

The God of Ishmael

Genesis 21:8-21

Today in the Islamic world is the festival Eid al-Fitr, marking the end to the holy month of Ramadan. Ramadan is the ninth month in the Muslim lunar calendar that is religiously set aside for fasting from sunrise to sunset, commemorating the first revelation of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad. It is a period of pious reflection and prayer, of charitable acts, and of humility before Allah. Quoting from the Qur'an:

It was in the month of Ramadan that the Qur'an was revealed as guidance for [humankind], clear messages giving guidance and distinguishing between right and wrong. So any one of you who sees in that month should fast, and anyone who is ill or on a journey should make up for the lost days by fasting on other days later. God wants ease for you, not hardship. [God] wants you to complete the prescribed period and to glorify Him for having guided you, so that you may be thankful. (2.185)

On this day of celebration marking the end to Ramadan, Muslims express their joy through generosity to others, charity to the poor, feasting with family and friends, providing gifts to children, and to praising the graciousness of Allah in a time of appreciative worship. It is a high holy day experienced throughout the world.

It's quite likely very few non-Muslims will even be aware of this day's significance or what Ramadan itself is. The common references to Islam in our mainstream media or culture tend to be *associational* rather than *educational*, i.e., what has happened during the month of Ramadan, or in the Hajj (or sacred pilgrimage to Mecca), or during Friday prayers. Typically, the association is made with a tragic event or act of terrorism, leading to a widespread distrust and fear of Islam and of young male Muslims, in particular.

This is a terrible injustice on many levels, aside from being religious bigotry. Most likely, it is a symptom of the news coverage or media culture (internet, TV, films, books, etc., where villains are often portrayed as Muslim). For instance, I was struck by the imbalance of U.S. news coverage over the recent attacks in the U.K., where those committed by ISIS sympathizers (Manchester, London Bridge) were covered with great interest and thoroughness relative to attacks where Muslims themselves were targeted (Finsbury Park; cf. ISIS attack in Iran). This imbalance was also noted by a British journalist¹ following last Monday's attack on Muslims leaving a mosque, and it corroborates recent findings by researchers at Georgia State University² who studied the U.S. media and concluded:

When the perpetrator is Muslim, you can expect that attack to receive about four and a half times more media coverage than if the perpetrator was not Muslim...Put another way, a perpetrator who is not Muslim would have to kill on average about seven more people to receive the same amount of coverage as a perpetrator who's Muslim. ³

With this imbalance in media attention and the correlation of Islam with acts of violence, it isn't surprising then, that many Americans have a negative impression of Islam, with some believing we are at war and should view Muslims as a dire threat, even though, there is far more evidence to the contrary (i.e., estimates of Muslims involved with ISIS or al-Qaeda are a few thousand, compared to the 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide). Based on data compiled by the Global Terrorism Database which includes the thousands of victims on 9-11, the numerical odds of an actual act of

¹ Ashley Kirk, "How Many People are Killed by Terrorist Attacks in the UK?", www.telegraph.co.uk, June 19, 2017.

² Erin M. Kearns, Allison Betus, and Anthony Lemieux, "Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?", Georgia State University, March 3, 2017.

³ Quoted in, Tara Boyle, "When Is It 'Terrorism'? How the Media Cover Attacks By Muslim Perpetrators", www.npr.com, June 19, 2017.

terrorism to strike any of us is roughly 1 in 3,600,000⁴—odds that are even more remote when you remove 9-11 from the equation as an outlier, and certainly much less than what we face every day with an endless number of other tragic causes that warrant more caution and alarm (e.g., traffic accidents, gun violence, work safety concerns, etc.). Besides, both in the U.S. and Europe, there have been other periods of even more intense terrorist activity (e.g., IRA bombings, bombings in the 1970s from radical groups (Weather Underground, Symbionese Liberation Army, etc.)). A recent study noted that of the “201 terrorist incidents on U.S. soil from January 2008 to the end of 2016,” 115 were from right-wing extremists, 63 from Islamist militants, and 19 by leftist radicals.⁵ It’s important to allow perspective to be our ally in this case. The truth is, we hear more about Islamic terrorism because it’s the monstrous bogeyman of our time, with even the thought of random acts of violence forcing us to paint with a very broad brush our negative perceptions of Islam as a religion.

However, if we draw back a bit and educate, instead of merely associate, we will recognize Islam is not some strange, new foreign religion, completely alien to our Judeo-Christian heritage. Muslims have been a part of this country since its founding and Islam is the world’s second largest religion; more significantly, it is part of our larger family of Abrahamic faiths, rooted by tradition in the biblical character, Ishmael. Muslims, both Sunni and Shia, view Abraham as the father of their faith and Muhammad its Messenger. So, the ancient stories of Judaism (which we, as Christians, have embraced as our own) are also the foundation of Muslim identity, particularly for Arabs. We have far more in common than not.

