

Abraham and Covenants in the Quran:

A Scriptural Analysis with Biblical References

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Abstract

The Biblical Abrahamic Covenant has served as a central inspiration to a great deal of modern scholarship. Consideration of this fact begs the question– is there an Abrahamic Covenant in the Quran? If so, what does this covenant entail? The most direct response to this question is that the Quran specifies multiple covenants made between God and Abraham. Yet these covenants may all, in a sense, be contextualized to one covenant that was established pre-eternally with all the descendants of the Children of Adam, the Primordial Covenant. This article provides a thorough scriptural analysis of the covenants made between God and Abraham as they are narrated in the Quran and simultaneously seeks to contextualize these covenants with three key concepts: monotheism, submission to God, and the notion of an innate nature that exists within all of humanity– the Islamic *fitra*. It will additionally utilize an interfaith approach to answer the research question by incorporating Biblical verses into the scriptural analysis.

Keywords: *Islam; Quran; Primordial Covenant; Abraham; Abrahamic Covenant; Genesis*

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1. Introduction

“In the Name of God – the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful.”

– The Clear Quran, 1.1

The primary sacred scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the faiths known as the ‘Abrahamic Religions,’ all mention covenants. However, as Joseph E.B. Lumbard points out in his essay “Covenant and Covenants in the Qur’an,” recent scholarship has been more plentiful regarding covenants in the Old and New Testaments than covenants in the Quran. I would add, more specifically, that the Quranic narrative of Abraham and his inclusion in covenants, has not been nearly as thoroughly analyzed as the Biblical Abrahamic Covenant in recent scholarship. This gap is noteworthy as, although the scriptures of these three religions intersect in many regards, their narratives on covenants result in a myriad of perspectives with great influence.

The purpose of this research is to thoroughly analyze the covenants made between Abraham and God as they are described in the Quran and to elaborate upon the means through which these Quranic covenants can be contextualized to one covenant, the Primordial Covenant. In doing so, it will provide references to key verses from the Bible. This is with the intention of adding nuance to interreligious understanding and dialogue, even as the article focuses on the Quran. Though it is certainly necessary to acknowledge the importance of thoroughly researching the Biblical text in order to wholly grasp its meaning, the aim of this paper is to contribute to the literature regarding Abraham and Quranic covenants. This is particularly because there tends to be more existing research regarding the Biblical Abrahamic Covenant. This is not a comparative

study; the utilization of certain verses from the Bible is only meant to showcase the means through which these scriptures may interact with one another.

This paper will argue that Abraham and the Quranic covenants that involve him should not be studied in complete isolation. Rather, they should be studied in the context of other significant Islamic concepts such as *tawhid*, the *fitra*, and submission to God. In order to achieve a thorough analysis of Abraham and Quranic Covenants, this paper will first provide an overview of Islam and the Quran. This is to establish one possible interpretation of Abraham being called a *Muslim* in Verse 3.67, as well as to explain key concepts needed to properly analyze the Quran.

Secondly, this paper will provide a scriptural analysis of verses from the Quran relating to the Primordial Covenant, the Children of Israel, and the Covenant of the Prophets. The third chapter will then explore certain events from Abraham's life in the Quranic narrative to showcase his character and societal background. This paper will not, however, examine the Quranic nor Biblical narrative regarding the story of Abraham and the near-sacrifice of his son because it was not found to be directly relevant to this particular analysis. However, the story's relevance could certainly be argued. The final chapter will then begin with an introduction to verses from the Bible that will later be used as references, and end in a detailed scriptural exploration of the Quranic Covenants established between God and Abraham.

1.1 Islam and the Quran

The term *Islam* is defined by Steingass as 'submit; resign one's self to the will of God' (505). It is derived from the Arabic root س-ل-م (s-l-m), the same root as the Arabic term *salaam* which translates to 'peace' (Kaskas). Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick define a Muslim as "one who has submitted to God's will, or one who follows the religion of Islam" (10). The holy scripture of Islam is the *Quran*, a term that may translate as 'recitation' in English (198). To Muslims, reciting the Arabic Quran is equivalent to reciting the untainted, exact word of God. However, the Quran is only believed to be the word of God in Arabic (10). English translations of the Quran are not perceived as equivalent to the original Arabic, and can furthermore be considered interpreta-

tions of the Quran (10). They are also not perceived as sufficient in expressing its linguistic style (11).

In some translations of the Quran, the word God is used in place of the Arabic *Allah*. For the English reader, the term God may be more familiar. Yet the word *Allah* is also reminiscent of the Aramaic word *Allaha* in the language Jesus spoke (Helwa 5). However, for the sake of the English reader's familiarity, this paper will attempt to mostly utilize the term God, although it will occasionally incorporate translations that have kept *Allah*.

Every prophet, along with their followers, that lived prior to the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad, the Messenger of Islam, could be considered a Muslim because they submitted to God. This concept can specifically be found in the Quran regarding Abraham. The Quran states, "O People of the Scripture, why do you argue about Abraham while the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed until after him? Then will you not reason?" (*The Qur'an: English Meanings and Notes*, 3.65) and "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was one inclining toward truth, a Muslim [submitting to Allah]. And he was not of the polytheists" (3.67).

These verses express the Quranic ideal that Abraham could not have been a Jew nor a Christian since the scriptures of these religions were revealed after him. They indicate that Abraham could, however, be considered a Muslim, perhaps due to his submission to God. This can be seen in Quran Verse 2.131, "When his Lord told him, "Submit," he said, "I have submitted to the Lord of the worlds"" (*The Qur'an With References to the Bible*).

Similarly, the Quran states that Jesus' disciples were Muslims (3.52). This can be seen after the angels tell Mary, "'O Mary, truly God gives thee glad tidings of a Word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, high honored in this world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought nigh" (*The Study Quran*, 3.45). They inform her, "He will speak to people in the cradle and in maturity, and will be among the righteous"" (3.46), that she will have a child even though she has never been touched (3.47), that Jesus will be taught the "the Book, Wisdom, the Torah, and the Gospel" (3.48), be "a messenger to the Children of Israel" and perform specific miracles by "God's Leave" (3.49), and say, "And [I come] confirming that which was before me, the Torah, and to make

lawful unto you part of that which was forbidden unto you. And I have come to you with a sign from your Lord. So reverence God and obey me. Truly God is my Lord and your Lord; so worship Him. This is a straight path” (3.50-51). Verse 3.52 then establishes that the disciples were Muslims, “But when Jesus felt [persistence in] disbelief from them, he said, “Who are my supporters for [the cause of] Allah?” The disciples said, “We are supporters for Allah. We have believed in Allah and testify that we are Muslims [submitting to Him]” (*The Qur’an: English Meanings and Notes*, 3.52). These verses exemplify that the Quranic narrative of Muslims includes those who submitted to God prior to the coming of the formal religion known as Islam today. As C. Jonn Block writes, “In fact, the word Muslim was not originally meant as a delineator of a new religion, but rather an adjective to describe those who had submitted to the straight way of the Judeo-Christian tradition as ...clarified by the Qur’an” (Foreword Two).

