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Merit, Mimesis, and Martyrdom: Aspects of Shi'ite Meta-historical Exegesis on Abraham's Sacrifice in Light of Jewish, Christian, and Sunni Muslim Tradition[1]

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CERTAIN SCRIPTURAL TEXTS seem to strike a near universal chord among thinkers across religious, ethnic, and historical boundaries, yet even when this occurs, the particularity of individual religious systems tends to cause the exegeses of those texts to work themselves out in particularist, sometimes exclusive terms. In the often subtle world of inter- and intra-religious rivalry, polemical statements and claims may be made in relation to such texts with the knowledge that the audience will make the critical connection, whether consciously or unconsciously, with a subtext deriving from a competing point of view. Suggestive polemical statements are found in many *genres* of religious literature including those *outside* of what is usually deemed "religious polemics," which tend to be far more blatant, far less suggestive.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the motif of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, where Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each makes use

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of the powerful story in order to buttress its own particularity.[2] The interpretive traditions of these religions agree that so much merit is associated with the exceptional willingness of the protagonists to carry out God's command to the last letter and often through personal suffering, that some or much of that merit is considered to have spilled over or is held as credit for the generations of those who follow them. Those lucky followers, however, are restricted in each separate religious interpretation of the event to the official believers of that religious system. This common view tends to be worked out as an equation of excellence, merit, and value. Extreme acts of personal excellence generate merit before God which may be realized through suffering, although suffering is not necessarily required in order to demonstrate excellence.[3] This merit is accumulated essentially as a commodity and stored up on behalf of generations of followers, and those followers are accredited with unique value by virtue of their identification with the religious system attributing merit to the act in the first place.

This study is a comparative examination of some of the classic ways in which particular religious views run this equation in relationship to the Abrahamic sacrifice. Although the study of sacrificial theory rightly remains of great concern to the academic study of religion, it is not the purpose of this study. We are not concerned here with a theory of sacrifice per se.[4] The goal, rather, is to examine the ways in which related but independent religious expressions process Scripture (not a common Scripture canonically but nevertheless accessible interpretively). Of particular interest to this study is the way in which some Shi'ite interpretations process the Abrahamic sacrifice in terms of Shi'ite sacred history (or "metahistory"). The larger question is, how are commonly accepted scriptural motifs, even when the underlying conceptual issues fueling the importance of such motifs are shared between religious traditions, manipulated by those traditions to buttress and enhance their own particularity at the expense of the "other"? Issues of "borrowing," "influence," or "inspiration" are irrelevant for the purpose of this inquiry since the adherents of all the religious expressions examined here were engaged in inter- and intra-religious discourse, whether directly or indirectly or whether or not chronologically contemporaneous, in which such issues as merit of the ancients, mimesis, and martyrdom were shared concepts despite the fact that each tradition and even the various vectors *within* each tradition applied their own twists and nuances to them.

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2 The particular Islamic renderings of this narrative and their purported origins and literary journeys have occupied scholarship for over a century. For the most recent studies, see Calder, Firestone 1990.

3 On the redemptive nature of suffering, see Ayoub.

4 For synopses and critiques of the classical and contemporary theories of sacrifice, see Hecht, Strenski, and Milbank.

The narrative of the Abrahamic sacrifice may be found in Qur'ān 37:99-113. It parallels the biblical narrative in Genesis 22, and the two exhibit many common motifs. There are, of course, many differences between them as well, and there is room for a great deal more scholarly inquiry into the literary, historical, and theological relationship between the two scriptural versions of the attempted sacrifice and the exegetical traditions that respond to them. The most immediate peculiarity regarding the qur'ānic story lies in its reluctance to identify the intended victim of the sacrifice. Neither Isaac, Ishmael, nor any other name is provided in the narrative to identify Abraham's son.

It should be stated from the outset that although the biblical rendering of the story precedes the qur'anic rendering by some 1500 years, it is not absolutely certain that the latter is directly dependent upon the former. I have presented the case elsewhere for a pre-biblical rendering of the tale based on literary, historical, and cultic considerations in which Ishmael and not Isaac would have been the intended victim (Firestone 1998). This reconstruction would correspond, at least with regard to the issue of which son was the intended victim, with Islamic exegetical traditions placing Ishmael in that role. On the other hand, even though the tradition that eventuated in the qur'ānic rendering may have evolved independently of the biblical story per se, once it became a part of the Qur'ān, it became subject to the close scrutiny and criticism of Jews and Christians wedded to belief in the unique and divine origin of the biblical tale. Muslim exegetes, therefore, were forced to come to terms with both the obvious and subtle differences between the two scriptural portrayals.

The differences range from contextualization to the role of the narrator, the relationship and dialogue between father and son, dialogue in general, the divine role, human responses to the divine command, and the many other issues between them such as the role of servants, the knife, binding or laying out the prospective victim, the nature and modality of divine communications, angels, the issue of testing, the issue of progeny and the future, the redemptive offering, the role of blessing, reward, and so forth. The list could be extended almost indefinitely. Exegetical responses to the scriptural passages in the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam reflect a number of different agendas including the theological, historical, and polemical.

IDENTIFYING THE INTENDED SACRIFICE

The major item of discussion in Islamic exegetical texts is the identification of the intended victim, a problem unique to Islam for two primary reasons that will be discussed in some detail to follow. The first is that, as

just noted, the text of the Qur'ān does not specify which of Abraham's sons he attempted to sacrifice. The second is that the Arab peoples trace their origins to the biblical Ishmael.

