Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham’s Family in Mecca

Abstract and Keywords

Surah 14:37–38 refers to people Ibrahim had settled in a barren place, near God’s sacred house. This invited interpreters to explore Hagar’s and Ishmael’s fortunes in Mecca. Muslim interpreters wrote of the personal qualities of the mother and her son, and attributed to Hagar admirable courage. Her running (sa’y) between the hills of Safa and Marwa in search of water prior to the discovery of the spring, Zamzam, sponsors the ritual running of pilgrims, and the near-sacrifice of Ishmael is likewise commemorated as pilgrims make their prayerful circuit during the Hajj. In al-Tabari’s History we find amplifications of qur’anic motifs by himself and other commentators and storytellers. A particularly striking presentation of the story appears in an edition of al-Nisaburi’s Stories of the Prophets, and in one of the volume’s illustrations. A change and amplification of relationships between Ibrahim’s family members is offered.
In Islam’s strong vision of a history in which God’s messengers offer right guidance to all of humankind, Abraham, Ishmael, and Hagar take center stage as God’s family of special choice. Much of their dramatic story unfolds in the vicinity of Mecca, where God’s “first temple [was] set up for humankind” (Surah 3:96).

Even if the 245 references to Abraham in the Qur’an were collected and read all at once, they would strike someone familiar with the extended narrative cycle in Genesis 11–25 as being spare and episodic. There is no mistaking, however, what it is about the life and role of Abraham and his progeny that this scripture declares. The Qur’an knows Abraham as God’s “friend” (khalil) and as “upright” (hanif). This chapter traces Muslim interests in Abraham’s women and sons, first in the Qur’an and then in the writings by storytellers and commentators intent upon explaining and elaborating upon the Qur’an’s testimonies.

Sarah, Hagar, and Their Sons in the Qur’an

Sarah is identified in the Qur’an as “his [Abraham’s] wife,” but there is no direct reference to Hagar. We find in Islam’s scripture no treatment of the relationship between the two women. Absent is any notice concerning how Hagar came to be Sarah’s servant, or any mention of the troubled dealings between these two mothers of Abraham’s sons that resulted in Hagar and Ishmael being sent away—to a wilderness. The Qur’an regularly presumes that its hearers and readers possess broader background knowledge about the events recited by the Prophet. The more complete history of Abraham’s dealings with his wives and their sons, then, is not unfamiliar.

The Visit of God’s Messengers

Two passages describing the visit of the “messengers” to Abraham (Surah 11:69–76 and Surah 51:24–30) provide brief glimpses of “his wife.” Abraham becomes suspicious and apprehensive about the visitors when they do not eat the food he has offered them, but the tension is broken when they declare their news. In one of the recounts of this episode,
however, there is ambiguity in what prompts the response of Sarah:

11:69 And Our messengers came to Abraham
with good news: they said, “Peace.”

He said, “Peace,” and without delay
set out a roasted calf.

70 But when he saw they did not touch it,
he felt offended by them,
and had foreboding fear of them.

They said, “Do not fear; for we were sent
to the people of Lot.”

71 Then his wife, who was standing there, laughed;
but We announced to her
good news of Isaac, and of Jacob after Isaac.

72 She said, “Woe is me!
Shall I give birth now
that I’m an old woman
and my husband an old man?
This is a indeed a strange thing.”

They said, “Do you marvel
at the order of God?
The mercy and blessings of God
are on you, the people of the house.
Truly God is most praiseworthy,
most glorious!”
Sarah’s responses to the messengers’ announcements are somewhat puzzling. What, exactly, causes her to laugh? And what kind of reaction is her “Woe!” to the tidings that she and Abraham, in old age, will be parents to Isaac (and perhaps Jacob? the language allows this possibility)? The announcers chastise Sarah for regarding her predicted motherhood as a “strange thing” rather than a gift from God. Later interpreters will sort out the confusions.

In Surah 51:24–37 the sequence of the visitors’ two messages is reversed, and that to which Sarah reacts, though she reacts differently in this case, is clear.

51:28b They said [to Abraham], “Don’t be afraid,” and announced
good news to him of a very wise son.

29 Then his wife approached
in an uproar; striking her forehead,
she said, “A barren old woman?”

They said, “Thus has spoken your Lord,
Who is the epitome of wisdom, and of knowledge.”

In this instance, the patriarch’s wife cries out and strikes herself—gestures that catch up in themselves some combination of perplexity and disbelief. For their part, the messengers make a retort that expresses a basic element in Qur’anic representation of Allah as creator: God says “Be!” and a being comes to life. God’s will to generate life is a force not to be denied—whether in extraordinary or ordinary circumstances. Following this exchange, Abraham inquires about his visitors’ mission.