This is not to indicate that Islam is solely a universal concept, as the Quran does indicate that Islam is a religion as well, “This day I have perfected for you your religion, and completed My Blessing upon you, and have approved for you as religion, Submission (Islām)” (*The Study Quran*, 5.3). However, it is to indicate that at the heart of the religion of Islam lies submission to God and firm belief in God’s revelations. Verse 3.84 states, “Say, “We believe in God and what He revealed to us and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the tribes, and in what was given to Moses (Musa), Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We do not distinguish between any of them, and we have submitted to Him”” (*The Qur’an With References to the Bible*). Verse 3.64 similarly states, “People of the Book, “Come to a common word between us that we will not worship any but God, and we will not ascribe partners to Him, nor will we take each other as lords in addition to God.” If they turn away, say, “Bear witness that we have submitted to God.””

The Quran mentions it is not the only scripture God has revealed (3.3, 5.46, 3.50, 5.48, 4.47, 46.12) and describes itself as “confirming what is already revealed and a guidance and good news to believers” (*The Qur’an With References to the Bible*, 2.97). It establishes that the Prophet Muhammad is not the only messenger God has sent to mankind:

We indeed sent a messenger unto every community, “Worship God, and shun false deities!” Then among them were those whom God guided; and among them were those who were

deserving of error. So journey upon the earth and behold how the deniers fared in the end! Though thou eagerly desire that they be guided, verily God guides not those who lead astray, and they shall have no helpers. And they swear by God their most solemn oaths [that] God will not resurrect those who die. Nay, but it is a promise binding upon Him, though most of mankind know not. (*The Study Quran*, 16.36-38)

Verse 14.4 similarly states, “We have not sent a messenger except in the language of his people to clarify ‘the message’ for them. Then God leaves whoever He wills to stray and guides whoever He wills. And He is the Almighty, All-Wise” (*The Clear Quran*).

Understanding the Quran to be a reminder is central to understanding Islamic covenant theology. In analyzing the above verses, the Quran firmly establishes that God has sent messen-

“...the Quran firmly establishes that God has sent messengers not to a single community, but to every community, and that at the heart of this message was the consistent reminder of God’s oneness.”

gers not to a single community, but to every community, and that at the heart of this message was the consistent reminder of God’s oneness. However, the Quran states that Muhammad is “the Seal of the prophets” (*The Study Quran*, 33.40), expressing that no divinely appointed prophets will come after him. Muhammad is commonly believed by Muslims to have been a descendant of the Prophet Abraham through one of his sons, the Prophet Ishmael, although both of his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, are considered prophets in Islam.

The Prophet Muhammad is believed to have received The Quran through the Angel Gabriel from 610 to 632 CE (Sinai and Ringgren). It is written in the Quran that the Prophet Muhammad was “unlettered,” (*The Study Quran*, 7.157), which as Maria Massi Dakake explains, is significant because it emphasizes that the Quran had to have been divinely revealed. Dakake writes, “That the Prophet was unable to read and write serves, in Islamic tradition, as a fundamental proof of the miraculous nature of the Quran and the purity of the soul of the Prophet who was the recipient of it (R) and of its Divine provenance, since it would be otherwise impossible for a man who

“...Kaskas explains pronouns such as We, Our, or Us that are used to address God in the Quran do not imply that God has partners,...

had not “studied” earlier works to produce eloquent verses containing knowledge of past peoples and prophets” (460).

Among the scriptures the Quran mentions have been previously revealed is the Torah. The Quran states, “Indeed, We sent down the Torah, in which was guidance and light. The prophets who submitted [to Allah] judged by it for the Jews, as did the rabbis and scholars by that with which they were entrusted of the Scripture of Allah, and they were witnesses

thereto. So do not fear the people but fear Me, and do not exchange My verses for a small price [i.e., worldly gain]. And whoever does not judge by what Allah has revealed – then it is those who are the disbelievers” (*The Qur’an: English Meanings and Notes*, 5.44).

Additionally, the Quran specifically states that the Psalms was given to David (*The Study Quran*, 17.55, 4.163), and that the Gospel was also revealed (3.3, 3.48, 3.65). However, Islam refuses the religious notion of worshipping the trinity as can be inferred from Quran Verses 3.45-51, 3.59, 4.71, 5.116, and 5.72-75. It is rather the concept of *tawhid*, defined by Murata and Chittick as ‘the assertion of God’s unity’ (25) that lies at the heart of the Quran. The Quran constantly repeats that God is one and has no partners, as seen in Verses 112.1-4, “Say: He is God who is Uniquely Singular, Who is Eternal, (the uncaused cause of all that exists), Who has not given birth nor is He born and there is no equivalent to Him” (*The Qur’an With References to the Bible*). As Murata and Chittick point out, “The Koran says specifically that all God’s messengers were charged with tawhid: And We never sent a messenger before thee save that We revealed to him, saying, “There is no god but I, so worship Me.” (21.25)” (25).

It is furthermore significant to note that the Quran utilizes several pronouns to reference God. In explaining the reasoning for this variety, Kaskas references a quote by Mohammad Asad, who writes, “these changes are not accidental, but are obviously deliberate, a linguistic device

meant to stress the idea that God is not a "person" and cannot, therefore, be really circumscribed by the pronouns applicable to finite beings" (Introduction).

Additionally, Kaskas explains pronouns such as *We*, *Our*, or *Us* that are used to address God in the Quran do not imply that God has partners, but that "The "We" is simply the royal plural required in Arabic, and Hebrew as a sign of respect" (Introduction).

The Quran is a scripture that greatly emphasizes God's immense mercy and forgiveness. As Sinai and Ringgren point out, the phrase "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate" (Arabic: *Basmalah*) is placed prior to every chapter of the Quran except for one.

"The Quran is a scripture that tells of the Day of Judgment, when people will be assigned to abide in Paradise or Hell in accordance with how they lived their lives, and it stresses the importance of belief in God and His revelations. "

The Quran expresses that all sins are forgivable to God through repentance, "Say, "O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allah, Indeed, Allah forgives all sins. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful"" (*The Qur'an: English Meanings and Notes*, 5.44). However, the Quran also greatly warns of God's capacity to punish. Verse 41.43 states, "Indeed, your Lord is a possessor of forgiveness and a possessor of painful penalty" and similarly Verses 15.49-50 state, "Inform My servants 'O Prophet' that I am truly the All-Forgiving, Most Merciful, and that My torment is indeed the most painful" (*The Clear Quran*).

The Quran is a scripture that tells of the Day of Judgment, when people will be assigned to abide in Paradise or Hell in accordance with how they lived their lives, and it stresses the importance of belief in God and His revelations. However, the Quran places emphasis on how God's mercy encompasses everything in existence, and the Quran clarifies that this includes His punishment:

“I cause My Punishment to smite whomsoever I will, though My Mercy encompasses all things. I shall prescribe it for those who are reverent, and give alms, and those who believe in Our signs, those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, whom they find inscribed in the Torah and the Gospel that is with them, who enjoins upon them what is right, and forbids them what is wrong, and makes good things lawful for them, and forbids them bad things, and relieves them of their burden and the shackles that were upon them. Thus those who believe in him, honor him, help him, and follow the light that has been sent down with him; it is they who shall prosper.” Say, “O mankind! Truly I am the Messenger of God unto you all—Him to Whom belongs Sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. There is no god but He. He gives life and causes death. So believe in God and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, who believes in God and His Words; and follow him, that haply you may be guided.” (*The Study Quran*, 7.156-157)

2. Covenants in the Quran

“And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ they said, ‘Yea, we bear witness’-- lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, ‘Truly of this we were heedless,’
– *The Study Quran, 7.172*

The English term *covenant* can be understood as the equivalent of the Arabic terms *‘ahd* and *mīthāq*, although these terms can denote other English words of similar meaning, such as “agreement” or “promise” (Ebstein). The term *covenant* itself is defined by George Emery Mendenhall as “a binding promise of far-reaching importance in the relations between individuals, groups, and nations.” This research, however, will only focus upon scriptural covenants established between God and human beings. These types of covenants can be found in both the Quran and the Bible, although they can be understood differently. This research will focus on the Quranic covenant(s) and their relation to Abraham. Quranic covenants are strongly centered on *tawhid*. This is arguably the most important tenet of these covenants and is what binds them all together, just as *tawhid* may be considered the single most important concept in Islam.