Judaism had no such problem identifying the intended victim. Isaac, a patriarch and progenitor of the Jewish people, is mentioned by name five times in the brief narrative of Genesis 22, and Jewish tradition ascribes great merit to Isaac as well as Abraham for enduring that trial (Vermes 1973). Christianity was also clear as to the identity of the near-sacrifice, for, like Judaism, it considered the text of the Hebrew Bible sacred. Christianity likewise saw itself as the heir of Isaac—more in the spiritual than in the biological sense, perhaps, but nevertheless heir (Romans 9:6-9; Galatians 4:21-31), and privileged heir at that. When it wished to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity to its older religious sibling, the motif of the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus was taken to prove its perfection of the pious but uncompleted act suggested in Genesis 22. With the near-sacrifice of Isaac seen as a prefiguration of the crucifixion, Jesus comes to displace Isaac and perfect his role as sacrifice (Hebrews 11:17-19, and Vermes 1973; Swetnam).[5]

Why, one might ask, would the total immolation of Jesus demonstrate such superiority? The answer may be found, as has been noted above, in the religious concept of merit accrued for righteousness, including righteousness under suffering, a value shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Judaism, where the concept evolved before the birth of Christianity, it is identified by the term, *z'khūt āvōt*—"merit of the Patriarchs" (Babylonian Talmud, Rosh HaShanah 11a), which is closely related to atonement, and especially vicarious atonement or *kappārāh* (Kaddushin: 15, 318-319). The "merit of the Patriarchs" epitomizes the protecting influence of the ancients' merit for future generations of the Jewish people. According to this view, the very righteousness of the ancients guarantees a degree of divine protection for their descendants, for their merit is a blessing that accrues for their progeny. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son, for example, is said by some early Jewish commentators to have been the reason that God caused the Red Sea to part for the Israelites in their escape from Egyptian bondage. Thus, in an early Midrash dated to approximately the third century, "Rabbi Benaya said: By the merit of the commandment which Abraham our father carried out I will split the Sea for them, as it is written: 'and he split the wood of the sacrifice' (Gen.22:3), and it is written: 'and the waters were split' (Ex.14:21)" (Horowitz and

[5] For the interpretive process from rabbinic Judaism to Christianity see Levenson 173-213. On the iconography of the relationship, see Bregman.

Rabin: 98). A more striking articulation of the same concept is found a few pages later:

> Rabbi Yose HaGallili said: "When the Children of Israel entered into the Sea, Mt. Moria with Isaac's altar built upon it and the entire scene laid out upon it were uprooted from their place—with Isaac as if he were bound and placed on the altar and Abraham as if he were stretching out his hand, taking the knife to slaughter his son. . . . God said to Moses: Moses, My children are in trouble . . . and you are standing there busied in prayer. [Moses] said before Him: What can I do?! [God] answered: 'and lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it. . . .' (Ex.14:16)." (100)

Credit for Abraham's merit of being willing to sacrifice his own son is recalled in Jewish tradition in order to bring atonement even to this day. This is most obvious in the liturgy for the New Year and the Day of Atonement where liturgical poetry often refers to this theme, but it is often included in the liturgy of the daily morning prayers and was earlier associated with Passover (Manns). The merit for the *ʿaqēdāh*, or the "binding" of Isaac as it is known in Jewish tradition, is of such magnitude that it is seen in rabbinic literature as the efficient cause of Israel's rescue from affliction throughout history (Levenson: 181).

JEWISH SCHEME OF MERIT:	
Father:	Abraham
Intended victim/son:	Isaac
Beneficiary of merit:	The Jewish people (Abraham and Isaac's progeny)

In Christianity, the general concept of merit is contracted and centered particularly on the person of Jesus (although saints also accrue merit which may be tapped by later generations). But it is Jesus whose own merit for righteousness in the face of suffering and the ultimate personal sacrifice of death on the cross provides atonement for all those who would believe in him. As Paul would articulate it in his letter to the Galatians, "The purpose of it all was that the blessing of Abraham should be in Jesus Christ extended to the Gentiles . . ." (3:14). But Paul continues by stating that this extension in effect becomes a restriction, for those [i.e., the Jews] who reject the divine status of Jesus will be rejected from the blessing accrued through his merit (Gal. 4:21-31).[6] To put the Christianized concept most simply, the merit accrued for the completed act of personal suffering and sacrifice far outweighs that accrued for the uncompleted act (Swetnam: 176-177, 186-187, 190-191). Jesus supersedes Isaac, and the blessing that accrues for his merit passes only to those "spiritual descendants" who believe in their "Father," Jesus.

6 Cf. Fernandez.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY ASSOCIATION:	
Father:	God
Actual victim/son:	Jesus
Beneficiary of merit:	Christians (who believe in Jesus' redemptive role)

The parallel between Genesis 22 and the crucifixion was not lost on Jews and Christians from the earliest days of their mutual contact and conflict. The obvious correspondence engendered the creation of exegetical material that, among other purposes, came to be written for or eventually used as polemic (Brock, Danielou, Hayward).[7] This exegetical material in which points are carefully articulated in reference to scriptural texts may be homiletical in form, or it may be narrative in which the associations are implicit. The latter type seems to have been beloved among Semitic cultures, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, and a good deal of narrative exegesis may be found on the biblical story. But, as noted above, polemic was not restricted to the traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Muslims too felt the need to demonstrate the exclusive truth of their religious tradition over the claims of their monotheistic cousins, and the story of the intended sacrifice came to be a reference from which polemical material was generated. This is not to suggest that it was a central Islamic text for polemical purposes, for this appears not to have been the case. Nevertheless, the unique nature of the story, the variant versions found in the Bible and the Qur'ān, and the underlying genealogical associations shared by Jews and Arabs gave rise to rival exegesis on the story.

The common genealogical worldview among biblical religionists (Jews and Christians) and Muslims alike held that the Jews derived from Isaac while the Arabs, or at least the Arab line resulting in the Prophet Muḥammad and his followers, derived from the line of Ishmael (Brockelmann, Rentz, Caskel, Dagorn, Montgomery). Whether or not the qur'ānic rendering of the story of the sacrifice intended Ishmael as the victim or not, the polemical implications of the ambiguous qur'ānic telling are striking. Who merits the reward for submitting to God's will in the person of the intended sacrifice? Was it Isaac with the resulting reward for his merit accruing to his progeny the Jews (or his spiritual progeny, the Christians)? Or was it Ishmael, for whose willingness for self-immolation his Arab progeny derive divinely ascribed credit?

