

# Tale of Two Sons, Two Destinies

## *Isaac, Ishmael and the Saga of the Middle East*

Islam takes up the story of Abraham offering his son Isaac as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah found in Genesis 22. The event is known in Judaism as the Akeda, meaning “binding,” referring to the story of God’s command to Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. The Biblical narrative shows Abraham binding Isaac to be offered. The chapter names Isaac six times, and calls him Abraham’s “only son, whom you love.”<sup>1</sup> However, Islam interprets the narrative to apply to Ishmael instead of Isaac. Before getting into details, here’s a little backstory about these two sons of Abraham.

### The Backstory

Many people have heard about Abraham, but relatively few know much about his life. He was first named “Abram,” which can mean strong, elevated, protector and father. The story begins in Genesis 12:1. God told Abram to leave his father in Haran (in modern southeastern Turkey) and:

**...go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you; and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you.”** Genesis 12:1-3

The land God would show Abram was called Canaan, which later became Israel. Abram obeyed and took his wife Sarai to Canaan where he underwent many adventures and trials, one of which was that his wife was barren. As a result, she offered Abram her Egyptian slave Hagar as a surrogate mother according to the custom of their culture, and Hagar became pregnant by Abram.

As things turned out, Hagar treated Sarai with contempt because of Sarai’s bareness. The story is found in Genesis 16. Sarai responded so harshly Hagar fled into the wilderness where the Angel of the Lord<sup>2</sup> appeared and said: **“I will greatly multiply your off-spring so that they will be too numerous to count.”** (Genesis 16:10) Then the Angel of the Lord added:

**“Behold, you have conceived and will bear a son. And you shall name him Ishmael [“God hears”], for the LORD has heard your cry of affliction. He will be a wild donkey of a man, and his hand will be against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.”** (v. 11)

Remarkably, Hagar gave the Lord a new name following the encounter, marking her as the first person in the Bible to directly give God a name: **“El-Roi, the God who sees me”** (v.13). Ishmael’s birth set in motion events that have reverberated over 4000 years down to our time.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the first time the word “love” appears in the Bible, prefiguring the love God shows the world by offering God’s only begotten Son to die as a sacrifice to restore humanity’s innocence. “For God so loved the world....” John 3:16

<sup>2</sup> This is the first mention in the Bible of the “Angel of the Lord,” which Christian scholars view as a pre-incarnation appearance of Jesus, the Son of God. It’s striking to consider God’s first appearance before encountering Moses was to an Egyptian slave. Notice the quote from the Angel switches from saying “I will...” in v. 10 to referring to “the LORD” in v. 11, equating the Angel of the Lord directly with God (*Yahweh*), as Hagar goes on to call Him in v. 13.

## Abraham Loved Ishmael

God appeared to Abram again when he was 99 years old, as found in Genesis 17. There the LORD renamed him Abraham, which means “Father of Many Nations.” God also promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants forever, and told him to circumcise his descendants as a sign of God’s eternal covenant. God added: **“I will make you exceedingly fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will descend from you.”**

Despite Abraham’s age, God promised him Sarai would become pregnant and give Abraham another son who would inherit God’s promises to Abraham. God changed Sarai’s name to Sarah, “Mother of Nations.” Abraham laughed at the thought he would be a father again at his age, but God reassured him Sarah would bear him a son. Abraham was to name him Isaac (“He Laughs”).

Abraham loved Ishmael and so appealed to God: **“O that Ishmael might live under Your blessing!”** God replied: **“I have heard you, and I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He will become the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation.”** (Genesis 17:18,19)

However, God also told Abraham that God’s covenant of the land would continue through Isaac: **“But I will establish My covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this time next year”** (v. 21).

Ishmael was 13 years old at the time, and was circumcised along with all the other males in Abraham’s camp. At that time, Ishmael was Abraham’s only son. Given that fact, it’s entirely possible that Ishmael was the first person circumcised according to the Lord’s command.<sup>3</sup>

## Sarah Asked Abraham to Banish Hagar and Ishmael

A year later Abraham and Sarah conceived and Isaac was born when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90. When young Isaac was weaned, Sarah saw Ishmael mocking him and demanded that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away once and for all, exclaiming “the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac!” (Genesis 21:9-10). God told Abraham to do what Sarah asked, reiterating **“your offspring will be reckoned through Isaac”** (v. 12).

There’s no mistaking the Bible’s account of God’s plan to pass the legacy of the land through Isaac rather than Ishmael. Nonetheless, God again promised He would make Ishmael into a nation. The Bible says **“God was with the boy,”** as he grew up. Ishmael settled in the Wilderness of Paran [northeastern Sinai Peninsula] and became a great “archer” [i.e., warrior]. While he was dwelling there, his mother found a wife for him from the land of Egypt” (Genesis 21:20-21).