2.1 The Primordial Covenant

The Primordial Covenant is central to understanding Islamic covenant theology. It is based on Quran Verse 7.172, which states:

When your Lord took out from the loins of the children of Adam all their descendants, He called upon them to bear witness about themselves, "Am I not your Lord?" To which they answer, "Yes, we bear witness of this." (We remind you of this) so that on the Day of Resurrection, you do not say, "We were unaware of this," (*The Qur'an - with References to the Bible*)

Since all of humanity is believed in Islam to have descended from Adam, this verse establishes that all of humanity has already personally encountered God. Although the Arabic terms for 'covenant' (*ahd* or *mīthāq*) are not used in this verse, the covenant here is clearly expressed. God asks humanity, "Am I not your Lord?" and humanity bears witness to this fact. The next verse discusses the potential implications of breaking this covenant on the Day of Resurrection:

or so that you do not say, "It was our forefathers who began to ascribe divinity to other beings beside God and we were only their children. Will You destroy us because of the falsehoods they invented?" We clearly spell out these messages and (We do it) so that they (those who have sinned) might return (to Us). (*The Qur'an - with References to the Bible*, 7.173-174)

These verses visibly outline three key points: 1) every member of humanity has already personally bore witness that God is their Lord, 2) humanity will be judged by this testimony on the Day of Resurrection, and 3) people should return to their only Lord, their creator, whom they have

"...it is the Islamic conception that human beings are not only born having personally encountered God, but that it is actually their fitra, or innate nature, to worship God alone."

already encountered. This concept of returning can also be seen in a phrase from Verses 2.155-156, "give good news to the steadfast, who say when disaster strikes them, "We belong to God and to Him will return"" (*The Qur'an - with References to the Bible*).

Along with these three points, the Primordial Covenant is significant in understanding a variety of other concepts, most notably the Islamic notion of *fiṭra*, an Arabic term that may be translated to mean ‘innate nature’ or ‘original disposition’ (Hoover). Wadad Kadi Al-Qadi writes, “the Verse of the Covenant is of enormous importance for our understanding of the Qur’ānic vision in human history in that it, first, adds a crucial stage to the stages of human existence known from other verses in the Qur’ān, and, second, offers new reflections on man’s nature, the nature of sin, and the relationship between God and man” (333).

In reflecting upon previous exegesis, Al-Qadi explains the direct relation that exists between the Primordial Covenant and the *fiṭra*. She interprets that God made “each single human being re-enter his father's loins with the Covenant being the last thing he had done, so that when he came again out of his father's loins and mother's womb in the next stage of his existence, on earth, he would come out with the memory of that Covenant imprinted on him and fundamentally defining his nature– the exegetes' *fiṭra*” (336). Furthermore, it is the Islamic conception that human beings are not only born having personally encountered God, but that it is actually their *fiṭra*, or innate nature, to worship God alone.

When human beings are on earth, they may not remember this covenant. In fact, an Arabic term for the word ‘human’ is *insan*, one of its roots being *nasiya*, meaning “forget” (Nurulhaq 167). As Al-Qadi explains, it may be that because human beings are forgetful, God sends them prophets. Al-Qadi writes, “the exegetes all agree that man promised God in a binding fashion to worship him alone as Lord and God; that man might forget his promise; that God would send prophets to man; and that man on the Day of Resurrection will be judged in accordance with his compliance, or lack thereof, with the promise he made in the Covenant” (333). In addition to revelation, it is significant to note that the Quran expresses it is already in mankind’s nature to devote themselves to God. This can be seen in Verses 31.31-32:

Do you not see that the ships sail ‘smoothly’ through the sea by the grace of God so that He may show you some of His signs? Surely in this are signs for whoever is steadfast, grateful. And as soon as they are overwhelmed by waves like mountains, they cry out to God ‘alone’ in sincere devotion. But when He delivers them ‘safely’ to shore, only some be

“...the notion of the *fitra* is key here, because it means that God, being most merciful, made it so that the human being would instinctively remember Him, making the upholding of the covenant far easier on man, because it is already in man’s innate nature, his *fitra*, to uphold it.

come relatively grateful. And none rejects Our signs except whoever is deceitful, ungrateful. (*The Clear Quran*)

When the sailors in this verse are overwhelmed by fear and impending doom, they call upon God alone. These verses exemplify the Islamic notion that there is an instinct in human beings to call upon their Lord in devotion. When the possibility of death encompasses them, it is by instinct that they call upon God. However, when the sailors are returned to shore by the grace of God, many of them do not acknowledge His favor upon them.

It is my view that the notion of the *fitra* is key here, because it means that God, being most merciful, made it so that the human being would instinctively remember Him, making the upholding of the covenant far easier on man, because it is already in man’s innate nature, his *fitra*, to uphold it.

Furthermore, in addition to the reminders sent to humanity to worship God alone, the human being already instinctively does so upon the possibility of returning to Him. Although Verses 31.31-32 do not mention the Primordial Covenant, these two verses seem to exemplify men’s instinctive recognition of and devotion to God, and then later, their forgetfulness, or perhaps even rejection, of this recognition and devotion.

This can be contextualized to the Primordial Covenant, where man encounters God and bears witness that He is their Lord. However, man has a choice to later abide by this covenant or break it, although abiding by the covenant results in an unimaginably great reward and breaking the covenant results in a great consequence. The Quran states that those who turned away from

the remembrance of God will be told on the Day of Judgment, “(God) will say, “Just as Our Signs came to you and you forgot them, in the same way, you too will this Day ...be forgotten” (*The Qur'an - with References to the Bible*, 20.126).

Al-Qadi writes, “God, in an action of mercy, sends over time to various nations prophets and messengers, armed with divine scriptures, who inform people of the necessity to worship the one and only God, and to obey his messengers. To the faithful who heed God's message and obey his messengers, the prophets are bearers of good tidings, and to those who refuse to do so, the prophets are stern warners” (335). This is clearly expressed in Quran Verses 35.23-24, “You, [O Muhammad], are not but a warner. Indeed, We have sent you with the truth as a bringer of good tidings and a warner. And there was no nation but that there had passed within it a warner” (*The Quran: English Meanings and Notes*). It can similarly be seen in Verses 51.55-58, “And remind, for indeed, the reminder benefits the believers. And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me. I do not want from them any provision, nor do I want them to feed Me. Indeed, it is Allah who is the [continual] Provider, the firm possessor of strength” (*The Quran: English Meanings and Notes*).

These verses establish that although God created mankind to worship Him, he does not need mankind to worship Him. On the contrary, people benefit from worshipping God and need Him to provide for them. Verse 39.7 states:

“...Moses is told to pray so that he doesn't forget God, expressing that the establishment of prayer is benefiting Moses.