As noted above and in striking contrast to the Genesis version, the Qur'ān nowhere provides the name of the intended victim within the narrative of the act itself. It is true that Isaac is mentioned in verse 112, but that reference is extremely ambiguous, and traditional Muslim scholars

7 Davies and Chilton take a unique view regarding the dating and influence of the sacrifice motifs (Davies and Chilton, Davies), which has been successfully refuted by Hayward and Vermes 1996.

have read it to learn that Ishmael was the intended sacrifice as often as Isaac. Two pro-Ishmael arguments are worth mentioning here. One suggests that Q.37:112 is an annunciation of the upcoming birth of Isaac given after and as a reward for Abraham's near-sacrifice of his older brother, Ishmael. The second argues that since God had already promised progeny for Isaac elsewhere in the Qur'ān (Q.11:71), Isaac could not have been the intended victim (Ṭabarī: XXIII, 85-86).[8] The problem of who was the intended sacrifice clearly disturbed early Muslim scholars, and it took many generations until the issue was resolved. During that period, lasting some two hundred years or more, two schools of thought developed. One, which I designate the "biblicist" school, considered Isaac to have been the intended victim and the act to have taken place in or near Jerusalem. The "Arabian" school considered Ishmael to have been the intended victim and the story to have taken place in the vicinity of Mecca. The tenth-century historian and geographer, ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī, sums up the dichotomy in his history: "If the sacrifice occurred in the Ḥijāz (the area of Arabia in which Mecca is located), it was Ishmael, because Isaac never entered the Hijāz. If the sacrifice took place in Syria (the common Arabic term for the area including Jerusalem), then it was Isaac because Ishmael did not enter Syria after he was taken from there" (I, 58).

The question of who was the intended sacrifice plagued Muslim commentators from the earliest period, and few refrained from arguing in favor of one or the other son. Most of the discussion on the question does not assume an overtly polemical overtone but simply treats textual, historical, or geographical issues that would appear to effect the intent of the scriptural text (Firestone 1990: 135-151). Some, however, do. They may be as simple as the statement by Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Thaʿlabī (d.1036): "The Jews claim that it was Isaac, but the Jews lie" (91); or of Radī al-Dīn Abū ʿAlī al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī (d.1158):[9] "The proof for those who say that it was Isaac is that the Christians and Jews agree about it. The answer to that is that their agreement is no proof and their view is not acceptable" (XXIII, 75).

A rather detailed anti-biblicist polemic may be found in the commentary of ʿImād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl Ibn Kathīr (d.1373):

> That boy is Ishmael. He is the first son announced to Abraham in revelation. The Muslims and the People of the Book agree that he was older

[8] A more compelling argument would suggest that Ishmael's association with Abraham's founding of the Kaʿba must parallel his association with the intended sacrifice that occurred in the same general area (Finkel).

[9] According to Professor Kohlberg, his name was more likely, al-Ṭabrisī.

> than Isaac. However, in their book, Ishmael was born when Abraham was 86 years old, while Isaac was born when Abraham's age was 99 years. According to them, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son, but according to another version, [he commanded him to sacrifice] his oldest son. They dishonestly and slanderously introduced Isaac here by forcing him in. But this is impossible because it contradicts their own book. They forced this understanding because Isaac is their father while Ishmael is the father of the Arabs. They envy them, so they added it and distorted "your only son" in the sense that "you have no other than he." But [Abraham] took Ishmael and his mother to Mecca[10] so theirs is subjective exegesis and distortion. That is because "your only son" can refer only to one for whom there is no other. . . . (n.d.: IV, 14)

He mentions that, although some Muslim scholars, holding the opinion that Isaac was the intended sacrifice, trace the authority of their view to Companions of the Prophet, Ibn Kathīr considers the origin of this view to be sages of the "People of the Book," whose ideas were taken into Islam without adequate proof. "The account that it was Isaac came from Kaʿb al-Aḥbār. . . . All of these statements, and God knows best, are taken from Kaʿb al-Aḥbār. Now when he converted to Islam during the caliphate of ʿUmar, he began to report traditions to ʿUmar on the authority of his ancient books. Perhaps ʿUmar listened to him and permitted the people to listen to his sources and to transmit what he had on his [Kaʿb's] authority, [both] the corrupt ones and the good ones. Now this Islamic nation has no need for one word of [those traditions] he possessed. . ." (n.d.: IV, 17).

In his book of history Ibn Kathīr ascribes the authority for the Isaac position to the spurious literature known as *Isrāʾīliyyāt*, the "Israelite tales:"[11]

> The basis of the claim that it was Isaac is from the Israelite Tales. But their book is full of distortions. It is especially true in this case. According to them, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son, but in the Arabic version, his first-born was Isaac. Putting Isaac here [as the intended victim] is an insertion without reason, a lie, and a falsehood, for he is neither the only son nor the first-born. Rather, it is Ishmael. (1982: I, 232-233)

Ibn Kathīr is one of the most strident supporters of Ishmael and most vociferous denouncers of the Isaac position. In the course of his argument he cites a polemical story that is found in many other commentaries as well. The context is the court of the Umayyad caliph, ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (reigned 717-720 CE), considered by later Muslim historians as the

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10 That is, even though Abraham brought Ishmael to Mecca, he did not disown him. Isaac, therefore, is not Abraham's "only son."

11 On "Israʾīliyāt," see Goldziher, Goitein, Vajda, Newby.

most pious caliph of the Umayyad dynasty. The narrator claims to have asked the caliph about whom he believed was truly the intended victim of the sacrifice:

> ʿUmar said to him: "I would never have considered that issue before, but I think it is as you say." Then he sent for a man who was with him in Syria.[12] He was a Jew who had converted to Islam and became a good Muslim. It became apparent that he was one of the religious scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) of the Jews, so ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz decided to ask him about it. Muḥammad b. Kaʿb al-Qurażī said: "I was with ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz when he said: 'Which of Abraham's two sons was he commanded to sacrifice?' He answered: 'Ishmael. And by God, O Caliph, the Jews know that. However, they envy the Arab community because their father was the one commanded [to be sacrificed] and he is the one who is ascribed for merit for his steadfastness (*wal-faḍl al-ladhī dhakarahu Allah minhu liṣabrihi limā umira bihi*). But they deny that and claim that it was Isaac because Isaac was their father.'" (Ṭabarī 1969: I, 299; 1984: XXIII, 84-85; Thaʿlabī: 92; Zamakhshārī: III, 350; Ṭabarṣī XXIII, 85; Ibn Kathīr n.d.: IV, 18; 1982: I, 235-236; Ḥanbalī: I, 40-41).