Although God’s Covenant was promised to Isaac, God nonetheless promised three times that Ishmael would be the father of rulers and a great nation. But things got confused afterward.

---

<sup>3</sup> The Bible says Ishmael was circumcised with Abraham on the same day. Author Tass Saada describes why Ishmael may have been the first person circumcised. See *Once an Arafat Man*, Tyndale, 2008, pp 209-210. Some modern Muslims commemorate this event by waiting until their sons reach puberty to circumcise them, but the most common age in Islam is seven.

## How Islam Views the Story of Isaac and Ismael

Islam has a long and deep history of either misquoting or circuitously interpreting the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Regarding the binding and sacrifice of Issac, here are the relevant Biblical verses found in Genesis 22:

**“Take your son,” God said, “your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you.... Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood. He bound his son Isaac and placed him on the altar, atop the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son....**

**By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will multiply your descendants like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore.... Through your offspring all nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”** Genesis 22:2, 9, 16-18

The Christian New Testament reaffirms that Isaac was the Son of Promise:

**By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your descendants be named”. Hebrews 11.17-18.**

**Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?**  
*James 2.21*

Most Muslims insist Genesis 22 refers to Ishmael, not Isaac. They ignore the direct Biblical references to Isaac quoted above and conclude that Isaac was never an “only son” because Ishmael was Abraham’s only son when Isaac was born. This is taken to mean Ishmael was Abraham’s *only ever* “first son.”<sup>4</sup> Altogether, 38 of Muhammad’s companions say the boy was Isaac, compared to 28 who said the boy was Ishmael.<sup>5</sup> This contradictory fact alone raises questions about the factualness of the prevailing Muslim view.

The Quranic verse used to substantiate the Muslim re-interpretation is *Surah As-Saaffat* 37:100-109, which uses the phrase “son” when speaking of Abraham’s sacrifice, but does not mention *either* Isaac *or* Ishmael’s name. Thus, some Islamic scholars assume it is appropriate to substitute Ishmael for Isaac. To substantiate this claim Muslims insist the Bible was subjected to errors in translation or a conspiratorial substitution of Isaac’s name for Ishmael. But the Bible is by far the most copied and translated book ever written. Not a single copy has ever been found that says Ishmael was the “only” son of Abraham or the “son of promise.” That term is consistently reserved for Isaac.

---

<sup>4</sup> See “Ishaq or Ismail: The Muslim Dilemma” at <https://www.answering-islam.org/Gilchrist/Vol2/4d.html>. For added scholarly details, see: <https://www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/sacrifice.htm>. The latter resource identifies Islamic sources that support one view or the other. Evidence indicates early Muslim scholars believed the child of sacrifice was Isaac, while later scholars said it was Ismael. One Islamic perspective in support of Isaac emphasizes God had already promised Abraham three times Isaac was the intended son, and God would not contradict Himself by changing him to Ishmael. This view gains ascendance because the Quran never specifically mentions Ishmael as the son of sacrifice. Another support for Ishmael is that the Quran acknowledges various Biblical prophets, all of whom descended from Isaac, not Ishmael. The work of Reuven Firestone also supports this view. It is cited in the first link in this footnote under: *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* [State University of New York Press), Albany 1990], “Chapter 16: Isaac or Ishmael”?

<sup>5</sup> These tallies are found here: <https://www.judaism-islam.com/was-abraham-commanded-to-sacrifice-isaac-or-ishmael/>

## Temple Mount or Mount Arafat?

Islamic tradition maintains that the sacrifice of Ishmael took place in what is now Saudi Arabia, rather than on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> To this day Muslims celebrate a holiday during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca called *Eid al Adha* (“Festival of Sacrifice”) by throwing stones at pillars near Mina, about five miles from the Kaaba in Mecca.

The stone throwing commemorates a Muslim oral tradition that Abraham threw stones to chase away the devil who came to test his faith by persuading him not to sacrifice Ishmael. The overall intent is to celebrate Abraham’s unwavering devotion and perfect submission to Allah’s will. Given the Biblical Judeo-Christian view that Isaac is the true son of Promise who Abraham bound in order to sacrifice, Christians hold that the Islamic tradition is limited to symbolizing Abraham’s faithfulness rather than commemorating a historical fact. However, Muslims everywhere celebrate *Eid al Adha* with conviction it is a historically accurate commemoration.

## Two Destinies

Abraham directed the master of his household to travel to Haran, in Mesopotamia, to find a wife for Isaac among Abraham’s relatives there. (See Genesis 24.) He also made his servant promise that Isaac would always remain in the land God gave Abraham, as if to preclude any possible later claim that the land did not belong to Abraham’s descendants through Isaac. One of the distinctive features of Isaac’s life became that he never left Canaan, the original “Promised Land.”

