



# Who

was the  
Biblical  
sacrifice :  
Isaac or  
Ishmael?

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## Abstract

In the Abrahamic faiths, it is held that Abraham had received a Divine command to sacrifice one of his sons. The human sacrifice of that event was ransomed alive due to a sheep that was dispatched from the heavens for Abraham. Though Jews believe that it was Isaac who was ransomed, based on the Old Testament, both historical and Quranic evidence prove that it was Ishmael who underwent such a sacrificial experience in the vicinity of Mecca. The paper highlights some discrepancies in the Biblical references, too.

**Keywords:** Abrahamic faiths, human sacrifice, Ishmael, Isaac, Mecca.



## Introduction

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all accept their Abrahamic roots; they also differ on some of their belief articles. One such a belief concerns the Biblical sacrifice. Jews and Christians unanimously hold that God's covenant with Abraham was fulfilled through his son Isaac, not Ishmael. In fact, they hold that Isaac was the rightful heir to the covenant, while Ishmael, being the son of the 'slave-girl' had no role in it and was thus shunned to a far-off land for the same reason. Muslims, on the other hand, believe that God's covenant with Abraham was fulfilled through both Ishmael and Isaac. They make no distinction between the two brothers and consider both of them the sons of Abraham to be mighty Divine prophets, who fulfilled the covenant of God with their father.

The three Abrahamic faiths differ from each other in their core beliefs. For instance, the Jews reject Jesus Christ altogether,

Christians call him the ‘Son of God’, while Muslims consider him to be a great Divine prophet and one of the ‘*Ul al ‘azm anbiyā,*’ or the arch-prophets referring to the five major Divine prophets (Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad) who were given the Divine scriptures and religious laws.

Despite certain differences, when it comes to Abraham’s sacrifice on Mount Moriah, Judaism and Christianity share common views, while Islam differs in its beliefs with them. The Jews and the Christians hold that it was Isaac who was taken up for the sacrifice by Abraham to Mount Moriah, while Muslims believe that it was Ishmael. For centuries this question has remained unanswered.

The present essay seeks to answer the question by analyzing only a few verses from the Holy Bible. Biblical hints are quoted verbatim, followed by precise references. All references are from the Old Testament of the Holy Bible which is common among both the Jews and the Christians. The story of Abraham’s sacrifice is mentioned in the Book of Genesis, which is the first book in the Old Testament of the Christians or the Torah of the Jews. Genesis 22 is an important reference point which mentions the story of Abraham’s dream and the event of the sacrifice.

A critical analysis of this chapter answers many questions and clears many doubts as to who really was the sacrifice - Isaac or Ishmael?

## **Abraham’s sacrifice**

Here the quotes are from Genesis 22:1-19.

Abraham Tested

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

“Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.

“Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.

“Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

“Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.” The angel of the Lord called to Abraham

from heaven a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” Then Abraham returned to his servants and they set off together for Beersheba. And Abraham stayed in Beersheba.”

### **The Only Son?**

The above verse gives an account of how God tested Abraham, who was commanded to take his son to the mount to be sacrificed. It is interesting to note that in Genesis Chapter 22, there are three places where Abraham’s son is addressed as his “only son.” They are as follows: (1) Genesis 22:2; (2) Genesis 22:12; and (3) Genesis 22:16.

In the first instance, it is God Who addressed Isaac as the only son and in the other two instances it is the Angel of the Lord who calls Isaac as the only son.

Was Isaac indeed the only son of Abraham?

A detailed examination of a few other verses from the book of Genesis raises many questions about the above version of the incident and ultimately leads to their answers.

Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.<sup>(1)</sup>

And Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.<sup>(2)</sup>

Thus according to the Bible, for a good fourteen years Ishmael was Abraham’s only son. So when the Bible says “your only son Isaac” there can be three possibilities: (a) God and his Angel were

unaware of the fact that Isaac was not the only son of Abraham; (b) because Ishmael was the son of an Egyptian slave, God did not want to acknowledge him as the son of Abraham; and (c) born to Abraham fourteen years before Isaac, Ishmael's name was replaced by the Bible writers.

### **The First Possibility**

A warm-up question here is as follows: Were God and his Angel unaware of Ishmael?

It is not possible for God and his Angel to be unaware of the fact that Abraham had a son named Ishmael who had been born before Isaac, for according to the Holy Bible it was the Angel of the Lord that gave the good news of a son to be born from Hagar: "And the Angel of the LORD said to her (Hagar), Behold, you are with a child and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Ishmael; because the LORD has heard your affliction."<sup>(3)</sup> It follows that God and his Angel being obviously aware of Ishmael's existence would not call Isaac the only son of Abraham.

### **The Second Possibility**

As Ishmael was the son of an Egyptian slave, God refused to accept him as a part of the covenant.