⁴ Alex Nowrasteh, “Americans’ Fear of Foreign Terrorists is Overinflated,” www.time.com, September 13, 2016.

⁵ Sarah Ruiz-Grossman, “Most of American Terrorists are White, and Not Muslim,” June 23, 2017, www.huffington.com.

The story of Hagar and Ishmael as we have it in Genesis 16 (and in our text for today in chapter 21) serve as the basis for the origins of Islam and the bedrock markers of their heritage, including the settling of Mecca, the establishment of the sacred Kaaba toward which Muslims around the world turn to in prayer, as well as the traditions of the Hajj (or pilgrimage), where Muslims are encouraged to make their way to the Great Mosque of Mecca at least once in their lifetime. How does this story inspire the origin of Islam? In their telling of this same tale from the Muslim *Hadith*, or traditional teachings, Abraham took his firstborn, Ismail, and his mother, Hajar, and led them not to Beer-sheba, as we have in Genesis, but instead to the Arabian Peninsula.

Abraham walked through cultivated land, desert, and mountains until he...came to an uncultivated valley having no fruit, no trees, no food, no water. The valley had no sign of life. After Abraham had helped his wife and child to dismount, he left them with a small amount of food and water, which was hardly enough for two days. He turned around and walked away. [Hajar] hurried after him asking, "Where are you going Abraham, leaving us in this barren valley?" Abraham did not answer her, but continued walking. She repeated what she had said, but he remained silent. Finally, she understood that he was not acting on his own initiative; she realized that Allah had commanded him to do this. She asked him, "Did Allah command you to do so?" He replied, "Yes." Then his great wife said, "We are not going to be lost since Allah, Who has commanded you, is with us." ⁶

As the story continues, Hajar is not able to find water to survive, so in an attempt to find someone to help, she climbs the closest mountain, al-Safa to no avail, and then crosses the valley over to another mountain, al-Marwa, making this journey back and forth seven times, which is the basis for the traditional Muslim pilgrimage, Hajj. On the seventh time, she hears the voice of an angel who, at the place in the valley called Zamzam, uncovers a spring of water.

⁶ Story of Ismail; www.sunnaonline.com.

The angel said to her, “Don’t be afraid of being neglected, for this is the House of Allah, which will be built by the boy and his father, and Allah never neglects His people.”⁷

As the story unfolds, in time a local Arab tribe comes to find water, is invited by Hajar to stay, teaches Ismail their language, Arabic, and when he is of age, Ismail marries into the Arab tribe. Eventually, Abraham returns and with his firstborn son, builds the Kaaba on the site of Zamzam dedicated to the worship of Allah, which is the holiest place in Islam.

The parallels between the Hebrew and Muslim traditions are obvious: Hagar and Ishmael being sent out into the wilderness because of Sarah’s jealousy; Abraham leading them out with a little food and water then leaving them to fend on their own; in Hagar’s distress, an angel of God coming to her and providing a spring of water; God’s promise to make of Ishmael a great nation. The differences are also noteworthy: Abraham leading them to Mecca (or Makkah), instead of Beer-sheba; Hajar’s seven-time journey crisscrossing the valley between mountains, rather than a short-distance (“bow-shot”) away, as it is in Genesis; the angel uncovering the spring in Zamzam, as opposed to Hagar discovering a well of water. In Genesis, Hagar and Ishmael are dismissed by Abraham and never seen again; in Islam, Abraham returns several times to his firstborn son, Ismail, and together they build the holiest site dedicated to the worship of the one God (Allah, meaning “one God” in Arabic). In Hebrew tradition, the descendants of Ishmael were the Bedouin tribes; in Islam, Ismail’s descendants were Arab Muslims.

Still, the striking similarity between the two stories is the benevolent love of God for Hagar and Ishmael. This Egyptian slave woman and her son were not condemned, rejected, or dismissed as unrelated to his father,

⁷ Ibid.

Abraham. They are loved and protected. It is only Sarah who wants them to banish them out of jealousy. There is a kindred tie between the three Abrahamic faiths—one where God does not withhold love and care.

Historians and cultural anthropologists would name these stories as sacred myths describing, in their own way, the origins of the people of the land, which doubtless they were. But the religious ties are meaningful, even apart from the land itself. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is, indeed, the God of Ishmael. Despite the religious differences and hostilities that exist to this day, the God of Israel to whom Jews and Christians pray is the God of Islam.

How did this all come about? Karen Armstrong in her book on Islam explains the history behind the Qur'an and Islamic stories through the Prophet Muhammad's life—something that might help us understand not only the origins, but why so many find their faith in Islam and why young Muslims want to reform the Muslim world, even if they wrongly end up following radical leaders who undermine the nature of Islam.

