



Abraham the Archetype of Faith: “There Is No God but God!”*

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IF ISLAM DID NOT SEE ITSELF TIED SO INTIMATELY TO JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY, it would make our relationship much simpler and perhaps better. But this cannot happen, because in Islam Muhammad stands in a long line of prophets. He comes to fulfill and authenticate former messengers, including Abraham and Jesus. Sūra 3:50 says Muhammad came (1) to confirm the law which was before him, (2) to make lawful part of what was forbidden, and (3) to bring a sign from God, so “fear God and obey me”!

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We turn next to Islamic motifs that are directly related to the Christian and Jewish traditions. Abraham and his family, including Hagar and Ishmael, play significant roles in Islam. Abraham is the friend of God and the archetype of faith. The story of Hagar is woven into the founding of the central shrine, Ka'ba in Mecca. The author reminds us of the opportunity for dialogue that the Muslim tradition represents.

What is unique is that Muhammad is seen as the seal of the prophets (Sūra 33:40), who brings the final message which speaks with ultimate authority. Sūra 5:3 says: “today I have completed for you your religion...I have chosen for you Islam.”

So Islam is not the revelation of a new religion, nor is Muhammad the founder of *islām*. According to Muslims, it was already the religion of Abraham (and of Adam and Eve) who, the Qur’ān says, was a *hanif* (one who rightly worships God). In fact, the Qur’ān specifically says in Sūra 3:65,67 that Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a *hanif*.

O people of the scripture! Why will you argue about Abraham, when the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed till after him. Have ye then no sense?...Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian; but he was an upright man who had surrendered [to Allāh; a *hanif*] and he was not of the idolaters.

The attachment to Abraham is not primarily as an ancestor, though many have argued the case and, indeed, according to Muslim tradition, Muhammad’s genealogy runs by blood through *Isma’īl* (Ishmael) and *Ibrahim*. Abraham is, rather, the archetype of faith for all Muslims, for all believers.

I. COMMITMENT

What makes Abraham such an exemplary Muslim is that he was able to commit himself wholeheartedly to his Lord. In Sūra 37:84 we have the wonderful image of Abraham’s total commitment, where he is described as one of the *mukhlasin* (sincere ones) because “he came to his Lord with a pure heart.” He came with a heart undivided, undisturbed, a constant heart; one that does not serve two masters and so is not torn between two loyalties.

There are many stories about Abraham that circulate among Muslims. One of them portrays his hospitality and openness:

It is related that each day Abraham postponed his breakfast until some hungry traveler should happen along to share his meal. One day an old wayfarer walked by and accepted Abraham’s invitation. As the two prepared to eat, Abraham pronounced the blessing. Noticing that the old man’s lips formed the words of a prayer unknown to him, Abraham sent the man away, saying he could hardly offer hospitality to a fire-worshipper. God observed the scene and immediately chided the patriarch: I have given this man life and sustenance for a hundred years; could you not be gracious to him for one hour? Abraham pursued the aging Zoroastrian and brought him back home.

So Abraham is the true Muslim, not because he simply surrenders himself to God, which might be taken as passive acquiescence, but because he commits himself wholeheartedly to God, willfully and without any reservation whatsoever. His is not a partial surrender. This is the meaning of *islām*!

For anyone to do this, of course, presupposes the oneness and unity of God. If there are two or more gods then loyalty becomes divided. One can never be sure which one to appease. Only if God is one can anyone make a total commitment.

And the Qur'ān repeats: *God is One! There is no god but God.* So total commitment to God is possible, required – and Abraham becomes the pattern for such devotion.

II. DEPENDENCE

But not only is God one, and so worthy of absolute loyalty and commitment, God is *dependable*, and so deserving of our dependence upon him. This total dependability of God is implied in such phrases as: *in shā allāh* (“if God wills” – 10:22, 23; 18:22-24, 39) and *mā shā allāh* (“what God wills” – 29:61-66).

Such a complete dependence/dependability relationship is true in all circumstances. The Qur'ān makes clear that the pagans already knew God existed. For them God was at the pinnacle of a pantheon of gods. But their commitment was only partial. They called upon God, but only in times of trouble. Sūra 30:33 says:

And when harm toucheth men, they cry unto their Lord, turning to him in repentance; then, when they have tasted of his mercy, behold! some of them attribute partners to their Lord. (cf. 106, 107)

What the pagans didn't know, or believe, is that one can and should be dependent on God at all times and in all circumstances.

Nor will anyone find God to fail if he or she does this. One need never despair or feel hopeless because God's word and promises are sure. God will never forsake nor abandon those who trust in him.

A good example of this comes from the life of Muhammad. In Sūra 93 he is pictured as one in deep despair; idolaters are mocking him; no one appears to be listening. It seems God has forsaken him, that Muhammad's dependence on God has been betrayed.

The verses come as a word of encouragement:

Thy Lord hath not forsaken thee, nor doth he hate thee.
Verily the latter portion will be better for thee than the former.
Verily, thy Lord will give unto thee so that thou wilt be content.
Did he not find thee wandering, and gave thee guidance?
Did he not find thee in need and made thee free of want?

Muhammad's total dependence on God is vindicated, his prophethood is confirmed. As with Abraham, ultimate dependence on God is not misplaced. It does not go unrewarded.

III. GRATITUDE

And all this leads to gratitude, or at least should. If you've committed yourself wholeheartedly to God, have depended totally upon him, and found God to be faithful, the only proper and appropriate response is gratitude. Gratitude is the opposite of unbelief. To believe is to give thanks. Sūra 16:112-114 speaks of this. It talks of a people who had everything, “provision coming to it in abundance from

every side," then they turned to unbelief because they failed to give thanks (cf. 14:7; 2:152).

So for Muslims to believe that there is no god but God is something far more than belief in a creed, or giving assent to a particular dogma, or repeating set formulas and rituals. As with Abraham, it involves a *commitment* that is whole-hearted, a *dependence* that is total, and a *gratitude* that is responsive to God's goodness and mercy. ⊕