This popular tradition quite clearly articulates the Islamic belief that merit ascribed for the ancients results in benefits for their progeny in later generations, a concept that we have observed is of great importance also to Judaism and Christianity. Another popular Islamic tradition centralizes the effects of such merit on the Prophet Muḥammad, who unlike all others, is the beneficiary of not one but two intended sacrifices:

> We were with Muʿāwiya b. Abī Sufyān[13] when they said: "Was the intended sacrificial victim Ishmael or Isaac?" He answered: "You have come to someone well-informed about the matter! We were with the Apostle of God when a man came up and said: 'O Apostle of God, repeat to me [the knowledge] that God has bestowed upon you, O son of the two intended sacrifices (*ibn dhabīḥayn*)!' So he laughed. Then I said to him, 'O Commander of the Faithful, who are the two intended sacrifices?' He answered: 'When ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib was commanded to dig Zamzam,[14] he vowed to God that if it were made easy for him, he would sacrifice one of his sons. The lot [arrow] fell on ʿAbdullāh.[15] But his maternal uncles prevented him, saying, 'Redeem your son with one hundred camels!' So he redeemed him with camels. Ishmael was the second.'" (Ṭabarī 1969: I, 199; 1984: XXIII, 85; Thaʿlabī: 92; Zamakhsharī: III, 350; Ṭabarsī XXIII, 75; Ibn Kathīr n.d.: IV, 18; Ḥanbalī, I, 41)

12 ʿUmar reigned in Damascus.

13 A companion of Muḥammad who became the first Caliph in the Umayyad dynasty.

14 The sacred well in Mecca.

15 ʿAbdullāh was Muḥammad's father, and ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib his grandfather.

This represents only a small part of a series of traditions about the near-sacrifice of Muḥammad's father, ʿAbdullāh, in Islamic tradition.[16] All versions are associated with the sanctuary at Mecca and clearly parallel the late biblical association of the near-sacrifice of Isaac at the sanctuary in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 3:1). This tradition ascribes a special status to Muḥammad as the beneficiary of double merit. He is singled out through divine grace, deriving great merit through the near-sacrifice of two of his progenitors, Ishmael and his own father ʿAbdullah, each in relationship to a divine command and associated with the sacred precinct of Mecca. As such, Muḥammad serves as the focal point for the coming together of two traditions: one deriving from the biblical religious milieu and the other from that of pre-Islamic Arabian religion associated with the cult center in Mecca.

The parallel between the near-sacrifice of Abraham's son with the near sacrifice of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib's son invokes a series of striking parallels between the founders of biblical religion and the founders of Islam. If ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib's role parallel's that of Abraham in the near sacrifice of his son, then ʿAbdullah parallels Isaac. Muḥammad would then take the role of Jacob in biblical tradition. Muḥammad, therefore, is the Islamic "Israel." Just as Jacob is the figure from whom the tribal nation of Israel derives, Muḥammad is the figure around whom is formed the *umma*, the community of Islam.

SUNNI IDENTITY ASSOCIATIONS:

	#1 "biblicist" school	#1 "Arabian" school	#2 "Arabian" school
Father:	Abraham	Abraham	ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib
Intended victim/son:	Isaac	Ishmael	ʿAbdullah
Beneficiary of merit:	Problem of identification	N. Arabs/ Muslims	Muḥammad and, by extension, all Muslims

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It is not surprising that the concept of merit ascribed to the ancestors accruing benefit or status for their descendants became an issue in the early Islamic period when Islam found itself in spiritual competition with the "Peoples of the Book." While it became abundantly clear to Jews and Christians by the end of the early Islamic conquests that the new religious civilization of Islam had won the competition on the field of battle, they could still claim spiritual ascendancy. Both Christianity and Judaism were old and established, and both claimed the merit of longevity as well as spiritual supremacy. After all, their great and sacred personages such

16 The most accessible source for these tales is the official Sīra or biography of Muḥammad (Ibn Hishām), translated into English by Guillaume (cf. 66-68).

as Abraham and Moses or John the Baptist and Jesus, all of whom are known also in Islamic Scripture, were not Muslims but rather Jews (or Israelites) and Christians. Islam countered not only by "overachieving" in virtually every human field—for by the ninth century it had equaled or surpassed not only the military achievements of its predecessors but also their intellectual, cultural, and scientific achievements as well—but by becoming more reliant on its own developing religious heritage. Not only did the Qur'ān itself respond to Jewish and Christian claims of ascendancy (Q.3:65-67: ". . . Abraham was not a Jew or a Christian, but was upright [*ḥanīf*], one who surrenders [*muslim*], and not an idolater."), Muslim religious leaders were determined by the ninth century to expunge the foreign "Israelite tales" entirely from the canon of acceptable Islamic literature (Goldziher, Goitein, Vajda, Newby).

It should be no surprise, then, that by about this time in the ninth century, the "Arabian school," considering Ishmael to have been the intended sacrifice, predominated among Muslim scholars and literati, and to such an extent that most Muslims today are unaware even that many early Muslim exegetical sources considered Isaac to have been the intended victim. Certainly since the early tenth century, most Muslims have considered the intended sacrifice to have been Ishmael and the act to have taken place near Mecca (Firestone 1989).