If you disbelieve, then 'know that' God is truly not in need of you, nor does He approve of disbelief from His servants. But if you become grateful 'through faith', He will appreciate that from you. No soul burdened with sin will bear the burden of another. Then to your Lord is your return, and He will inform you of what you used to do. He certainly knows best what is 'hidden' in the heart. (*The Clear Quran*)

The Quran emphasizes the forgetfulness of mankind and the need for remembrance of God. For example, in Verse 20.14

it is written that God tells Moses, “Indeed, I am Allah. There is no deity except Me, so worship Me and establish prayer for My remembrance” (*The Quran: English Meanings and Notes*). Note here that Moses is told to pray so that *he* doesn’t forget God, expressing that the establishment of prayer is benefiting Moses. Regarding the Primordial Covenant, Lumbard writes:

The Qur’an would appear to refer to existence before human beings are brought into this world, when the spirits of all human beings are said to have been assembled before God on a single plain, just as it is said that they will be assembled on a single plain at the end of time for the Day of Judgement ... And the human response is seen as the everlasting affirmation of this covenant to which human beings are forever beholden and to which they will bear witness on the Day of Judgement ... What one could call the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition is thus seen as a multi-faceted series of temporal manifestations of a single pre-temporal covenant. From this perspective, the function of revelation and prophecy, for which another covenant was made with the prophets, is to reawaken the awareness of this imprint and remind humankind that they must return to observance of the first covenant. (“Covenant and Covenants in the Qur’an” 6-9)

Hence the Primordial Covenant is central to Islamic covenant theology. Although other Quranic covenants seem to carry constituents that are not specifically detailed in the Verse 7.172, they do not violate the Primordial Covenant and remain centered upon the oneness of God. The covenants compliment one another by serving as means to continue upholding monotheism and submission to God alone.

2.2 The Children of Israel and The Covenant of the Prophets

All Quranic covenants between God and human beings are centered upon monotheism. Although the covenants take place in different contexts, they serve to uphold this same core value. For example, the verse regarding the Primordial Covenant is placed directly after Verse 7.171, regarding the covenant God makes with the Children of Israel:

And when We lifted the mountain above them, as if it were a canopy, and they thought it would fall upon them, “Take hold of that which We have given you with strength, and remember what is therein, that haply you may be reverent.” And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, “Am I not your Lord?” they said, “Yea, we bear witness”—lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, “Truly of this we were heedless,” or lest you should say, “[It is] only that our fathers ascribed partners unto God beforehand, and we were their progeny after them. Wilt Thou destroy us for that which the falsifiers have done?” Thus do We expound the signs, that haply they may return. (*The Study Quran* 7:171-7:172)

In analyzing the placement of these verses, the covenant made with the Children of Israel can be seen as a reminder. Lumbard writes, “Q. 7:172 is reminiscent of God’s promise to the Children of Israel at Mount Sinai, and their response in Exodus 24:7, ‘All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient’” (“Covenant and Covenants in the Qur’an” 6). Allen Maller similarly writes, “When the Qur’an (7:171) mentions this same event a second time, when the Mount was moved above the Children of Israel, this verse is followed by a reminder in 7:172 that “children of Adam” were all made (to) bear witness against their own souls” (“Islam And Judaism On God’s Covenant With Banu Israel At Sinai”). The placement of this covenant in scripture, then, may serve to contextualize the covenant that is made with the Children of Israel to the Primordial Covenant that is made with all of humanity to come (the Children of Adam). Seen from the perspective that covenants made on earth are reminders, although the covenant in 7:171 is made with the Children of Israel, they themselves are part of the Children of Adam. The Quran personally addresses the Children of Israel in Verses 2.40-43:

Children of Israel, remember my grace which I gave you. Fulfill your promise, and I will fulfill My promise, as I am the One you should revere. Believe in my revelation, confirming the revelations that you already have. Do not be the first to deny it, and do not barter away my verses for trivial gain, but be mindful of Me. And do not mix truth with error or knowingly hide the truth. Perform prayers, and pay the purifying alms, and kneel together with those who are kneeling. (*The Qur'an - with References to the Bible*, 2.40-43)

The term “remember” is significant in the verse above. The Children of Israel are not being asked to take a new covenant, but to uphold a promise they have already made. However, the Quran not only speaks to the Children of Israel regarding the past and the present, but it also warns them of the Day of Judgment:

O Children of Israel! Remember My Blessing which I bestowed upon you, and that I favored you above the worlds. And be mindful of a day when no soul shall recompense another in any way, nor shall ransom be accepted from it, nor shall intercession benefit it; and they will not be helped. (*The Study Quran*, 2.122-2.123)

Yet the Quran also indicates that among the Children of Israel were those who had broken their covenant:

And [remember] when We made a covenant with the Children of Israel, “Worship none but God; be virtuous toward parents, kinsfolk, orphans, and the indigent; speak to people in a goodly way; and perform the prayer and give the alms.” Then you turned away, save a few of you, swerving aside. (*The Study Quran*, 2.83)

Although the covenant established with the Children of Israel is not the central focus of this paper, the verses above regarding the Children of Israel exemplify the point that although Quranic covenants may be established in various contexts or retain various constituents, they share in their core purpose: they all emphasize God’s oneness. Additionally, Quran Verses 6.151-153 bear similarities to the ten commandments found in the Bible. Muhammad al-Ghazali separates these verses from the Quran into a list of ten clear “commandments,” (135) as follows:

“Say: Come, I will tell you what your Lord has ordained for you.

a. You should not take other gods besides Him.

b. Show kindness towards parents.

c. You should not kill your children for fear of destitution, because We provide for you and for them.

d. Avoid foul sins, overt and covert.

e. Do not kill a soul that God has forbidden to be killed, without the right justification to do

- so. This is what He urges you to do, so that you may understand.
- f. You have no right to any of an orphan's possessions, except what is required for his [her] own wellbeing, until he [she] comes of age.
- g. Observe fairness and justice in weights and measures; We never burden a soul with more than it can bear.
- h. Judge fairly and testify to the truth, even against your own kinsmen.
- i. Be true to the covenant of God. This is what He urges you to do, so that you may take heed.
- j. And, this is My path, a straight one. Follow it and do not follow other paths, for these shall lead you away from it. This is what He urges you to do, so that you may be fearful of God. (151-153)" (134-135).

Perhaps relevant here is Ex. 34.27-28, "And the LORD said unto Moses, Write thou these words: for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel. And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. *And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments*" (*King James Bible Online*; emphasis added). Moses, along with other prophets, is mentioned to be in a distinct covenant in the Quran:

And 'remember' when We took a covenant from the prophets, as well as from you 'O Prophet', and from Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, son of Mary. We did take a solemn covenant from 'all of' them so that He may question these men of truth about their 'delivery of the' truth. And He has prepared a painful punishment for the disbelievers. (*The Clear Quran*, 33:7-8)

Although the prophets are involved in their own covenant, this verse establishes that a key part of their role in this covenant is to deliver the truth. This covenant Moses takes is the same as the one Noah, Abraham, Jesus, and Muhammad take. Furthermore, Mendenhall expresses that the prophets are unified in their message that one should worship God alone, "All revelation from Adam to Muhammad is regarded by Muslims as a unit, mediated through a series of prophets, or messengers, with whom God made a covenant: Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Though the concept is difficult, it seems that the prophet in each case was given a revelation and a religion to

“The Prophet Abraham can be seen in several Quranic covenants, and he is portrayed as a role model of submission to God.

which he covenanted with God to witness faithfully. This concept of a covenant of the prophets conveys the conviction of the unity of revelation as well as the unity of God in past history.”

