Caesar said, "That one wants to be killed first, and that one wants to be killed first. So then, draw lots between the two of you!" The lot fell to Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, so the Caesar commanded to cut off his head first, and they did so. Rabbi Yishmael then took [Shimon ben Gamliel's head] between his legs and cried over him with great bitterness, saying, "Where is Torah and where is its reward (*ey torah ve'ey s^{e}kharah*)?! How can the tongue that explained the Torah in seventy languages now lick the dust?" He mourned and cried over Shimon ben Gamliel. The Caesar said to him, "What is with this old man that you cry over your comrade? You should cry over yourself!" Rabbi Yishmael said to him, "I do not cry over myself because my comrade is greater than me in Torah and wisdom. It is because he has entered the Yeshivah of Heaven before me that I cry."

While he was still speaking and mourning and crying and grieving, the daughter of the Caesar looked out the window and saw the beauty of Rabbi Yishmael the High Priest. Her compassion was stirred for him, so she sent to her father [and asked] that he grant her a single request. The Caesar answered

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[29] BOUSTAN, Martyr, 51.

[30] *v^{e}gonēv īsh umkharo v^{e}nimṣā b^{e}yado mōt yumāt* (וגנב איש ומכרו ונמצא בידו מות יומת).

[31] JELLINEK, Bet, 67, which is virtually identical to that found in EISENSTEIN, Ozar, 441.

back, "My daughter, anything that you ask I will do, aside from [releasing] Rabbi Yishmael and his comrades. She sent to him, "I request of you to allow his soul to live." He sent back to her, "I have already sworn."[32] She then sent to him, "Then I request that you decree to flay the skin off his face (*lehafshīṭ et 'or panav*) so that I can look at him in a place of viewing." Immediately, [Caesar] decreed to flay the skin off his face.

When [the torturers who were flaying him] arrived at the location of the *tefillin* [on his forehead], he cried out a great and bitter cry, and earth and heaven were in shock and tribulation. He cried out again and the Heavenly Throne was agitated. The ministering angels said before the Holy One blessed be He, "Shall a righteous man as this (*ṣadīq kazeh*) to whom You showed all the treasures of the upper world and the secrets of the depths be killed in such a horrific and evil way? This is Torah and this is its reward?" [God] said to them, let him know that his merit shall prevail [for the benefit of] the later generations.

> The Holy One blessed be He said, "What shall I do for my child? It is decreed, and there is no one to annul it." A heavenly voice (*bat kol*) came out and said, "If I hear another sound I will return the entire world to its original unformed state (*ahafōkh et kol ha'olām l'tohu vavohu*)." When Rabbi Yishmael heard [this], he ceased [his cry]. The Caesar said to him, "Until now you did not cry and did not cry out, but now you cry out." He answered him, "I did not cry out for my own soul, but rather because of the commandment of *tefillīn* that has been taken from me." The Caesar asked, "You still trust in your God?" He answered [by quoting the Book of Job], "*Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him*." (Job 13:15). Rabbi Yishmael's soul immediately departed.

The intertextual relationship between Rabbi Yishmael, whose full name is Ishmael ben Elishah son of the High Priest, with Ismā'īl bin Ḥizqīl is obvious. Both were martyred by unbelievers. If there was any doubt of the intertextuality, the "smoking gun" is the motif of flaying the skin off the protagonists head or face, an uncommon detail of martyrdom. And of course the name of Ishmael/Ismā'īl represents a direct parallel as well.

There is much more, however, that supports the importance of Ishmael's martyrdom for Shi'a Muslims. First of all, Rabbi Yishmael is referred to in the narrative as a *ṣadīq*, which finds assonance in the later Muslim readings of the Qur'an's reference to Ismā'īl as *ṣādiq al-wa'd*.[33] More important, the death of Ishmael ben Elishah is portrayed in Jewish tradition as an atoning sacrificial offering.[34] His vicarious suffering is so effective that his death

[32] An ironic parallel to the qur'anic text of Ismā'īl as *ṣādiq al-wa'd* – "true to the promise."

[33] The meanings of the two words differ, though they derive from the same semitic triliteral root, which offers a reverberative parallel.

[34] See BOUSTAN, Martyr, 99–130, for these traits and their sources in Rabbinic tradition.

manages to relieve the sins of Jews throughout the generations. His extraordinary merit is anticipated by a miraculous conception of his righteous mother through divine intercession via the arch-angel, Metatron. The connection with Metatron allows him to ascend to heaven, which he does at the beginning of the *Story of the Ten Martyrs* in order to determine whether the emperor's decision to execute the sages accords with the divine will (which it does). When he ascends to heaven, it is the same angel Metatron, the "Prince of the Divine Countenance" (*sār hapanim*) who greets him. The literal translation of *sār hapanīm* is "prince of the face [of God]," though some read the meaning as "prince who *is* the face [of God]."[35] Here we observe the "face" theme repeated. Ishmael sees the face of God through his interaction with the angel Metatron, and it is perhaps Metatron's representation of God's *panīm* that energizes Ishmael's miraculous birth and his extraordinary beauty.