The covenants of God to Abraham passed through Isaac to Jacob, who passed them on to his sons who comprised the original twelve tribes of Israel. The Bible records their story all the way down to the time of Jesus, who introduced a new and different kind of covenant not only to Israel, but available to all people everywhere, as I’ll discuss in the Messianic Brief #16 [[LINK](#)].

As for Ishmael he settled in the Arabian peninsula and fathered twelve sons, as God foretold. Their names are listed twice in the Bible, in Genesis 25:12-14 and 1 Chronicles 1:32-33. Isaiah 42:11 says let the village of Kedar, the second son of Ishmael, sing and give glory to the Lord. Isaiah 60:7 also prophesies that Kedar’s flocks will be gathered to the Lord and the “rams of Nabaioth” (Ishmael’s first mentioned son) will be accepted as offerings and give glory to the Lord’s temple. These remarkable prophecies are lost in today’s embittered conflict flooding the Middle East.

Although God foretold that Ishmael would be a “wild donkey of a man,” the term used for “donkey” refers to the *onager*, a rugged desert donkey found in the Middle East. Onagers are not dumb, stubborn animals, but symbols of strength and instinctive independence. They have been compared to the wild, famously untamable mustang ponies of the American west.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the Bible says Ishmael’s mother, Hagar, literally saw God even as God saw her, declaring “Here I have seen the One who sees me” (Genesis 16:13). Author Tass Sadda, born in Gaza and once a violent Muslim jihadi, notes:

“All these things teach us that the Ishmaelite line is not a throwaway population in God’s eyes. It was started under God’s watchful care, received dramatic promises from Him, began to multiply

<sup>6</sup> The Bible specifically says the location was three days journey from Beersheba, in Canaan. That distance eliminates any location near Mecca. Mt. Moriah, the Biblical site of Isaac’s sacrifice, is about a 20 hour walk.

<sup>7</sup> Tass Saada, *Once and Arafat Man*, p. 209. Saada points out that Jacob later used wild animal metaphors to describe some of his sons. Issachar was a “rawboned donkey.” Dan was “a serpent.” Benjamin was “a ravenous wolf.”

a full generation before Isaac..., and has today become a major beneficiary of God's resources (oil, natural gas, gems, spices). The hopes and dreams of this group are very real.<sup>8</sup>

### Reconciled at Abraham's Death?

A touching scene took place at Abraham's death. He was 175 years old according to the Bible. Both Isaac and Ishmael attended his funeral and buried him in the cave of Machpelah, which is still there in modern Hebron, in Israel. It's located in the field Abraham bought to bury his wife Sarah. While there's no confirmation Isaac and Ishmael were truly reconciled, they clearly came together to honor their father, and there is no Biblical mention of violence between the two.

The Bible goes on to say Isaac lived in Beer-Lachai-Roi, meaning "The Well of the Living One Who Sees Me." It's where Hagar declared God saw her.

Regarding Ishmael, the Bible says Ishmael's twelve sons "settled from Havilah to Shur...near the border of Egypt.... And they lived in hostility toward all their brothers" (Genesis 25:12-18). Havilah denotes the region of Arabia nearest Egypt. Shur depicts the Arabian Peninsula. Some say it extends south to Africa, while others believe it goes all the way to the Euphrates. These lands have been long occupied by nomadic tribes.

Today, it is interesting that twelve people groups are found among modern Arabs, but it is not possible to trace them directly to the twelve sons of Ishmael mentioned in Genesis 25. What stands out most is that the tribes of Arabia have remained proudly independent throughout history. While their lands have been occupied, such as under the British mandate, the people never submitted to outside dominion, thereby fulfilling God's declaration to Hagar that Ishmael would be a wild onager of a man.

### Islam's Claim to the Temple Mount

Returning to the topic of Islam's claim that Abraham once offered Ishmael as a sacrifice, the Bible states clearly that it was Isaac who Abraham offered on Mt. Moriah, the site of today's Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Islam insists Abraham offered Ishmael at a site located in modern Saudi Arabia, making no claim to the Temple Mount based on their view of Ishmael's sacrifice. Yasser Arafat even went so far as to assert the Jewish Temple was *never* located in Jerusalem!

Still, Islam does claim a direct connection to the Temple Mount. A prominent Muslim tradition links Muhammad, himself, to the Temple Mount. The story is referred to as the "Night Journey," and stems from a single short Quranic verse in Surah 17, which says: "Glory be to the One [Allah] Who took His servant [Muhammad] by night from the Sacred Mosque [the *Kaaba* in Mecca] to the Farthest Mosque [*Al Aqsa* in Jerusalem] whose surroundings We have blessed."