A second mention of the covenant made with the prophets can be seen in Verse 3.81: And [remember] when God made the covenant of the prophets:

“By that which I have given you of a Book and Wisdom, should a messenger then come to you confirming that which is with you, you shall surely believe in him and you shall help him.” He said, “Do you agree and take on My burden on these conditions?” They said, “We agree.” He said, “Bear witness, for I am with you among those who bear witness.” (*The Study Quran*)

Verse 3.81 may serve to express that the prophets are bound together in a sense by this covenant. The Prophet Abraham can be seen in several Quranic covenants, and he is portrayed as a role model of submission to God. Verse 3.95 states, “Say, “God has spoken the Truth; therefore, follow the creed of Abraham, a monotheist. He was not an idolater,” (*The Qur'an - with References to the Bible*).

Verse 16.123 states, “And We have given you inspiration, (Prophet): “Follow the faith of Abraham, who turned from every false thing, and who was not among the idolaters,” and Verse 3.67 states, “Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was one inclining toward truth, a Muslim [submitting to Allah]. And he was not of the polytheists” (*The Qur'an: English Meanings and Notes*). These verses repetitively emphasize that Abraham was not an idolater or polytheist, consistently re-emphasizing the importance of *tawhid*. Abraham’s submission to God can also be seen in Quran Verses 2.132-133:

Abram commanded his sons to do the same as did Jacob, “Sons, your God is One, He has chosen this faith for you, so do not die unless you have submitted to Him.” Or were you witnesses when Jacob was on his deathbed, when he asked his sons, “What will you wor-

“...Believers, be patient in hard times, and encourage each other to endure, and always be ready.

ship after I die?” They said, “We will worship your God and the God of your fathers Abram and Ishmael and Isaac. (He is) one God and We have submitted to Him.” (*The Qur'an - with References to the Bible*)

Thus, the Quran portrays Abraham and his offspring specified in this verse as Muslims, because they submitted to God.

Those who were followers of the previous revelations, frequently referred to as “The People of the Book” in the Quran, could choose to accept God’s revelations or reject them. The Quran states, “They are not all alike. Among the People of the Book are upright people, reading God’s verses all night as they bow down. They believe in God and the Last Day, order what is right, forbid what is wrong, and they are quick to do good deeds. They are righteous. The good they do will not be forgotten. God knows those who are mindful of Him” (3.113-115). However, the Quran also discusses how the Christians and Israelites broke their covenants (5.13-14). They are addressed in Verse 5.15, “O People of the Book! Now Our Messenger has come to you, revealing much of what you have hidden of the Scriptures and disregarding much. There certainly has come to you from God a light and a clear Book” (*The Clear Quran*) and Verse 5.19 states, “O People of the Book! Our Messenger has indeed come to you, making things clear to you after an interval between the messengers so you do not say, “There has never come to us a deliverer of good news or a warner.” Now there has come to you a deliverer of good news and a warner. And God is Most

The Quran furthermore emphasizes that prophets were sent to all communities, and at the heart of their divinely sent message was the command that people worship God alone. In doing so, human beings would be upholding the testimony that they made prior to their existence on earth.

Capable of everything.”

The Quran furthermore emphasizes that prophets were sent to all communities, and at the heart of their divinely sent message was the command that people worship God alone. In doing so, human beings would be upholding the testimony that they made prior to their existence on earth. The Quran makes it clear that God is loving towards those who believe and are righteous:

“Surely those who believe and perform righteous deeds, for them shall the Compassionate ordain love” (*The Study Quran*, 19.96). Verses 13.27-29 similarly express this concept, “And the unbelievers say, “Why has a sign not been sent down to him from his Lord?” Say, “God lets go astray him who wills as He guides to Himself whoever turns (to Him). Those who have believed and whose hearts are assured by the remembrance of God. Truly, hearts find peace only in the remembrance of God.” Those who have believed and done righteous deeds—joy and a blessed (final) return will await them” (*The Qur'an - with References to the Bible*). Regarding the People of the Book, Verses 3.199-200 state, “Among the People of the Book are those who believe in God and what was revealed to you and what was revealed to them. They stand in awe of God; they do not barter God’s messages for trivial gain. They have their reward from their Lord: God is quick in settling accounts. Believers, be patient in hard times, and encourage each other to endure, and always be ready. Remain mindful of God, so you may prosper.”

Yet the Quran also serves as a warning, emphasizing that one should not break their covenant. Verse 2.27 of the Quran states, “Those who break God’s Pact after accepting His Covenant, and sever what God has commanded be joined, and work corruption upon the earth, it is they who are the losers” (*The Study Quran*) and Verse 13.25 of the Quran is similar in that states,

“But those who break the covenant of God after agreeing to it, and sever that which God has ordered to be joined, and spread corruption on earth—for them is the curse, and they will have the Worst Home (in Hell). God extends or restricts sustenance to whom He wills. They rejoice in the life of this world, but it is simply a passing pleasure compared to the Hereafter” (*The Qur'an - with References to the Bible*).

3. Abraham in the Quran

***“Truly, Abraham was forbearing, tender-hearted,
and ever turning ‘to his Lord’.”***

– The Clear Quran, 11.75

The Quranic narrative of Abraham portrays him as a man of reason and faith, who wholly submits to God and does not blindly follow the religion of his forefathers. It is clearly written in the Quran that Abraham initially lives in a society that worships idols. However, Abraham is not convinced that these idols can be gods. Verses 26.69-82 state:

Relate to them ‘O Prophet’ the story of Abraham, when he questioned his father and his people, “What is that you worship ‘besides God’?” They replied, “We worship idols, to which we are fully devoted.” Abraham asked, “Can they hear you when you call upon them? Or can they benefit or harm you?” They replied, “No! But we found our forefathers doing the same.” Abraham responded, “Have you ‘really’ considered what you have been worshipping— you and your ancestors? They are ‘all’ enemies to me, except the Lord of all worlds. ‘He is’ the One Who created me, and He ‘alone’ guides me. ‘He is’ the One Who provides me with food and drink. And He ‘alone’ heals me when I am sick. And He ‘is the One Who’ will cause me to die, and then bring me back to life. And He is ‘the One’ Who, I hope, will forgive my flaws on Judgment Day.” (*The Clear Quran*)

Similarly, Verses 6.74-75 state, “And when Abraham said unto his father, Azar, “Do you take idols for gods? Truly I see you and your people in manifest error.” Thus did We show Abraham the

dominion of the heavens and the earth, that he might be among those possessing certainty” (*The Study Quran*). In her commentary on Verse 6.75, Dakake writes,

That God showed Abraham *the dominion of the heavens and the earth* may mean simply that Abraham witnessed the wondrous phenomena of the celestial and terrestrial realms that are also visible to human beings in general. The Quran indicates elsewhere that anyone who observes and reflects upon these phenomena with sincerity and a sound mind should come to the conclusion that there is an all-powerful God who is One (cf. 10:101; 34:9). Since Abraham was given *sound judgment* by God (21:51), he was able to apply reason to his observations of the world around him in order to arrive at the reality of monotheism (IK) ...God’s showing Abraham *the dominion of the heavens and the earth* is, however, more widely associated with a miraculous and revelatory journey in which God split open the heavens, allowing Abraham to see all its levels up to the Divine Throne itself, and cleaved the earth so that he could see to its lowest level (IK, R, Ṭū, Z). (368-369)

Following Dakake’s interpretation, Verse 10.101 of the Quran states, “Say, “Observe that which is in the heavens and on the earth.” But neither signs nor warnings avail a people who believe not” (*The Study Quran*) and Verse 34.9 states, “Have they not considered that which is before them and that which is behind them of the sky and the earth? If We will, We cause the earth to engulf them or fragments from the sky to fall upon them. Truly in that is a sign for every penitent servant.”

