



ABRAHAM

A STORY OF TRUE SUBMISSION

by Hakan Yesilova

Imagine a situation where you have no choice but have to sacrifice your only child – your precious, who came late in your life as a great surprise.

Or think of yourself rejected by your father and your community because of your out-of-the-box beliefs that challenged theirs, and you have only a few who believe in you.

And just for good measure, add to these the wrath of the ruthless ruler of your land who has declared you his archenemy.

This would be more or less a very brief summary of the story of the great patriarch Abraham, peace be upon him, as told in the holy scriptures. Considered as one of the key figures in the history of monotheism, Abraham holds a very central role in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. Today, his mission is being revitalized through interfaith meetings and panels where his legacy is discussed from the perspectives of different traditions, in the hopes of creating friendships across faiths. I had the opportunity of participating in some of these events in recent years and, while making new friends, I have also been able to see *my* Abraham in the eyes of friends from *other* traditions. At a time when we are challenged by polarizations, it is hope-inspiring to see many communities striving to build bridges and treating diversity as a source of richness.

What you will be reading below is an effort to share some reflections on this great man, whose life can by no means be retold within the limited scope of an article.

Abraham in the Muslim neighborhood

Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic and Turkish) is a commonplace name of Muslim cultural makeup, as many of our religious values are. Abraham and his family are remembered, praised, and prayed for by Muslims in their daily prescribed prayers, during the annual festival of sacrifice (*eid al-adha*), and also when performing the Hajj, which is the pilgrimage to the holy land of Mecca.

“Abraham” is a popular name across Muslim communities. And especially in places like Urfa, Turkey, Halil and Ibrahim are the most common names given to boys. “Halil” literally means friend and is one of the distinctive attributes of Abraham.

The historical city of Urfa, on the Turkish-Syrian border, is dedicated almost entirely to the memory of Abraham. Balıklı Göl, or Abraham’s Pool, one of the most visited ancient sites in this city, is believed to be the place where he was thrown into fire, and by God’s will, the fire turned “cool and peaceful” for him. According to the legend, the logs that were used in the furnace turned to fish, which still exist today.

Many restaurants across Turkey have the name “Halil Ibrahim Sofrası,” which is an allusion to the generous hospitality Abraham used to show his



Abraham holds a very central role in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. Today, his mission is being revitalized through interfaith meetings. Top: Clergy and representatives from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities at an interfaith prayer event at Congregation B'nai Israel in Emerson, New Jersey. Bottom: Congregation B'nai Israel members visited Boshniak American Mosque in Elmwood Park, NJ.

guests. In Turkish folk culture, it is told that he would not eat without having a guest at his table, and if there was no one, he would go out to find one.

Stories attributed to Abraham

Some of the moral stories recorded in religious literature and discussed in reading circles are believed to have been first told in the scriptures that were revealed to Abraham. Prominent Islamic scholar Bediüzzaman Said Nursi noted that the story he narrates and expounds on in his 8th Word in the *Risale-i Nur* collection did originally exist in the “scrolls” of Abraham. Also told as an “Eastern fable” by famous novelist Leo Tolstoy in his *Confession* (1884), Bediüzzaman paraphrased this story for the purpose of his religious wisdom, turning the “traveler” in the story into two brothers, one obedient and wise and the other rebellious. In Bediüzzaman’s version, the two brothers aim to reach the same destination but choose different paths; and as they go along, they are both challenged by the same ordeals (like escaping from a beast and trying to survive in a well); the way they respond to these challenges are indicative of their character and choices.

Bediüzzaman’s version reads like a lesson on the fate of two characters,

the wicked and the prosperous, in the *al-A’la* Chapter of the Qur’an. This parable is recorded as “Man in Well” in the legend of two Christian martyrs from India, Barlaam and Josaphat, and in other earlier versions in Buddhist literature, too (Bilici 2014). Joseph Jacobs wrote that this parable “was one of the most popular morals of mediaeval sermonisers. Indeed, it puts in a most vivid form the most central practical doctrine of both Christian and Buddhistic Ethics. The supreme attraction of the pleasures of the senses amidst all the dangers of life and the perpetual threat of death has never been more vividly expressed” (Jacobs, 1896, p. lxx).

As we have no access to the scrolls of Abraham, we cannot prove whether such stories originally date back to him or not. However, considering the widespread existence of this parable across different traditions, if we are to credit it to a historical figure, Abraham is certainly the best fit.