During the month of Ramadan in 610 C.E., an Arab businessman had an experience that changed the history of the world. Every year at this time, Muhammad ibn Abdallah used to retire to a cave on the summit of Mount Hira, just outside Mecca in the Arabian Hijaz, where he prayed, fasted and gave alms to the poor. He had long been worried by what he perceived to be a crisis in Arab society. In recent decades his tribe, the Quraysh, had become rich by trading in the surrounding countries. Mecca had become a thriving mercantile city, but in the aggressive stampede for wealth some of the old tribal values had been lost. Instead of looking after the weaker members of the tribe, as the nomadic code prescribed, the Quraysh were now intent on making money at the expense of some of the tribe's poorer family groupings, or clans. There was also spiritual restlessness in Mecca and throughout the peninsula. Arabs knew that Judaism and Christianity, which were practiced in the Byzantine and Persian empires, were more sophisticated than their own pagan traditions. Some had come to believe that the High God of their pantheon, al-Lah (whose name simply meant "the God"), was the deity worshipped by the Jews and Christians, but he had sent the Arabs no prophet and no scripture in their own language. Indeed, the Jews and Christians whom they met often taunted the Arabs for being left out of the divine plan. Throughout Arabia one tribe fought another, in a murderous cycle of

vendetta and counter-vendetta. It seemed to many of the more thoughtful people in Arabia that the Arabs were a lost people, exiled forever from the civilized world and ignored by God himself. But that changed on the night of 17 Ramadan, when Muhammad woke to find himself overpowered by a devastating presence, which squeezed him tightly until he heard the first words of a new Arab's scripture pouring from his lips...

This was the core teaching of the new scripture, called the *quran* (recitation) because believers, most of whom, including Muhammad himself, were illiterate, imbibed its teachings by listening to public readings of its chapters...

The new sect would eventually be called *islam* (surrender); a *muslim* was a man or a woman who had made this submission of their entire being to Allah and his demand that human beings behave to one another with justice, equity, and compassion...

In the early years at Medina there were two important developments. Muhammad had been greatly excited by the prospect of working closely with the Jewish tribes, and had...introduced some practices (such a communal prayer on Friday afternoons...) to align Islam more closely with Judaism. His disappointment, when the Jews of Medina refused to accept him as an authentic prophet, was one of the greatest of his life...

But some of the Jews in the smaller clans were friendly and enhanced Muhammad's knowledge of Jewish scripture. He was especially delighted to hear that in the Book of Genesis Abraham had two sons: Isaac and Ishmael (who became Ismail in Arabic), the child of his concubine Hagar. Abraham had been forced to cast Hagar and Ismail out into the wilderness, but God had saved them and promised that Ismail too would be the father of a great nation, the Arabs. Local tradition had it that Hagar and Ismail had settled in Mecca, that Abraham had visited them there and that together Abraham and Ismail had rebuilt the Kabah (which had originally been erected by Adam but had fallen into disrepair). This was music to Muhammad's ears. It seemed that the Arabs had not been left out of the divine plan after all, and that the Kabah had venerable monotheistic credentials.

By 624 it was clear that most of the Jews of Medina would never be reconciled with the Prophet. Muhammad had also been shocked to learn that the Jews and Christians (whom he had assumed to belong to a single faith) actually had serious theological differences...In January 624 he made what must have been one of his most creative gestures. During the *salat* prayer, he told the congregation to turn around, so that they prayed in the direction of Mecca rather than Jerusalem. This...was a declaration of independence. By turning away from Jerusalem towards the Kabah, which had no connection with Judaism or Christianity, Muslims tacitly demonstrated that they were reverting to the original pure monotheism of Abraham...Muslims would no longer tag lamely behind those Jews and Christians who ridiculed their aspirations, but would take their own direct route to God. ⁸

⁸ Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, The Modern Library, 2000, pp. 3, 4, 5, 16-18.

The rest, as they say, is history.

I decided to give focus to Islam today through this story of Ishmael to help provide perspective on the meaning of Islam and its relationship to Judaism and Christianity. This is just a taste of what Islam is about, but it behooves us to learn more—not only to satisfy our curiosity, but to better understand this faith that is so impactful in our time.

On this day of Eid al-Fitr marking the end of Ramadan, may we learn more about this religion that impacts us so, of which so many of us are ill-informed. May we educate before we associate; may we find the ties that bind us together to build trust; may we note the differences so we may be teachers and prophets to one another. May we look to the one God of us all, from ancient times to our present day, to begin the search for common ground and a common commitment to humanity, so that the extremists of any religion do not dictate the terms of our engagement or threaten the welfare and survival of the world.

To that end, may the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael—of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad—inspire and bless us to become the family God intended us to be as Abraham’s descendants, whom God promised would populate the earth and bless it with goodness.

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