This would sound a surprise to many Christians because most of the Christians are unaware of the fact that Abraham was married to Hagar. The Bible asserts thus: "And Sarai Abraham's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abraham had dwelled ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abraham to be his wife."<sup>(4)</sup>

Hagar was indeed the slave girl of Abraham and Sarah, but she

was later married to Abraham and gave birth to Ishmael. In this case, is Ishmael still the son of a slave girl? It is clear that those who insist on calling Ishmael the son of a slave girl are either ignorant of the fact that Hagar was the wife of Abraham, or are doing it out of hatred for the progeny of Abraham through his son Ishmael.

Can God prefer Isaac over Ishmael because he loved the former more?

In the Book of Deuteronomy, also known as the Book of Laws, there is an interesting law which the Jews and Christians need to know. It is as follows: “If a man has two wives, one beloved, and another hated, and they have born him children, both the beloved and the hated; and if the firstborn son be hers that was hated. Then it shall be, when he makes his sons to inherit that which he has, that he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, which is indeed the firstborn. But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn, by giving him a double portion of all that he has: for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his.”<sup>(5)</sup>

In consequence, if we say that God loved Isaac more than Ishmael and thus kept the latter out of the covenant, then one may need to admit that God has gone against His own laws and also made His prophet break the laws.

### **God’s covenant with Abraham and his seed after him:**

The following discourse highlights a few verses from the Bible that speak about God’s covenant with Abraham and his seeds after him.

“And the Lord said to Abram, after that Lot was separated from him. Lift up now your eyes, and look from the place where you

are northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward. For all the land which you see, to you will I give it, and to your seed for ever. And I will make your seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall your seed also be numbered. Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it to you.”<sup>(6)</sup>

The above discourse is followed by the assertions that are indicated below: “And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, as for me, behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. Neither shall your name any more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made you. And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come out of you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you, and to your seed after you. And I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land wherein you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. And God said to Abraham, ‘You shall keep my covenant therefore, you, and your seed after you in their generations.’”<sup>(7)</sup>

Thus God speaks about the covenant with the seed of Abraham; however, does God consider Ishmael as the seed of Abraham?

## Was Ishmael a Part of the Covenant?

Most Christians believe that it was only Isaac who was a part of the covenant and not Ishmael; however, these beliefs are in total contradiction to the Bible. It cannot be denied that there are verses which assert that the covenant is only with Isaac, yet when you compare them with some other verses you can easily separate

the wheat from the chaff.

A few verses about the covenant with Isaac:

“And God said, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son indeed; and you shall call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.”<sup>(8)</sup>

“But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear to you at this set time in the next year.”<sup>(9)</sup>

God speaks to Isaac in the following way: “Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you, and to your seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father.”<sup>(10)</sup>

The above verses make it clear that God’s covenant with Abraham was only through his son Isaac, is it not so? It may seem so, but only if one reads the above verses. However, there are other verses in the Bible which paint a different picture and these verses are overlooked for obvious reasons.

God has promised the land to the seed of Abraham and who is counted as the seed of Abraham? Was it only Isaac?

Despite what people claim, according to Genesis 21:12-13, both Isaac and Ishmael are referred to as the seed of Abraham.

## **God’s Promise of a Great Nation from Ishmael**

Many verses of the Bible indicate that God promised to make a great nation of Ishmael, but these verses are deliberately ignored out of bias and prejudice for Ishmael and his descendants.

The Angel of God said thus to Hagar: “And the angel of the Lord said to her, I will multiply your seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. And the angel of the Lord said to her, Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son, and shall call

his name Ishmael; because the Lord has heard your affliction.”<sup>(11)</sup>

God promised Abraham to greatly bless Ishmael in the following words:

“And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: 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.”<sup>(12)</sup>

God consoled Abraham when he has to leave Ishmael in the barren desert:

“And God said to Abraham, ‘Let it not be grievous in your sight because of the lad, and because of your female slave; in all that Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac shall your seed be called. And also of the son of the female slave will I make a nation, because he is your seed.’”<sup>(13)</sup>

Similarly, when Hagar is alone in the wilderness searching for water for her thirsty child, the Angel of God speaks to her in the following words: “And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, ‘What ails you, Hagar?’ Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in your hand; for I will make him a great nation.”<sup>(14)</sup>

### **Covenant Sealed with Circumcision:**

In Chapter 17 of the Book of Genesis, God spoke about the covenant with Abraham and his seed and orders Abraham to circumcise all male members of his household. It is interesting to note that this Covenant was made when Ishmael was 13-years old and Isaac was not yet born. The Bible also mentions that Abraham and Ishmael were circumcised on the same day.<sup>(15)</sup>

In this way, it becomes clear to us that even the second possibility proves unacceptable. It means that it barely proves acceptable to

hold that Ishmael was not considered the son of Abraham because he was the son of a slave woman.