THE SHI'ITE PARADIGMS

The standard Syria-Isaac and Mecca-Ishmael positions may be found in a broad survey of Islamic exegetical texts reflecting the various legal and intellectual schools of Sunni Islam. An interesting variation may be found, however, in Shi'ite renderings of the story. Although the reasoned opinions of Shi'ite exegetes tend to side with the Mecca-Ishmael school, early examples of Shi'ite narrative exegesis retain old traditions depicting Isaac being brought to Mecca along with Abraham and Sarah in order to perform the Ḥajj pilgrimage. According to these traditions, Abraham is called upon in a vision to sacrifice Isaac in or near Mecca during the course of his own pilgrimage. Despite the common association of the pilgrimage sacrifice in today's Ḥajj with the near-sacrifice of Ishmael in submission to God's command, it is only the Shi'ite sources that consistently and explicitly provide a basis for this association through narrative exegesis of the Qur'ānic rendering of the Abrahamic sacrifice (Q.37:99-113).[17]

[17] Sunni traditions associate Abraham with the pilgrimage as well, but although they sometimes detail Abraham's ritual enactment of the pilgrimage stations, they do not describe him attempting to sacrifice his son, and only few mention that he performed a sacrifice of any kind (Firestone 1990: 98-103; cf. Calder: 380).

Why Isaac rather than Ishmael is associated with Mecca in many of these Shi'ite sources and why the Sunni sources lack the association between the Abrahamic sacrifice and the important ritual sacrifice of the pilgrimage have never been explained. Some light may be shed on the topic by examining the texts in the context of internal religious polemic in early Islam.

The groups which eventually came to be known as Shi'ites derive from the *shi'at 'Alī*, the faction or party of 'Alī. They believed that 'Alī, the closest blood relative to Muḥammad,[18] should have been chosen to succeed him in leading the community of Muslims. He was repeatedly rejected until the death of the third caliph, 'Uthmān, and, when he was finally appointed, he was opposed by 'Uthmān's cousin and powerful general, Mu'āwiya. War ensued between the two men and their followers. When 'Alī eventually agreed to arbitration to solve the dispute rather than insisting on his principled right to succession, an important group of his own supporters rejected him and even took up arms against him. He subdued their uprising but not their movement, and one of them succeeded in assassinating him in 661. The general who had earlier opposed him stepped into the vacuum caused by the series of crises and took power, founding the 'Umayyad dynasty of caliphs which ruled for the following century. Many of the followers of 'Alī remained loyal to his name even after his death and remained loyal also to his family, the closest blood relatives to Muḥammad. They believed that Muḥammad had intended for 'Alī to succeed him and argued that he had even stipulated as much in a sermon shortly before he died. They remained fervently loyal to this view and politically—and occasionally also militarily—opposed all subsequent caliphs, thereby inviting persecution by the ruling powers.

After 'Alī's death, the Shi'a turned to his sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. Ḥasan stayed out of the fray until his death in 669, but his brother Ḥusayn agreed to claim the right to the caliphate after the death of 'Alī's opponent, Mu'āwiya. The Shi'a began a revolt, but it was subdued by Mu'āwiya's son Yazīd, who massacred Ḥusayn and his followers at Karbalā' (in today's Iraq) in 680. The death of 'Alī's son (and Muḥammad's grandson), Ḥusayn, remembered with great mourning to this day, is considered by Shi'ites to be the most tragic of a continuing series of martyrdoms experienced by Shi'ites throughout the generations (Kohlberg 1983: 121). Shi'ism, although always a minority within the Islamic world, has always been extremely antagonistic toward Sunni Islam. As a result of their general opposition to the Muslim establishment and the violent uprisings instigated by the more activist sub-groups, the Shi'a has often suffered

18 Muḥammad had no surviving sons, but 'Alī was both Muḥammad's paternal first cousin and son-in-law.

persecution at the hands of the Sunni authorities. Shi'ite Islam refers to 'Alī and his sons as well as their successors as the rightful leaders of the Islamic world. Their personas took on special meaning as they came to be seen as the "rightly guided" or *mahdī*s of the community. They are the imams, which in the Shi'ite context means divinely guided leaders imbued with the divine legacy or *al-waṣiyya* of leadership, a spark of divine knowledge and light, and divinely protected from error and sin (Rubin; Kohlberg 1979). 'Alī and his descendants take on a redemptive and, indeed, messianic aura, particularly the last of his line to have a assumed physical existence before his occultation. Shi'ites await the messianic Return of the last imam, the "rightly guided" Mahdī or *Qā'im,* the one who will "rise up" from his occultation in a glorious age to rule and set the world straight (Amir-Moezzi: 99-123).

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A paradigmatic rendering of the Shi'ite traditions in which Isaac is the intended sacrifice follows (Qummī: II, 2:224-225; Ṭabarsī: XXIII, 77; Baḥrānī IV, 28-30 [2 versions]; Majlisī: XII, 125-127 [2 versions]).[19]

> On the Day of Tarwiya,[20] [the angel] Gabriel came to Abraham and said to him: "Drink the water" (*irtawi* or *tarwa min al-mā'*). That is why [the day] is called Tarwiya.[21] [Gabriel then took him to Minā and after that, to 'Arafa (both stations of the Ḥajj) where Gabriel taught him how to do the ritual activities of the pilgrimage, and they continued through additional rites of the pilgrimage until Abraham either received a command or had a dream vision in which he was commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac.[22] At this point Q.37:102 is cited or paraphrased in which Abraham told his son of the divine command and asked for a response. The boy answered]: **"O Father, do as you are commanded. You will find me, God willing, patient and enduring"** (Q.37:102).[23]

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19 Although Majlisī and Baḥrānī are late sources, they are citing the early tradition found also in Qummī (all their traditions are attributed to Abū 'Abdullāh) originating not later than the ninth century. The tradition in Ṭabarsī is anonymous.

20 The line to follow provides a folk etymology for the meaning of the word, *tarwiya.* The following few lines tracing Abraham's pilgrimage under the divine guidance of Gabriel provide folk etymologies for the names of other common pilgrimage sites and terms as well, such as 'Arafa, al-Muzdalifa, etc.

21 In Ṭabarsī, Gabriel does not appear. Abraham simply makes the pilgrimage to Mecca after having received the vision in what the medieval Arabic texts usually refer to as Syria (i.e., the vicinity of Jerusalem).