A majority view of Muslim scholars holds that Muhammad didn't visit the Temple Mount physically, but had a profound experience that took him there in the spirit. This carries as much significance for Muslims as if Muhammad had visited there in person.

### The Night Journey and the *Micraj*

A second story associated with the *Night Journey* is called the *Micraj* ("ladder), which refers to the prophet's ascent through seven heavens into the presence of God, described briefly in Surah

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p 210. For a powerful modern view of Arab and Israeli prosperity and war, see George Gilder, *The Israel Test*, Encounter Books, 2024, especially chapters 5, "The Economics of Hate," 9, "Games of War and Holiness," and 11, "Land for War."

53:13–18. Most Islamic scholars believe this ascent took place during the Night Journey on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

Certain *hadith* attest according to oral tradition that during the *Micraj* Muhammad encountered Adam in heaven. Muslims view Adam as a prophet in his own right and a distant forefather of Muhammad. This links the two as God's "first" and "last" prophets, an assertion universally held by Islam.

The much older Biblical account directly contradicts Islam on this point and instead calls Jesus the second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45). That verse says Jesus, the last Adam, became "a life-giving spirit," not simply another earthly prophet. It goes on to say, "**just as we [Christ-followers] have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so also shall we bear the likeness of the heavenly man.**"

When Christians are born again and led by God's Holy Spirit, they become "little Christs" made in the likeness of the second, spiritual Adam.

### A Sacred Duty to Recapture the Temple Mount

Muslims use the Night Journey and *micraj* as a basis for viewing the Temple Mount as sacred to Islam. In this context, an Islamic principle known as *Waqf* (Arabic for "stop," "withhold," or "not let go") figures centrally. *Waqf* confers a Muslim religious duty to return to Muslim rule any land formerly under Muslim rule. This means Muhammad's Night Journey to the Temple Mount not only makes it holy to Islam, but requires efforts to restore the Temple Mount to Muslim rule.

Since Muslims captured Jerusalem from the Romans in 637-638 CE, it has become a religious *waqf* obligation for many Muslims, particularly Shiites and Islamist jihadis, to fight to restore the Temple Mount to Islamic rule, along with Jerusalem and all of modern Israel. This of course ignores the fact that Jews settled Jerusalem and Israel long before Muhammad was born.

The walls of the present Old City of Jerusalem were not built until 1535-1542, by the second Ottoman ruler of Jerusalem, Suleiman the Magnificent. It is situated on the remains of earlier temple walls dating at least to the days of Herod the Great, the king who ruled during the time of Christ. Archaeological artifacts have been found underneath the wall built by Suleiman dating to the time of Solomon's Temple (957 BE).<sup>9</sup> This provides clear physical evidence of a Jewish presence on the Temple Mount predating Islam's claim by more than a thousand years.<sup>10</sup>

In 2023, Hamas called the October 7 massacre "Operation *Al-Aqsa* Deluge," to link the atrocity specifically to the Al-Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Hamas's military commander Muhammad Deif said the attack was launched in retaliation for Israel's purported desecration of the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

### Overcoming the Islamic Spirit of Rejection

Events in our day clearly have roots traceable to the religious views of Islam that directly contradict the historical record and archaeological realities traceable to the Bible. A spirit of rejection also marks the Biblical story of Ishmael and remains a thorn in the side of Israel today.

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/archaeologists-reveal-first-solomons-temple-era-artifacts-ever-found-on-temple-mount/>.

<sup>10</sup> Al Aqsa is built on the site of a mosque dating to the 11th century, which itself was built following several reconstructions that began with a small prayer house established on the existing Temple Mount after Muhammad died in the 7th century.

Tass Sadda concludes the deeper issue today is not the land of Israel, but the lingering sting of rejection traceable Biblically to Abraham's expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's household.<sup>11</sup> Saada says "Ishmael—who was the firstborn son deserved to inherit a double portion of his father's estate," according to the customs of the day. But God had a different plan—which alerts us to look for the deeper meaning behind God's plan, which I'll touch on later.

Saada concludes:

**"God is in the business of *accepting and embracing* the people he lovingly created, not *rejecting* them. As long as we major in rejection, we will continue reaping a harvest of animosity, frustration and death. Rejection is a dead-end street."**

Saada asserts we need to feel each other's pain, because the reality of human pain cuts across all categories, ideologies, and political parties. "It transcends who is 'right' and who is 'wrong.' It demands we become human and responsive again." For Saada, encountering Jesus opened the door to this possibility. He writes Jesus "is the one who convinces an Arab like me that the Jews are not my enemies but rather my cousins, going back to Abraham's house."

10-1-25

---

<sup>11</sup> See Tass, Saada, "For the Middle East" in *Once an Arafat Man*, chapter 18. All quotes above are from that chapter.