

## **Abraham: The Seeker's Sacrifice**

**By Reham Elnory**

Taking its cue from the Qur'an, Sufism, the mystical tradition in Islam, largely depends on stories to convey important spiritual principles. Sufi stories, replete with recurring motifs, revolve around the twin axes of seeking and sacrifice.

The spiritual seeker sets out on a journey of self-discovery. To unveil her true self, she has to shed not only her outer possessions, but her innermost ones as well, by casting off the restraints of her ego. Motivated by a searing, all-consuming love that leaves no place for other loyalties, the seeker journeys to the beloved—'God', or 'the Real'—through paths of ever-increasing difficulty. She is thoroughly tested to determine the level of her submission to and acceptance of (*islam*) the Real. The tests become harder and harder for the ego to accept until it finally dissolves in love, leaving the seeker free to continue the journey unimpeded.

Abraham is a spiritual seeker; in fact—judging by the amount of attention given to him in the Qur'an—he is the seeker par excellence. The stories told in the Qur'an of his incessant questioning, his refusal to accept anything but the truth, his withstanding the fire of Nimrod, and his leaving behind all he knew as he is forced to flee his homeland, demonstrate his determined willingness to be a servant of love.

Chapter thirty-seven of the Qur'an presents a rapid overview of Abraham's life, bringing together all of the Abrahamic stories, mentioned in greater detail elsewhere in the Qur'an, into one narrative. After smashing the idols of Nimrod and his people to force them to admit their powerlessness, they cast him into the fire:

**They exclaimed: "Build a pyre for him, and cast him into the blazing fire!"**  
**So they sought to do him harm, but We [frustrated their designs, and] debased them**  
**And [Abraham] said: "Verily, I shall [leave this land and] go to my Lord; He will guide me."**  
**[And he prayed:] "My Lord! Grant me the gift of [a son who shall be] one of the righteous!"**  
**So We gave him good tidings of a gentle boy, ready to suffer and forbear.**  
**And [one day,] when [the boy] was old enough to walk and work with him, [Abraham] said: "O my dear son, I have seen in a dream that I am slaughtering you. So look, what do you think? He said: "O father! Do as you are bidden: you will find me, if God so wills, steadfast, patiently enduring."**  
**Then, when they had both surrendered, and he laid him on his forehead (to slaughter him),**  
**We called out to him "O Abraham!**  
**You have already fulfilled the vision!" Thus do We reward those who do what is**

most beautiful

For this was a manifest trial.

And so, We ransomed him with a mighty sacrifice,  
and left him thus to be remembered [in blessing] among later generations:

“Peace be unto Abraham!”

Thus do We reward those who do what is most beautiful,

For he is surely one of Our faithful servants.

And [then] We gave him the good tidings of [the birth of] Isaac, a prophet, and one  
of the righteous,

And We blessed him and Isaac.<sup>1</sup>

Abraham bears great hardship for his love: from the world around him, and from the object of love himself, God. “**When God tried Abraham with (His) commands, and he fulfilled them, [God] said: ‘Lo! I have appointed you a leader of humanity.’**”<sup>2</sup> Abraham, old and childless, is not content with this rapidly vanishing leadership. Tremulously, he asks of God: “And my progeny? (Will I have any descendants? Will they be leaders of humanity?)” God eventually responds positively, and abundantly. Granting Abraham’s request, He doubles it, bestowing upon him two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and two sets of descendants. This motif of doubling persists throughout the story of Abraham and Ishmael, and culminates in Ishmael’s descendant, the prophet Muhammad.

The story of Abraham unfolds elsewhere in greater detail. When Abraham prays over and over again for a son, Sarah, eventually despairing of giving him a child herself, grants him her handmaiden, Hagar. Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, Abraham’s firstborn, when Abraham was eighty-six years old. Abraham is overjoyed, but he would not remain so for long. When Ishmael is still nursing, God commands Abraham to take Hagar and Ishmael to the barren valley of Mecca,<sup>3</sup> 700 miles southeast of Hebron in Palestine, where Abraham was living with his family, and leave them there.<sup>4</sup>

Abraham, governed by love, obeys. Leaving them in the middle of the desert with a skin of water and leather bag full of dates, he begins rapidly walking away. An anxious Hagar

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<sup>1</sup> 37:97-113

<sup>2</sup> Qur’an 2:124

<sup>3</sup> Unlike the Judeo-Christian traditions, the Qur’anic account does not relate that this was a result of Sarah’s jealousy and rage over Ishmael laughing at Isaac. In fact, it makes clear that this happened when Ishmael was still a baby, completely dependent on his mother for sustenance. Since by all accounts Isaac was born when Ishmael was thirteen or fourteen years old, the banishment could not have happened as a result of Ishmael—now around seventeen years old—laughing at the toddler Isaac.