“These verses exemplify the Quranic notion that to be a believer is to be in line with reason, that to be a disbeliever is to be against reason, and Abraham demonstrates this concept.

These verses exemplify the Quranic notion that to be a believer is to be in line with reason, that to be a disbeliever is to be against reason, and Abraham demonstrates this concept. Verse 6.75 can perhaps also be connected to Verse 13.27, “And the unbelievers say, “Why has a sign not been sent down to him from his Lord?” Say, “God lets go astray him who wills as He guides to Himself whoever turns (to Him)”” (*The Qur'an - with References to the Bible*). Abraham does not refuse

the act of worship, but he refuses the act of worshipping that which is not God. He searches for the truth, and God guides Abraham to the truth. Verses 6.76-83 describe a scene of Abraham examining the night sky and then debating with his people:

When the night grew dark upon him, he saw a star. He said, "This is my Lord!" But when it set, he said, "I love not things that set." Then when he saw the moon rising he said, "This is my Lord!" But when it set, he said, "If my Lord does not guide me, I shall surely be among the people who are astray." Then when he saw the sun rising he said, "This is my Lord! This is greater!" But when it set, he said, "O my people! Truly I am quit of the partners you ascribe. Truly, I have turned my face toward Him Who created the heavens and the earth, and I am not of the idolaters. His people disputed with him. He said, "Do you dispute with me concerning God, when He has guided me? I fear not the partners you ascribe unto Him, save as my Lord wills. My Lord encompasses all things in Knowledge. Will you not, then, remember? How should I fear the partners you ascribe, when you do not fear ascribing partners unto God for which He has sent down to you no authority? So which of the two parties has greater right to security, if you know? Those who believe and who do not obscure their belief through wrongdoing, it is they who have security, and they are rightly guided." That was Our argument, which We gave unto Abraham against his people. We raise in degrees whomsoever We will. Truly thy Lord is Wise, Knowing. (The Study Quran)

Amira Elias interprets Abraham's examination of the night sky to mean that "Abraham through his own efforts and desire to know the truth, speculated upon the possibility of each of the heavenly bodies being the source of creation, the stars, the moon, and the sun. But when each proved to be a temporary created being Abraham then was convinced that his God must be greater, thus he finally discovered the truth, he found his True God" (59). This could perhaps be generally linked to the Arabic phrase used by Muslims, *Allahu Akbar*, meaning 'God is greater' or 'God is the greatest' since Abraham realizes nothing could be greater than the creator of the heavens and the earth. However, Dakake points out that Verses 6.76-78 have also been interpreted to be "Abraham's rhetorical argument against his people's idolatry" (369), and that this could be a more suitable interpretation when contextualized with other verses.

Abraham is also called a *hanif* in Verse 6.79, as well as a *Muslim* in the Verse 3.67. Just as Abraham is referred to as a *hanif*, the Quran instructs those who believe to act as a *hanif*. Verses 30.30-31, “Set thy face to religion as a hanif, in the primordial nature from God upon which He originated mankind—there is no altering the creation of God; that is the upright religion, but most of mankind know not—turning unto Him. And reverence Him and perform the prayer; and be not among the idolaters” (*The Study Quran*). Lumbard writes, “To be a *hanif* is thus to be a pure monotheist, to have pure unswerving faith and hence to live in conformity with the primordial norm according to which all human beings have been created. One cannot change this underlying nature, because *there is no altering the creation of God*. To accept this truth and live in accord with one’s fundamental primordial nature is thus considered to be the foundation and substance of true worship” (“The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions” 1772).

Lumbard writes, “To be a hanif is thus to be a pure monotheist, to have pure unswerving faith and hence to live in conformity with the primordial norm according to which all human beings have been created.”


Following Lumbard’s analysis, it is my view that the above verses from the Quran signify how Abraham follows the innate nature, *fitra*, that exists in all human beings by submitting to God and refusing to associate anything with him. He rejects what his forefathers worship and worships God alone, upholding the testimony made by humanity in the Primordial Covenant. It is interesting to also then consider that one of the questions Abraham asks the idolaters in Verse 6.80 is, “Will you not, then, remember?” (*The Study Quran*)

This question is asked several times throughout the Quran, which in my view, could serve to emphasize the forgetfulness of the human being, the *insan*, and their need for the remembrance of God, as well as their capacity to remember God. Abraham urges his father to follow God’s guidance. He says:

O my father! Verily knowledge has come unto me that has not come unto you. So follow me, and I shall guide you upon a sound path. O my father! Worship not Satan; surely Satan is disobedient toward the Compassionate. O my father! Truly I fear that a punishment from the Compassionate will befall you, such that you will become a friend of Satan.” (*The Study Quran*, 19.43-45)

Abraham’s father then threatens him in response, “He said, “Do you reject my gods, O Abraham? If you cease not, I shall surely stone you. Take leave of me for a long while!”” (19.46) Abraham then responds:

He said, “Peace be upon you! I shall seek forgiveness for you from my Lord. Verily He has been gracious unto me. And I withdraw myself from you and that which you call upon apart from God. And I call upon my Lord; it may be that in calling upon my Lord, I will not be wretched.” (19.47-48)

 **...We made them leaders guiding others by Our command. And we inspired them to do good deeds, to establish prayer, and to give the purifying alms; they were our true worshippers.**

However, the Quran refers back to this event in Chapter 9, “Abraham’s prayer that his father would be forgiven was due to a promise that he had given his father. However, when it became clear to him that his father was one of God’s enemies, he renounced him, even though Abraham was tender-hearted, tolerant. God would not lead astray those He has already guided to the faith, unless He first makes it entirely clear to them what they should avoid. God knows everything” (*The Qur’an - with References to the Bible*, 9.114-115).

Abraham tells people that their Lord “is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, Who originated them” (*The Study Quran*, 21.56) and tries to demonstrate to his society’s people that idols cannot be divine. In Verse 21.58, it is written that Abraham breaks the idols, except for the largest one.

When Abraham is asked whether it is he who broke them in Verse 21.62, he responds “Nay, but it was the largest of them that did this. So question them, if they speak!” (21.63).

When the people say the idols cannot speak (21.65), Abraham responds, “He said, “Then do you worship what does not help or harm you at all instead of God? Shame on you, and shame on what you worship instead of God. Will you not use reason then?”” (*The Qur'an - with References to the Bible*, 21.66-67) and in response, the people attempt to burn Abraham in a fire:

They said, “Burn him and support your gods — if you are to act.” But We said, “Fire, be coolness and peace for Abraham.” And they intended to harm him, but We made them the greatest losers. And We delivered him and Lot to the land which We had blessed for all people. And We gave him Isaac and Jacob as an additional gift, and all (of them) We made righteous. We made them leaders guiding others by Our command. And we inspired them to do good deeds, to establish prayer, and to give the purifying alms; they were our true worshippers. (21.68-73)

4. Abraham and Covenants

“God chose Abraham as a close friend”

– The Clear Quran, 4.125

Similarities can be seen in the Biblical and Quranic narratives of Abraham, yet there lies a key difference in that the Quran mentions more than one covenant established with Abraham, wherein these covenants may be contextualized to the Primordial Covenant that was made with all of the descendants of the Children of Adam. The Quran also states that a covenant was made with Adam himself, “And indeed, We once made a covenant with Adam, but he forgot, and ‘so’ We did not find determination in him” (The Clear Quran, 20.115). Although the Biblical narrative of the Abrahamic Covenant is not the topic of this research, quotes from Genesis (Gen.) will serve as an overview for readers to reference in their quest towards understanding the Quranic narrative.