This only leaves us with the last possibility. It is the point that the name of Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn and his only son for 14 years, was conveniently replaced by the Bible writers.

There are a few cases in the Bible where a Prophet's legacy was not continued through their firstborn, so why cannot the same apply to the children of Abraham?

It therefore sounds true that there were cases where God's covenant was not established through a Prophet's firstborn, but they cannot be used as a reason to reject the covenant God made through Abraham's first child. In the case of Ishmael, it is clear to us that his name was deliberately replaced with that of Isaac for obvious reasons.

There are a few instances in the Bible where God's covenant is not fulfilled through a Prophet's firstborn. For instance, it is indicated in the Bible that Isaac's blessing goes to Jacob instead of his firstborn Essau. In the story of Jacob and Essau mentioned in the Bible,<sup>(16)</sup> it is mentioned that Jacob and his mother cheat Isaac and fraudulently take the blessing that was meant for Essau, Jacob's elder brother. Can such a mighty Divine prophet like Jacob resort to cheating his father in his old age? Is this how God's chosen messengers behave? What is the lesson for people to learn from such Prophets? If one accepts such incidents in the Bible, then one needs to acknowledge that God was incapable of appointing Prophets who could guide human beings through their own example. If the Divine prophets sent by Him indulged in sins, then this raises serious questions about their character and their mission of guiding people. Thus, one may either accept these incidents as true, or it must be accepted that the scriptures were forged by the Jewish elites for their own vested interests.

It can only be observed that Reuben was the firstborn of Jacob, but Jacob's legacy and prophethood is continued from and via his

son, Joseph. In the case of Joseph, it was very clear to Jacob that Joseph was to be a Divine prophet of God and he had a special status compared with the other sons of Jacob; however, this was not the case with Isaac and Ishmael, for both of them were called the ‘seed’ of Abraham and received the blessing of the covenant. Thus in the case of Ishmael and Isaac, it appears that the covenant of Abraham was indeed to be continued through his firstborn son, Ishmael.

### **Why did Abraham Leave his Wife, Hagar, and Ishmael in a Far-off Land?**

Can God and his Prophet be so heartless that they abandon a woman with a child in a barren desert without any reason? The sacrifice on Mount Moriah and leaving Ishmael and his mother in the desert of Beersheba were great tests for Abraham.

Both of these tests required an enormous amount of faith on Abraham’s part and the willingness to sacrifice everything for the Almighty. The Jews and the Christians downplay this incident from the Bible and never really discuss it. Imagine for a moment that God comes to you in a dream and tells you to take your son to the mountain and sacrifice him and in another dream tells you to abandon your wife and your son in a barren desert. What would be your reaction? Imagine how difficult it would have been for Abraham. Ishmael was Abraham’s firstborn, born to Abraham when the latter was 86-years old. Thus, when Sarah asks Abraham to take away Hagar and her son, the Bible says: “And the thing was very grievous in Abraham’s sight because of his son.”<sup>(17)</sup>

Abraham had complete faith in God, hence despite his love and attachment to his son Ishmael, he submitted to the Almighty’s will and agreed to abandon his son in the barren desert.

Both of these incidents, the sacrifice at Mount Moriah and

leaving Ishmael and his mother in the desert were interconnected. They were major tests for Abraham and they involved his first born whom he loved most. A similar test was seen with Jacob when his beloved son, Joseph, was taken away from him. In this way, one may discern in Genesis 22 God telling Abraham to sacrifice his only son, whom he loves. Subsequently, it becomes evident that Ishmael was not just the one who was abandoned in the desert (with his mother) but he was also the son who was taken up to Mount Moriah for sacrifice.

## Conclusion

It becomes clear that the name of Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn and his only son for 14 years, was conveniently replaced by the Bible writers. This discrepancy was deftly presented as truth and successfully managed to convince billions of unsuspecting Christians and Jews for centuries.

Now the question is, *why was Ishmael changed to Isaac?* This was done to belittle the status of Ishmael and raise the status of Isaac in the eyes of the Jews, because they were the descendants of Isaac. Ishmael, on the other hand, was the ancestor of the Arab nation. When Ishmael's status can be put down and forgotten for people's personal benefits, then one need not answer the question about the great nation that descended from Ishmael.



## Notes

1. Genesis 16:16
2. Genesis 21:5
3. Genesis 16:11
4. Genesis 16:3
5. Deuteronomy 21:15-17
6. Genesis 13: 14-17
7. Genesis 17:2-9
8. Genesis 17:19
9. Genesis 17:21
10. Genesis 26:3
11. Genesis 16:10-11
12. Genesis 17:20
13. Genesis 21:12-13
14. Genesis 21:17-18
15. Genesis 17:26
16. Genesis 27:1-35
17. Genesis 21:11