22 The command/vision occurred at al-Mash'ar al-Ḥarām in Qummī and Baḥrānī. Ṭabarsī does not give the location but has Abraham tell Isaac of the command at al-Jamra al-Wusṭā. Qummī and Baḥrānī #1 also associate the beginning of the actual sacrifice sequence at al-Jamra al-Wusṭā, one of the stone pillars representing the devil, which are stoned as part of the pilgrimage rite.

23 Qummī and Ṭabarsī #1 add at this point, "They both submitted themselves to the command of God" (*wasallamā li'amr Allāh*). Qur'ān verses woven into the narratives are distinguished here by bold typeface.

An old man (*shaykh*) approached and said: "What do you want with this boy?"[24] He answered: "I am planning to sacrifice him." [The old man] said: "Heaven forbid (*subḥān Allah*), you will sacrifice a boy in an instant who has not disobeyed God?" [Abraham] answered: "Yes, for God has commanded me to sacrifice him." [The old man] said: "But Your Lord has forbidden you to sacrifice him. It was Satan who commanded this of you in your dream." [Abraham] replied: "Woe to you! The utterance which I heard most definitely came to me. You did not see. By God, I will not speak with you [any more]." Then he was resolved to do the sacrifice. But the old man said: "O Abraham, you are a leader (*imām*) whom people imitate. If you sacrifice your child, people will sacrifice their children." But [Abraham] refused to speak to him.

Abraham then approached the boy to slaughter him. **When they had both submitted** (Q.37:103) to the command of God, the boy said: "O Father, hide my face and tighten my bonds." Abraham replied, "**O my little son** (Q.37:102), bonds are [normally] part of [any] sacrifice, but by God, I will not bind you with them today."[25]

[Abraham] then laid him down,[26] picked up the knife, and placed it on the boy's throat. He raised his eyes to heaven and leaned over the boy [to draw the knife across his throat]. But Gabriel turned the knife over [onto its dull side].[27] A ram [or sheep] was brought from [Mt.] Thabīr[28] and exchanged for the boy. [Abraham] then heard a call from heaven coming from near the Khayf mosque:[29] **"O Abraham! You have already fulfilled the vision! Thus do We reward the righteous, for this was clearly a trial"** (Q.37:104-106).

[Some of the later traditions continue (Baḥrānī: IV, 29-30; Majlisī: XII, 127)]:

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24 The sequence of the old man challenging Abraham appears in strikingly similar form among the sources. Only Ṭabarsī #1 has a slightly less developed rendering.

25 This motif, which is in parallel to Jewish exegetical renderings but with a different result based on their different cultic and ritual practices, demonstrates in the Islamic version Abraham and Isaac's total submission to God's will, for Abraham need not even bind his son (cf. the Jewish sources, *Tanḥuma vayera'* 23; *Midrash Vayosha'* in Eisenstein: 147; *Pirqey deRabbi Eli'ezer* 70b; *Pesiqta Rabbati* 40, etc.). This sequence is found immediately prior to the "old man" sequence in Baḥrānī #1.

26 Baḥrānī #1 and al-Majlisī give the location of the act at al-Jamra al-Wusṭā. Qummī, Baḥrānī #2, and Majlisī #1 state he laid him on a donkey saddle (or saddle blanket [Majlisī, 12:128]).

27 In some renderings, Abraham turns it back to its proper side and tries again a number of times but is repeatedly foiled by Gabriel (Baḥrānī #1, Majlisī 12:128).

28 One of the largest mountains in the vicinity of Mecca, located between Mecca and 'Arafa (Yāqūt: 2:85).

29 Located nearby in Minā. Khayf appears to be a place of some sanctity in pre-Islamic times. It is referred to in al-Bukhārī as a place associated with the tribe of the Banū Kināna where the Meccan tribe of Quraysh took an oath to be allied with them in the pre-Islamic period (Bukhārī,: *Ḥajj* ch.44 #659 and *Jihād* ch.180 #291). Al-Khayf is also revered in a poem of Mawhab b. Riyāḥ Abū Unays (Ibn Hishām: 2:325; Guillaume: 508). The mosque was built on the site later (Cf. Yāqūt: 2:471).

The wicked old man[30] left and came to the old woman at the Kaʿba in the middle of the valley. He said [to her]: "What old man did I just see [#2: at Minā]?" and he described Abraham. She said: "That would be my husband." He said: "And who was the servant that I saw with him? " and he described [his son]. She said: "That is my son." He said: "Well, I saw him lay him down and take a knife to sacrifice him." She said: "Certainly not! I know Abraham only as the most merciful of people. How could you see him sacrificing his son?" He answered: "By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, and the Lord of this House, I saw him lay him down and pick up a knife to sacrifice him." She asked: "But why?" He answered: "He claimed that his Lord commanded him to sacrifice him." She said: "It is certainly the truth that he obeys his Lord." [The narrator] said: When she finished the stations of the pilgrimage, she was terrified that something had happened to her son. She hurried to Minā laying her hand on her head and saying: "Lord! Do not punish me for what I did to the mother of Ismāʿīl!"[31]

[Baḥrānī #1 continues] When Sarah came and was told what had happened, she went to her son, looked, and saw the mark of the knife scratched into his throat. She complained bitterly, and a sickness appeared which killed her.[32]

* * *

This narrative extends and expands upon the qurʾānic rendering of the story in dramatic terms, and much may be said about its intent, exegetical method, and literary relationship with Sunni and biblicist versions. Comments here, however, must be restricted to the unique Shiʿite association of Isaac with the Islamic pilgrimage.

Motivation for associating the act in or near the sacred cult center of Mecca is clear. Because Abraham was well known among biblicists as the founder of religious centers in the biblical holy places of Shekhem, Hebron, Beer Sheba, etc. (Gen.12:6-9, 13:3-4, 18, 21:22-23), it was only natural to expand the extent of his activities in order to provide an ancient and authentically monotheist sacred origin also for the previously pagan religious center of Mecca. According to the late biblical association of 2 Chronicles 3:1, the location of the biblical event of Abraham's

30 Baḥrānī #2 and Majlisī #1 have "the devil" (*iblīs*).

31 The sequence of the old man/devil appearing to Abraham and the boy's mother may be found in a few different versions also in Sunni traditions (Ṭabarī 1969: 292-294, 303-304; 1984: 23:82; Thaʿlabī: 94-95; Ibn al-Athīr: 1:109-112; Ibn Kathīr n.d.: 4:15; etc.) and in the Jewish Midrash (*Bereshit Rabbah* 56:4; *Tanḥuma vayeraʾ* 22; *Sefer HaYashar* 61; *Midrash Vayoshaʿ* 147; etc.). The motif of Sarah feeling guilt for her treatment of Hagar many years before (cf. Gen.16:5-6 and 21:10-16) is not found in other Muslim narratives but seems to be peculiar to the Shiʿite tradition.