The motif of sight and seeing also recurs in the Jewish martyrdom legend. Rabbi Yishmael sees the death of his beloved comrade and rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel; the daughter of the emperor sees the beauty of Rabbi Yishmael's face and desires him. She asks her father to flay off the skin of his face so that she can gaze upon him indefinitely. And Ishmael sees in Metatron something of the face of God.[36]

The beauty of Ishmael, his miraculous birth, ability to ascend to heaven and extraordinary power of vicarious atonement, are all exemplary traits. Their parallel with the suffering and martyrdom of Christ must certainly be noted as well, and it should not be surprising to observe how the notion of atonement through suffering crossed yet another set of religious and cultural boundaries in the transition from Ishmael to Ismā'īl.

And finally, there is a political aspect to the story that is of special interest. First, it should be noted how the theme of suffering and vicarious atonement has a long history of competition between communities, religions and factions. I already referred to the motif of the Binding or Sacrifice of Isaac, which is perhaps the best-known example of the traditional notion that merit accrues from suffering. Jews have claimed for millennia that the merit of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his beloved son – and Isaac's willingness to become the sacrifice – is atoning, and the expiating merit that accrued for such an extraordinary submission to the divine will serves for the benefit of

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[35] BOUSTAN, Martyr, 119.

[36] Rabbi Yishmael b. Elisha does not see only the angel Metatron in rabbinic tradition, but other divine beings as well. Once when he entered (as High Priest) into the Temple to offer incense *lifnai velifnīm*, sometimes translated as "in the Sanctuary" or "the innermost part" he encounters Akatri'el Yah the Lord of Hosts, who some equate with God himself (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 7a). The words *lifnai velifnīm* derive from the same root as "face" (*panīm*). Here again, it is as if Elishah sees the divine countenance, and in the narrative God asks Ishmael for a blessing. Ishmael's response is to beg God that the divine mercy prevail of the divine anger, to which God nods his head approvingly.

Abraham and Isaac's descendants to this very day. The Jewish notion is called in Hebrew *zekhūt āvōt* – "merit of the ancestors."

Christians have claimed the same benefit through an even more impressive and more efficacious sacrifice *completed* of God's beloved son, Jesus. Christians can argue, therefore, that they derive greater benefit through the merit of the Crucifixion even than Jews could benefit through the merit of the Akedah.

Muslims reject the Crucifixion as never having occurred, therefore rejecting any benefit from the vicarious atonement it could offer.[37] They do, however, relate to the motif of Abraham's submission to God through the sacrifice of his son, a narrative that occurs in the Qur'an (Q.37:99–113). In contrast to the Jewish view, most Muslim readings of the qur'anic story consider the intended sacrifice not to have been Isaac but Ismā'īl, the progenitor of the Arab tribes out of which emerged the last and most perfect expression of the divine will in Islam.[38] It is the Arabs/Muslims, therefore, who benefit from the extraordinary merit deriving from the *dhabīḥ*, the atoning sacrifice of Abraham's son.[39]

The political angle on the case of Ismā'īl b. Ḥizqīl is a bit different. In the Islamic context, the politics of the story reflects an internal argument between Muslim factions revolving around suffering and the merit that derives from it. The extraordinary suffering of Ḥusayn, reenacted ritually by Shi'ites on their "Day of Atonement" on 'Ashūra, the tenth day of the month of Muḥarram,

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[37] Q.3:55; 4:157–158.

[38] This is the derivative position based on the interpretive traditions. The Qur'an itself does not mention which son was the intended sacrifice, and the exegetes were divided on the identity between Isaac and Ishmael (Isḥāq and Ismā'īl). See FIRESTONE, Journeys, 135–151.

[39] The Arabic *dhabīḥ* is the term used in Islamic tradition to designate the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son in the Qur'an. The word derives from the Arabic root *dh.b.ḥ.* meaning cutting or rending, ripping open. It is related linguistically to the Hebrew *z.v.ḥ* and Aramaic *d.v.ḥ*, which basic meaning is to slaughter an animal, usually for sacrifice. The Arabic term for a sacrifice is *dhibḥ*, also meaning an *intended* sacrifice, or animal designated as such, related to the Hebrew/Aramaic term for sacrifice, *zevaḥ*/*d*^{e}*vaḥ*. The form of the root appears in the qur'anic story in the noun form *dhibḥ* and verbal form *dhabaḥa* when Abraham informs his son that he saw in a dream that he was to sacrifice him (Q.37:102: *innī arā fīl-manāmi annī adhbaḥuka*). But the designation for the narrative in Islamic tradition is *dhabīḥ*, which means "slaughtered," or action completed. This word does not occur in the narrative or anywhere else in the Qur'an, so it is purely an interpretive designation. It could refer to the substitute sacrifice through which the son was redeemed from becoming a victim of the act itself (Q.37:107: *wafadaynāhu bidhibḥ*^{in} *'aẓīm*^{in}). Or it could refer to the sacrifice *completed*, suggesting a tradent that might parallel the equivalent tradition in Judaism of the sacrifice of Isaac *completed*, which in turn serves to complicated the Christian claim of the ultimate (and completed) sacrifice of God's own son (see SPIEGEL, Last Trial).

proves the injustice of Sunni Muslim leadership while proving the merit of those who remained eternally loyal to the righteousness and justice of the Shi'a cause. Here is another example of competition in suffering. The legitimizing impulse underlying the notion of suffering atonement flowed in various interpretive traditions from the ancestral narratives across religious, geographic, linguistic, cultural boundaries and continues to do so in a variety of forms to this day.

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