<sup>4</sup> Ironically, Hebron, the site of current violence between the Palestinian Arabs and the Israeli Jews—who are intimately connected, genealogically and spiritually, to Abraham through Ishmael and Isaac—means ‘friend’, ‘alliance’ in Hebrew. In Arabic, Hebron is called *al-khalil*, which is taken from Abraham’s name, intimate friend of God.

runs after him, calling out, **'Abraham, where are you going, leaving us in this valley where nothing is in sight?'** Ducking his head, Abraham hurries on, silent. A distraught Hagar persists in questioning, **'Has God asked you to do so?'** Only then does Abraham stop and turn back: **'Yes!'** Slightly mollified, Hagar traces her way back to little Ishmael and waits. Soon, however, when the water and dates are gone, Hagar's desperation increases, unable as she is to quench her thirst or breastfeed her baby. Leaving Ishmael under a tree, she climbs the rocky incline of a nearby hill to search for water: **'Maybe there is a caravan passing by.'** Looking for signs of water or help from passers-by, she runs between the two hills of Safa and Marwa seven times. Eventually, fatigued and distraught, she hears a voice. Looking wildly around, she sees the angel Gabriel standing next to Ishmael in the valley between the two hills. He digs into the ground next to the baby, and water comes gushing out. **'Do not be afraid of being neglected,'** Gabriel says, **'for this is the House of God, which will be built by this boy and his father, and God never neglects his people.'**<sup>5</sup>

This, however, is not the only danger faced by Ishmael. He miraculously survives it only to face another one. Abraham, having left his wife and baby in Mecca as commanded, is finally given permission to go see them after ten years. The joy of reunion, however, is soon interrupted by a vision, the ultimate test of his faith. He is commanded to sacrifice his only son, the son who is the result of years of prayers, the son he had just met after a decade of separation.

The Qur'an does not mention by name the child to be sacrificed; however, it is clear from the structure of the verses quoted above that it is Ishmael. There is a clear temporal and causal narrative structure in Abraham's story as recounted in them: Abraham is rewarded by a son when he passes the test of enduring the fire, and his son is, like him, enduring and forbearing. He passes another test, that of sacrificing his son, his most precious possession, and is rewarded with Isaac, his second son. Further, we know from the Bible, Genesis 22, that God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son, and Ishmael, as Abraham's firstborn, was his only son for thirteen or fourteen years.

Thus the difficulty of the test Abraham the seeker is subjected to. He is asked to give up his only child *twice*—once when he is ordered to cast him, helpless, into the desert and

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<sup>5</sup> From *Sahih al-Bokhari*, one of the major collections of the sayings of Muhammad, which expands, comments upon and interprets the stories and divine rulings in the Qur'an. The house of God referred to is the Ka'aba, which was built, at God's command, by Abraham and Ishmael, in the spot where Abraham left Hagar and Ishmael.

walk away, and once when he is ordered to slaughter him. The motif of doubling is highlighted: Abraham goes through the agonizing difficulty of a double sacrifice, and Ishmael goes through a redoubled return from the abyss, miraculously making it through two divinely-ordained dangers. This is echoed in a saying of prophet Mohammad, who referred to himself as “the son of two sacrificed”, alluding to Ishmael, his ancestor, and his paternal grandfather, Abdullah. The latter was to be sacrificed as a result of a promise made by his father to the pagan gods and was spared at the last minute.

And so the message to the seeker is clear: If you want to enter the hallowed circle of Love, you have to give up what you most love. The sacrifice is not physical—for Ishmael does not die—but is completely egoic. It is Abraham’s willingness to go through with the sacrifice, to cast off his heart’s desire; his ego, that is exemplified and highlighted, not the sacrifice itself.

So Abraham is taken as the example people are to follow; and God’s promise to Abraham to make him and his descendants leaders of humanity is fulfilled. It comes to full fruition every year in the performance of the pilgrimage (*hajj*). The rituals include circumambulating the Ka’aba, built by Abraham and Ishmael, running to and fro seven times between the Safa and Marwa, and reenacting the father and son’s submission and trust in God by slaughtering a sheep at the end of the pilgrimage. The doubling movement of return and repetition in the circumambulation is a spatial and temporal reenactment of the doubling motif active in the narrative. With every concentric circle, with every return, something new is gained. The spiritual lineage extending from the seeker, to the prophet Muhammad, to Abraham is further enforced everyday, five times a day, in the concluding supplication offered at the end of each cycle of prayer: “O God! Exalt Muhammad and his true followers as You did exalt Abraham and his true followers; and bless Muhammad and his true followers as You did bless Abraham and his true followers.”