4.1 The Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis: Key Verses From the Bible

In Gen. 12.2-3, God says to Abram, “And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (*King James Bible Online*).

Gen. 15.18-21 establish the making of a covenant between Abram and God, “In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates: The Kenites, and the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, And the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaims, And the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

In Gen. 17:3-8, the covenant is mentioned again and Abram is renamed, “And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

Gen. 17:19-21 discuss Isaac and Ishmael, “And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.”

And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.”

4.2 Covenants Between God and Abraham in the Quran: A Detailed Exploration

The Quran establishes that Isaac was a prophet, “Then We gave him the good news of Isaac, a prophet from among the righteous, and We blessed him and Isaac. Among their descendants are those who do good, and those who clearly wrong themselves” (*The Qur'an - with References to the Bible*, 37.112-113). The Quran also establishes that Ishmael was a prophet, “And mention in the Book, Ishmael. He was true to his promise, and he was a messenger and a prophet. He used to order his people to pray and to give the purifying alms and he found favor with His Lord” (19.54-55). Similar to Gen. 12.2, where it is written that God tells Abraham he will be made “a great nation,” the Quran mentions a promise made to Abraham in Verse 2.124. However, this promise is not that Abraham will be made into a nation, but rather, that he will be made an *imam*:

And [remember] when his Lord tried Abraham with [certain] words, and he fulfilled them. He said, “I am making you an *imam* for mankind.” He said, “And of my progeny?” He said, “My covenant does not include the wrongdoers.” (*The Study Quran*, 2.124; emphasis added)

“And mention in the Book, Ishmael. He was true to his promise, and he was a messenger and a prophet. He used to order his people to pray and to give the purifying alms and he found favor with His Lord”.

Abraham here is told that he will be made an *imam*, a term that is commonly understood to mean ‘leader’ (Dagli 57). However, when Abraham asks God about his progeny, God’s response is that wrongdoers are not included in His covenant. This re-emphasizes the Quranic notion that each member of humanity will be judged as an individual, and no one will be held accountable for the actions of their forefathers.

Dagli writes, “The response to Abraham’s prayer means that a wrongdoer or tyrant would not deserve a covenant with God and could not rightly be an *imām*; or it means that such a person could be an *imām*, but an *imām* who does wrong would not receive the promise of the Hereafter; or it can simply be read as meaning that not all of Abraham’s descendants would be virtuous, as in 37:113: *And We blessed him and Isaac. And among their progeny are the virtuous and*

those who clearly wrong themselves (٢) (57). Furthermore, although the Quran does not state Abraham will be made “into a great nation” as seen previously in Gen. 12.2, Maller points out that the Quran does state Abraham was a nation or *ummah* (“The Qur’an States: Abraham Was A Nation Dutiful To God”).

Ummah has also been translated as ‘community.’ Verse 16.120 states, “Truly Abraham was a community, devoutly obedient to God, a *hanif*, and he was not among the idolaters” (*The Study Quran*).

Verse 2.125 mentions the establishment of another covenant between God and Abraham, yet this covenant explicitly mentions his son Ishmael, “And [remember] when We made the House a place of visitation for mankind, and a sanctuary, “Take the station of Abraham as a place of prayer.” And We made a covenant with Abraham and Ishmael, “Purify My House for those who circumambulate, those who make retreat, and those who bow and prostrate”” (*The Study Quran*). The House mentioned here is understood to be the Kaaba (Dagli 57), which is known in Islamic tradition to have first been built by Adam and then rebuilt by Abraham (Chittick and Murata 15). Muslims must make a pilgrimage to the Kaaba, located in Mecca, at least once in their lifetime, if they are capable (48-49). The Quran states:

Say, “God has spoken the Truth; therefore, follow the creed of Abraham, a monotheist. He was not an idolater. The first house of worship established for people was the one in Bakka. It is blessed and a source of guidance to humanity. In it are signs and miracles. It was the place where Abraham stood. Whoever entered it was safe. Pilgrimage to the House is a duty owed to God by all people who can find a way to do it. But if anyone decides to reject the truth, (they should know that) God is rich beyond need of the worlds. (*The Qur'an - with References to the Bible*, 3.96-97)

**Abraham and
Ishmael’s prayer to
be Muslims and for a
Muslim nation from
among their descendants
here is centered upon
upholding monotheism
and submission to God.**

The covenant that is made with Abraham and Ishmael in Verse 2.125 is centered upon upholding monotheism, as Abraham and Ishmael are purifying the Kaaba “for those who circumambulate, those who make retreat, and those who bow and prostrate” (*The Study Quran*, 2.125; emphasis added), expressing that this covenant serves the purpose of providing believers with a pure place to assemble in their worship of God. Verse 2.126 further emphasizes the significance of monotheism and the reality of resurrection, “And [mention] when Abraham said, “My Lord, make this a secure city and provide its people with fruits - whoever of them believes in Allah and the Last Day.” [Allah] said, “And whoever disbelieves - I will grant him enjoyment for a little; then I will force him to the punishment of the Fire, and wretched is the destination”” (*The Qur’an: English Meanings and Notes*).

Abraham’s prayer in the above verse is specifically for believers, and God reminds Abraham of the fate of the disbelievers. Verses 2.127-128 then state:

And [mention] when Abraham was raising the foundations of the House and [with him] Ishmael, [saying], “Our Lord, accept [this] from us. Indeed, You are the Hearing, the Knowing. Our Lord, and make us Muslims [in submission] to You and from our descendants a Muslim nation [in submission] to You. And show us our rites [of worship] and accept our repentance. Indeed, You are the Accepting of Repentance, the Merciful. (*The Qur’an: English Meanings and Notes*)

Abraham and Ishmael's prayer to be Muslims and to have a Muslim nation from among their descendants here is centered upon upholding monotheism and submission to God. Since, from the Islamic view, these events are being told as past events to the Prophet Muhammad, Verse 2.129 also expresses that Abraham and Ishmael’s prayers were foretelling of his prophethood:

Our Lord, raise up in their midst a messenger from among them, who will recite Thy signs to them, and will teach them the Book and Wisdom, and purify them. Truly Thou art the Mighty, the Wise.” (*The Study Quran*)

Dagli points out the Prophet Muhammad is described exactly in Verse 2.151, “even as We sent among you a messenger from among you, who recites Our signs to you and purifies you, and

teaches you the Book and Wisdom, and teaches you what you knew not” (*The Study Quran*). He also links Verse 2.129 to Verse 4.54, “Or do they envy men on account of what God has given them of His Bounty? We gave the House of Abraham the Book and Wisdom, and We granted them a mighty sovereignty.” (*The Study Quran*; emphasis added).