32 This motif is found also in other renderings mentioned by Majlisī (12:128). Cf. the Jewish versions of this sequence: *Pirqey deRabbi Eliʿezer* 32; *Leviticus Rabbah* 22:2; *Sefer HaYashar* 63-64, etc.

attempted sacrifice in the Land of Moriah was none other than Jerusalem, the center of the biblical cult, and later Jewish and Christian exegesis established many more arguments for the correlation (Ginzberg: V: 253 note 253). But even among biblicists there was not absolute agreement over Abraham's founding of the holy place in Jerusalem, for the Samaritans, who were not burdened with the evidence of the book of Chronicles, made the association of Moriah with their holy mountain to the north, Mt. Gerizim (Finkel: 158-159, Levenson: 114-118).

Given the nature of exegesis and the oral medium in which most premodern exegesis developed, it is natural and to be expected that geographic locations change in relationship to the geography in which new exegetical interpretation evolves. This has been documented repeatedly in studies of oral epic and folk literature (Firestone 1990: 15-21). It should be of no surprise, therefore, that the locus of Abraham's response to God's command for sacrifice according to Arabs living in the vicinity of the sacred cult center of Mecca, whether Jews, Christians, adherents of indigenous Arabian religions, or Muslims, would have shifted within the local tradition to one or more sacred sites there.

Moreover, the most logical association of ancient sacrifice in the vicinity of Mecca is within the context of the ancient pilgrimage ritual. Sacrificial offerings were well known in pre-Islamic Arabia, including one or more sacrifices as part of the various cultic rituals of pilgrimage, but ritual sacrifice ceased with the establishment of Islam aside from the sacrifice practiced in Minā (just outside of Mecca) in association with the Islamized pilgrimage (Peters: 30, Wensinck: 99-100). It was the sacrifice of the ancient Pilgrimage to Mecca and its environs, therefore, which was the most likely vehicle to bridge the gaps of time and place necessary for associating Abraham's attempted sacrifice with Arabia.

The more interesting question, however, lies with the Shi'ite association of the Meccan sacrifice with Isaac, despite the indisputable fact that it contradicts the common wisdom holding that, if Isaac were the intended victim, it would have occurred in Syria (Jerusalem) while, if it were Ishmael, it would have occurred in Mecca. The contrary placement of Isaac in Mecca must be associated with one of the pillars of the Shi'ite worldview: a sense of persecution at the hands of an illegitimate and irreligious Sunni establishment. Despite the fact that there was no formal "Party of 'Alī" until the middle 650s or later, Shi'ites have tended to trace their persecution to as early as the first crisis of leadership and succession following the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in 632. As a response to persecution by the Sunni establishment, Shi'ism instituted defensive and protective measures as early as the eighth century, such as the policy of *taqiyya* or doctrine of religious dissimulation, which served to protect

its adherents from repressive campaigns conducted against them by the caliphate (Momen: 39). Moreover, during the period of Shi'ite persecutions in the early eighth century a new population of Iranians that had previously held an inferior status in the informal social structure of early Islam began to be mobilized for the Shi'ite cause.[33] As early as the mid-eighth century, four of the five prominent Imāmi Shi'ite theologians were ethnically Persian, and the writings of some Persian converts to Shi'ite Islam during this period predicted that with the coming of the messianic Mahdī, his companions would be the non-Arabs (*'ajam*) who would fight the Arabs to avenge the wrong done to the imams (Arjomand: 498-500). While it may still be premature to suggest that the movement as a whole was becoming largely non-Arab in ethnicity by this time, it is likely that an increasingly Iranian Shi'ite movement would resonate with what early Islamic tradition had already established was the non-Arab Isaac rather than the Arabized Ishmael during this period. After all, it was the Arab establishment of the caliphate, whether Umayyad or Abbasid, which represented the victimizer, both of the Shī'a and of the defeated Iranians of the once great Sassanian empire.

EARLY SHI'ITE IDENTITY ASSOCIATION	
Father:	Abraham
Intended victim/son:	Isaac
Beneficiary of merit:	Shi'ite Muslims

A second Shi'ite tradition examines the Abrahamic sacrifice in light of the martyrdom of Ḥussayn. According to this popular narrative,[34] when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice a sheep in place of his son, Abraham is disappointed. He wished

> . . . that he would not have been commanded to sacrifice the sheep in his place so that his heart would be pained with the pain of the father who actually sacrificed his most beloved child with his own hand. He would therefore merit the highest level of reward for misfortunes. God then said to him: "O Abraham, which of My creations is dearest to you? " He answered: "O Lord, You have formed no creation dearer to me than Your beloved (*ḥabībuka*), Muḥammad." God then asked him: "O Abraham, is he dearer to you than yourself?" He answered: "He is even dearer to me than myself." [God] asked: "Is his son or is your son dearer to you?" [Abraham] answered: "Even his son." [God] asked: "Is the wrongful sacrifice of his son at the hands of his enemies more painful to your heart or

33 It was Mukhtār al-Thaqafī who seems to have begun rallying non-Arabs at Kūfa (Momen: 35-36).

34 Given on the authority of al-Fadl b. Shādhān who heard it from al-Riḍā' (Ibn Bābawayh 1970: I, 166; 1971: 58-59; Baḥrānī: IV, 30; al-Majlisī: XII, 124-125). I am indebted to Professor Kohlberg for the references to Ibn Bābawayh.