Another story attributed to Abraham goes that he was once again hosting a guest. As he started eating, he called the name of God first, while his guest did not. Abraham asked him why he did not say God’s name first, to which his guest replied that he was a fire-worshipper. Abraham showed the

man the door. Then, God asked Abraham why he did so. “He denied You, my Lord.” God said, “That man has been denying Me his entire life, and I am still feeding him.”

Whether this really took place as it is told here or not, the story reflects the infinite Mercy that rules the universe. God extends His mercy without questioning whether we truly recognize Him, and He asks us to do the same for others. This divine guidance is what lies behind Abraham’s legendary hospitality, the one that finds expression in so many restaurant names today.

Abraham, the friend of God

Islamic tradition records that God has sent every community a messenger to guide them to faith (Qur’an 10:47; 13:7). According to some narrations, there are as many as 124,000 messengers. Abraham, “the friend of God,” is among the top five messengers of God, the others of whom are Noah, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, peace be upon them. They are called “*ulu’l azm*,” i.e. masters of determination, and are exclusively praised in the following verse from the Qur’an:

Of the Religion (that He made for humankind and revealed through His Messengers throughout history), He has laid down for you as way of life what

He willed to Noah, and that which We reveal to you, and what We willed to Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus, (commanding): “Establish the Religion, and do not divide into opposing groups concerning it.” What you call people to is hard and distressful for those who associate partners with God. God chooses whom He wills and brings them together (in faith and in obedience) to Himself, and He guides to Himself whoever turns to Him in devotion. (42:13)

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Abraham and Islamic worship

Practicing Muslims who pray five times a day mention Abraham's name at least 28 times (the number is double if one includes voluntary prayers) in the following way: "O God, send grace and honor to Muhammad and his family, just as You sent grace and honor to Abraham and his family." Many Muslims add Abraham's name to the prayer after eating when they ask for God to further His grace upon them (*ni'mat ħalil-ul'lah*), the Prophet's mediation on the Day of Judgment (*shafaat ya Rasulullah*), and the abundance God blessed Abraham with (*barakat Halil-ul'lah*).

A full chapter in the Qur'an is named after Abraham. A lengthy portion of this chapter (14:35-41) is a beautiful prayer of Abraham for Mecca to be a secure land and that his progeny to be protected from ever worshipping idols.

Abraham's legacy manifests itself more thoroughly in the pilgrimage to Mecca, which is an obligatory duty for Muslims who can afford it. Almost all of the rites of pilgrimage, the hajj, and the locations where the hajj is observed have all been inherited from Abraham. The history of Mecca, the holiest place for Muslims, starts with Abraham, when he brought his wife Hagar and baby son Ishmael to begin the first human settlement there. Muslims re-

member the frustration of Hagar seeking water as they run between Safa and Marwa around the holy sanctuary. As the pilgrims wash themselves from the well of Zamzam, they remember God's mercy upon her and upon humanity, when God sent them the angel to bring this abundant source of water from out of nowhere under Ishmael's heel; a fountain so abundant that it keeps flowing even today, watering pilgrims.

The Ka'ba, the cubic building located at the heart of Mecca, was built by Abraham and Ishmael. As Muslims circumambulate the Ka'ba, they start from the corner of Black Stone, which was placed by Abraham, and after their cycles are complete, they stand for prayer behind the Station of Abraham (*maqam Ibrahim*), which is believed to be the rock he climbed while building the sanctuary. Another rite of the hajj is Jamarat, where pilgrims throw pebbles at three pillars. It is believed that Abraham and his son stoned Satan away when he tried to seduce them to turn back from the sacrifice. And at Mina, pilgrims offer their sacrificial animals whose meat are given away in charity, as they remember Abraham's ordeal with his son, who God "ransomed with a sacrifice of tremendous worth" (Qur'an 37:107).

As a side note, a great majority of Islamic scholars agree that the son to be

sacrificed was Ishmael, while some think he was Isaac. Whichever son was going to be sacrificed that day is not completely insignificant; however, there are more important lessons to be learned from this story, and it does not produce any benefit to engage in disputes on this matter. Besides, for Muslims, both Ishmael and Isaac are prophets and are equally respectable. This ordeal did not only testify to Abraham's and his son's incredible submission to God, but it also showed the atrocity of human sacrifice, which was, and unfortunately still is, one of the most violent forms of false devotion to the Divine.