Verses 2.127-128 may also perhaps be connected to Verse 22.78:

And strive for God as He should be striven for. He has chosen [for] you—and has placed no hardship for you in the religion—the *creed of your father Abraham*. He named you muslims aforetime, and herein, that the Messenger may be a witness for you, and that you may be witnesses for mankind. So perform the prayer and give the alms, and hold fast to God. He is your Master. How excellent a Master, and how excellent a Helper! (*The Study Quran*; emphasis added)

“...Abraham, being a strict monotheist in submission to God, is an exemplary leader, so much so that he could be considered a nation.

In analyzing the above verses, it can be inferred that the covenant made with Abraham and Ishmael, though established in a different context, shares the same purpose as the other covenants made in the Quran: to uphold monotheism and submission to God alone. Isaiah 51.2 similarly refers to Abraham as a father, “Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah *that bare you*: for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him” (*King James Bible Online*).

In summary, the Quran describes Abraham as a *muslim* (3.67), a *hanif* (6.79, 16.120, 16.123, 2.135), an *ummah* (16.120), and an *imam* (2.124). In connecting these terms, it can be understood that Abraham, being a strict monotheist in submission to God, is an exemplary leader, so much so that he could be considered a nation.

From an Islamic point of view, Abraham and Ishmael’s prayers for a Muslim *ummah* and a messenger from their descendants could serve as foretelling of Muhammad, the Messenger of Is-

lam, and his followers, which constitute the muslim nation or *ummah*. Although Gen. 17.19-21 establish that God will make a covenant with Isaac, a similarity between the scriptures here may be that God promises Ishmael a nation in the Bible, though it is written in a different context and as a response to Abraham's prayer, "And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation" (*King James Bible Online*).

The Islamic notion of covenants expresses that all members of humanity have already taken a covenant primordially, thus making the covenants established on earth first and foremost reminders of an unchanging message that God is one and only He deserves to be worshiped. Although the Quran mentions covenants established on smaller, yet still highly significant scales, as can be seen in the Quranic covenant made with the Children of Israel, all of the covenants are related in their core purpose.

The Primordial Covenant establishes that all the descendants of Adam, namely, all of humanity, have each individually borne witness to God's Lordship. This immediately establishes that all of the Children of Adam have taken a covenant that is universal—everyone is included in it so long as they uphold it. As Lombard excellently explains:

The multiple covenants envisioned by Qur'anic exegetes unfold in three phases: the first phase is the primordial, pre-temporal general covenant made by God with all human beings when they were taken from the loins of Adam; the second phase is the particular covenant made by God with the prophets, that they will call people to worship and thus back to observance of the first covenant and that they will affirm the covenants with which other prophets are sent. This second phase then prepares the way for the third phase, the phase on this earth, wherein human beings take one of the particular covenants, with which God has sent the prophets, as a recognition and renewal of the general covenant that they had made before time. ("Covenant and Covenants in the Qur'an" 15)

The concept that everyone is responsible in upholding their covenant as an individual is emphasized in Verse 2.124, wherein Abraham asks about his offspring, and God replies that wrongdoers

are not included in God's covenant, as well as in Verse 2.126, "And [mention] when Abraham said, "My Lord, make this a secure city and provide its people with fruits - whoever of them believes in Allah and the Last Day." [Allah] said, "And whoever disbelieves - I will grant him enjoyment for a little; then I will force him to the punishment of the Fire, and wretched is the destination"" (*The Qur'an: English Meanings and Notes*). Furthermore, the Quran emphasizes that people will only be judged by their own actions. The Quran states,

Truly God commands justice, virtue, and giving to kinsfolk, and He forbids indecency, wrong, and rebelliousness. And He admonishes you, that haply you may remember. Fulfill the pact of God when you have pledged it, and break not your oaths after solemnly affirming them, and having made God a Witness over you. Surely God knows whatsoever you do. Be not like she who unravels her yarn, breaking it after it had been strong [by] taking your oaths to practice deception among yourselves, so that one community might be larger and wealthier than another. God only tries you thereby. And on the Day of Resurrection, He will surely clarify for you that wherein you differed. Had God willed, He would have made you one community. But He leads astray whomsoever He will and guides whomsoever He will. And you shall surely be questioned about that which you used to do. (*The Study Quran*, 16.90-93)

“The Primordial Covenant establishes that all the descendants of Adam, namely, all of humanity, have each individually borne witness to God’s Lordship. This immediately establishes that all of the Children of Adam have taken a covenant that is universal– everyone is included in it so long as they uphold it.”

Conclusion

The Quran offers a universal perspective on covenants by describing a primordial event in which the descendants of the Children of Adam all bear witness that God is their Lord. This event results in human beings being born with the *fitra*, having previously known their Lord and testified to it. This signifies that God has taken a covenant from everyone, yet, since human beings are forgetful, prophets and messengers are sent to remind them to submit to God alone.

Furthermore, all of the Quranic covenants made between God and human beings are centered upon monotheism and submission to God. Abraham is a role model for this practice as he refuses to follow the religion of his forefathers blindly, and instead, upholds the testimony made by human beings primordially.

The Quran expresses that Abraham, though raised in a society that practices idolatry, delivers the truth of monotheism to his father and his people. He later becomes the father of two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, both of whom the Quran states were prophets. The Quran details a covenant made with Abraham and Ishmael, in which they are commanded to purify the House, generally understood to signify the Kaaba in present-day Mecca. From an Islamic point of view, it could be understood that Abraham and Ishmael's prayers for a Muslim nation and messenger were answered in the coming of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers, the Muslim *ummah*.

“The Quranic narrative regarding covenants tends towards the judgment of the individual, stressing that those who believe and are righteous have maintained their covenant and will be met with reward, and those who commit evil and break their covenant will be met with consequences.”

Although the Biblical narrative of Abraham does not include certain events found in the Quran and vice versa, these scriptures share similarities in addition to their differences. The Quranic narrative regarding covenants tends towards the judgment of the individual, stressing that

those who believe and are righteous have maintained their covenant and will be met with reward, and those who commit evil and break their covenant will be met with consequences. The Quranic narrative of Abraham exemplifies this notion, as Abraham is not held accountable for his father's actions, and evildoers amongst Abraham's offspring are not rewarded for Abraham's good deeds. Following the mention of "Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and The Tribes" in Verse 2.140 (*The Study Quran*), The Quran states:

That is a nation which has passed on. It will have [the consequence of] what it earned, and you will have what you have earned. And you will not be asked about what they used to do. (*The Quran: English Meanings and Notes*, 2.141)

In summary, the Quran portrays Abraham as blessed, truthful, in submission to God, and an *imam* for mankind. Abraham demonstrates pure monotheism as a *hanif*, meaning he is in line with the *fitra*, or innate nature that all human beings possess, yet many have strayed from. The *fitra* can be understood in relation to the Primordial Covenant, where humanity bore witness that God is their Lord. Abraham, being a truthful prophet, strives to remind people that they should worship God alone. Therefore, the most essential purpose of the covenants established between God and Abraham is strict monotheism.

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Commentator Key*

IK	‘Imād al-Dīn Abu’l-Fidā’ Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Umar ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm
R	Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), al-Tafsīr al-kabīr, also known as Mafātīḥ al-ghayb
Ṭū	Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān
Z	Abu’l-Qāsim Maḥmūd ibn ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), al-Kashshāf ‘an ghawāmiḍ ḥaqā’iq al-tanzīl wa ‘uyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-ta’wīl
Ṭ	Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), Jāmi‘ al- bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān

* From *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*

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