> the sacrifice of your own son by your own hand in obedience to Me?" He answered: "O Lord, his wrongful sacrifice at the hands of his enemies is even more painful to my heart." [God] said: "O Abraham, a group claiming to be of the community of Muhammad will wrongly and viciously kill his son al-Ḥusayn after him, just as the sheep is sacrificed. They will incur My anger for that"—and in a [different] version, "My wrath." Grieved by that and his heart in pain, Abraham began to weep.[35] So God said to him: "O Abraham, I have redeemed the grief you would have had about your own son if you had sacrificed him with your own hand, for your grief about al-Ḥusayn and his death; and I have [therefore] given you the highest level of reward for misfortunes." This is the meaning of [God's] statement (Q.37:107): **and We redeemed him with a magnificent sacrifice.** (Cf. Ayoub: 32-33, 235-236)

This tradition takes the paradigm of the Abrahamic sacrifice, applies it to the foundational narrative of Shiʿite Islam, and through a unique innovation equates the martyrdom of Ḥusayn with the sacrifice of the redemptive offering in place of Abraham's son, the *dhibḥ ʿaẓīm* or "magnificent sacrifice" of Q.37:107. Abraham's grief over the future death of Ḥusayn is accorded divine merit, and it is that very grief that provides him with the credit in the eyes of God as if he had truly carried out the sacrifice of his son.

LATER SHIʿITE IDENTITY ASSOCIATION:	
Father:	Abraham
Intended victim:	Ishmael
Redemptive sacrifice:	Sheep/Ḥusayn
Beneficiary of merit:	Shiʿite Muslims

The identity of Abraham's son in this exegetical tradition is given as Ishmael—not Isaac—but it is a relatively late tradition for which its earliest provenance seems to be the tenth-century Ibn Bābawayh. It seems to have evolved only after the transition in Islam from Isaac to Ishmael as the intended sacrifice, an observation that can be supported by the way in which the late collections of al-Baḥrānī and al-Majlisī organize their traditions on the topic. They faithfully preserve the earlier Shiʿite narrative in which Isaac is the intended sacrifice associated with the Meccan Ḥajj. Alongside it, however, are later non-narrative explanations demonstrating that the community had come to accept the general wisdom that Ishmael could be the only candidate for a Meccan sacrifice (Baḥrānī: IV, 29-32; Majlisī: XII, 130-134).

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35 So too in Shiʿite sources other prophetic figures such as Adam, Noah, Moses, and Jesus all came to know of the future martyrdom of Ḥusayn, and they all mourned his fate (Ayoub: 27-36).

The paradigmatic parallelism of this tradition would make most sense in an *early* Shi'ite context if Abraham's son were Isaac. Identifying the son as Ishmael suggests a later origin for the tradition. In al-Majlisī's rendering of the tradition, the name Ishmael is provided more often than in al-Baḥrānī's rendering. It is possible that, like the Qur'ān, such exegetical narratives originally left out the name of the intended victim altogether. It would then be supplied by the hearer/reader.

Once the Islamic association of the sacrifice with Ishmael became dominant while that of Isaac began to fall out of use, the metaphysical underpining associated with the Isaac narrative for Shi'ite suffering at the hand of the Sunni caliphate was lost. A new and innovative interpretation therefore grew up to fill the gap, and this was the association of the Abrahamic sacrificial narrative with the deeply traumatic martyrdom of Ḥusayn. Because Ḥusayn's death had become such a foundational issue and paradigm for suffering in Shi'ite Islam, the greatest merit in the story of Abraham came to be seen as accruing through his grief over his prophetic knowledge that Ḥusayn would be martyred many centuries into the future. It is the redemptive nature of that grief that corresponds with the redemptive nature of the "magnificent sacrifice" in Qur'ān 37:107: "And We redeemed him with a magnificent sacrifice." Abraham's grief for Ḥusayn therefore became the basis for the merit that he would have received for his willingness to sacrifice his own son. As the narrative articulates it, God informs Abraham: "O Abraham, I have redeemed the grief you would have had about your own son if you had sacrificed him with your own hand, for your grief about al-Ḥusayn and his death. I have [therefore] given you the highest level of reward for misfortunes." Because Abraham's grief for Ḥusayn was so striking, God credits him with *that* level of reward, thereby increasing the merit that would have accrued to him in any case for his willingness to kill even his own son.

The association of Ḥusayn's martyrdom with the redemptive ram may have also served as a response to the Christian understanding of the crucifixion as the perfected Abrahamic sacrifice. The Christian subtext strengthens the Shi'ite polemic against Sunnī Islam, for Shi'ites represent the spiritual heirs of their martyred Ḥusayn just as Christians represent the spiritual heirs of the martyred Jesus. They can thus be comforted with belief in their own spiritual ascendancy over their antagonists the Sunnis, just as Christians could be comforted with belief in their own spiritual ascendancy over the Jews. Just as the Jews originated monotheism but refused to accept the leadership and redemptive/messianic role of Jesus, so did the Sunnīs originate the perfect expression of monotheism in Islam but refused to accept the leadership role of the family of ʿAlī and the redemptive/messianic role of Ḥusayn and the Imāms who would follow

him. Not only did the Sunnīs/Jews refuse to accept the authority of the messianic figure of Ḥusayn/Jesus, they are responsible for the very death of the redeemer. However, with the return at the end of days of the Mahdī, the rightly-guided descendant of Ḥusayn, Shi'ites will be vindicated for their and their leaders' suffering, in parallel with the return and vindication of Jesus as the messiah.

SUMMARY IDENTITY ASSOCIATION WITH THE MERIT OF THE SACRIFICE:

Paradigm	*Jewish*	*Christian*	*Sunni #1*	*Sunni #2*	*Early Shi'ite*	*Later Shi'ite*
Father	Abraham	God	Abraham	'Abd al-Muttalib	Abraham	Abraham
Intended victim	Isaac	Jesus [actual]	Ishmael	'Abdullah	Isaac	Ishmael
Redemptive sacrifice	The ram	(Jesus)	The ram	100 camels	The ram	Sheep/ Ḥusayn
Beneficiary	Jews	Christians	Muslims [Arab]	Muhammad and Muslims	Shi'ites	Shi'ites

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