Abraham's mission

Islamic faith holds at its center the oneness of God, which is believed to be one of the key teachings of all prophets, from Adam to Muhammad, peace be upon them. Despite varying outward forms, all the messengers sent to humanity taught their communities God's uniqueness (*tawhid*), resurrection and life after death (*hashir*), messenger-ship (*nubuwwa*), and worship (*ibada*). However, Abraham's firm stance against idolatry and other forms of associating partners with God (*shirk*), which had reached an unprecedented extreme in his time, made his mission even more connected to the revival of monotheism. Even when he was a child, he would not pay any respect to the idols his father was crafting. He always opposed his community's worshipping of idols and celestial structures, like the moon and the sun. While he was staunchly against them, he still engaged in a "gradual" effort to invigorate his audience's logi-



As a part of the hajj rituals, Muslim pilgrims throw pebbles at three walls in Mina, near Mecca. It is believed that Abraham and his son stoned Satan away when he tried to seduce them to turn back from the sacrifice. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims walk across a long stretch of land to perform this ritual (jamarat) during the first three days of Eid al-Adha.



cal reasoning. The Qur'an explains, in 6:76-79, how their deities are temporary, even if they might be as bright as a star or as glorious as the sun, which are doomed to eventually set. Abraham voices the inner conscience of every human whose desire for eternity cannot be truly satisfied by false deities when he says, "I love not the things that set" (6:76). Professor Ibrahim Canan notes that Abraham's evident challenge to his own people "must have taken place after he had been thrown into the fire," when an intellectual struggle ceased to be possible (Canan 2007, 47).

Despite his gradual and convincing argument to inculcate certainty of faith, the response he got from his community was what almost all messengers of God received:

We had showed Abraham (the ugliness and irrationality of polytheism and) the inner dimension of (the existence of) the heavens and the earth, and the eternal truth. We had done so that he might be one of those who have achieved certainty of faith (6:75). They replied: "But we found our forefathers doing the same" (26:74).


Abraham's mission almost exactly matches the Prophet Muhammad's. Between them are connections at multiple levels: ancestral relations through Ishmael, the Ka'ba as the shared sanc-

tuary, and their struggle to show the truth at times when idol-worshipping was at its highest. Leaving behind his hometown where idol-worshipping was the unbreakable norm, Abraham was ordered to build the Ka'ba, to be a direction for prayer and site of pilgrimage, as a place to praise the only true God the Creator. The Prophet Muhammad was born in the shade of this holy sanctuary, but it was already filled with hundreds of idols, and his mission was to reinstate its holiness by purifying it from them. Not surprisingly, when he started calling his community to the One God, they said: "Enough for us (are the ways) that we found our forefathers on" (5:104).

Another interesting connection is that the Prophet was a descendant of Ishmael, whose mother, Hagar, was given by the ruler of Egypt as a gift to Sarah, who gave her to Abraham. Centuries later, Muqawqis, the ruler of Egypt, would send Maria to the Prophet as a gift, and the Prophet would name his son from her Ibrahim, or Abraham.

Submission

What stands tallest amongst Abraham's many virtues is his confidence in, and submission to, the Almighty. It is told that an angel came to offer help



when Abraham was being thrown to the fire, and Abraham said, “Sufficient for me is God.” He was in such a state of Divine refuge that he did not ask for the intervention of any other being.

Abraham’s trust in God was also proven when he was told to take Hagar and his son Ishmael away from home and leave them in the middle of the desert. Abraham did not answer Hagar’s questions about why he was leaving them there, until Hagar asked whether this was a command from God. The wisdom of this would manifest itself in time: Abraham and Ishmael would later build the Ka’ba there, and the Arab nation would emerge from that community. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, would come from that community, generations later.

Another ordeal Abraham had to face was sacrificing his son. It is told that when Abraham had the dream, he waited for two more days, and when he saw the dream again, he was assured of the Divine source of it. Both he and his son had full confidence in this command, and they were rewarded when God ransomed the boy and granted us the “festival of sacrifice,” which we still celebrate today as we honor human life while sharing food with the poor.

Abraham’s story is a rich source of lessons for anyone who seeks a life of virtue and commitment to a Prophetic mission. More importantly, as we are living through difficult times of extreme polarization across religious, cultural, and political divides, Abraham can be held up as a unifying figure among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, whose scriptures praise him and his family as the father of all prophets. His path of full confidence in God in the face of imminent death and apparently unbearable ordeals could inspire all of us today. It is especially useful for those being persecuted, forced to leave their homelands, abandon their families, and those threatened with torture and death.

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