51:32 They said, “We have been sent
to a people guilty of sin
33 to bring upon them stones of clay
34 marked for transgressors
Believers were to be rescued in these doomed cities, but these
could be found in “only one household of people who
submitted to God” (51:36). Lot’s wife is not among the
redeemed; she, with Noah’s wife, is an example of “those who
scoff” (i.e., disbelieve), both having betrayed their husbands,
God’s “righteous servants” (66:10). The voice of God speaks
the lesson: “We left a sign there for those who fear the
agony” (51:36-37).

We recognize within these episodes elements of the biblical
legend—and also lessons couched unmistakably in the
vocabulary of Qur’anic thinking. Abraham’s wife is not like
Lot’s. Though she greets the news about her motherhood with
surprise and consternation, she is understood to have
acquiesced to God’s plan articulated by the messengers (or
God) as a believer, a Muslim.

Hagar

Where do we see Hagar? The question directs us to a number
of places in the Qur’an. She is present, but only implicitly, in a
passage that tells of the birth of a first son to Abraham, and of
the second, Isaac, born to (similarly implied) Sarah. Within
these verses there also occurs the narrative of Abraham’s
near-sacrifice of his son. Already at an early point in the
period in which Islam’s history unfolded alongside that of
Judaism and Christianity, the meaning of the text was
questioned and debated. At issue: which of Abraham’s sons
was taken by him to be offered to God as a sacrifice? Surah 37
(“Those who stand together”) follows notices of God’s extolled
envoys (Noah, Moses, Aaron, Elias, Lot) with a narrative about
Abraham’s challenge to his father and his father’s community:
they worshipped “deities other than God” (37:85-92). When
Abraham proceeded to knock down the images, and was
threatened with being burned alive, he declared his intention
to go to his Lord. In this journey to God, his emigration,
Abraham trusted that his God would guide him (37:99). The
ayat that follow are these:

37:101 “My Lord, grant me sound progeny.”

So We announced joyful news to him,
of a good-natured son.

102 Then when he had come of age
to work together, he said, “My son,
I see in a dream that I sacrifice you.
Now let’s see what you think.”
He said, “Father, do what you are commanded;
You will find me, God willing,
bearing it calmly.”

103 Then when both had acquiesced
and he lay him down, on his forehead,

104 We called to him, “Abraham!
105 You have already authenticated the vision.”
For that is how We recompense
those who do right;
106 for this was certainly an evident trial,
107 as We redeemed him
through a tremendous sacrifice,
108 and We left for him in future generations
109 “Peace upon Abraham!”
110 That is how We recompense
those who do right;
111 for he was one of Our faithful servants.
112 We also gave him good news
of Isaac, a prophet, a man of integrity.
113 And We blessed him and Isaac too;

but while some of their descendants are good,

some are clearly oppressing their own souls.

Abraham’s prayer request for “sound progeny” yields the unnamed “good-natured” son who proved himself, in time, to be prepared to submit to God’s will that he be a sacrifice. He is spared on account of his father’s meeting the test of obedience to God. There follows the birth to faithful Abraham of a second son, the prophet Isaac, who gains, with his father, God’s blessing. The mothers are not identified. Those who hear the Qur’an read or come to recite it know who they were. More important to recall and emphasize, it seems, than the women who bore Abraham’s offspring, are other things: Abraham, who trusts in God for guidance, has his prayer answered; a first son is born to him, and together father and son submit to God’s testing and gain their reward; Isaac the second son comes to the patriarch as another gift, and the sons are together counted worthy of God’s blessing.

How are we to weigh the concluding line, which combines observation and an alert? From the seed of both of these God-sent sons, Ishmael and Isaac, came children of Abraham who (in the Qur’anic revelation’s present) do or do not abide by the guidance of God. The entire passage poses questions and also evokes curiosities in us, as we shall see that it did in the earliest Muslim interpreters of the story of Abraham and his two families. But we must return to the Qur’an itself—to other portions in it that point to the two women, and here, Hagar especially.

Does the Qur’an know or tell of the fortunes of Hagar after her banishment from Abraham’s household, or her plight in the wilderness, when she and her son were at the point of death, due to thirst? Two Qur’anic segments preserve strong suggestions of Hagar and her actions.

At the beginning of Abraham’s speech addressed to God in Surah 14:35–41 he petitions his Lord to make the land in which he dwells secure, and to divert him and his sons from
the idols who have led so many into error. Verses 37–38 contain Abraham’s report to God of one of his own actions:

14:37 “Our Lord, I have settled some of my children in a valley without crops near Your sacred House, our Lord, that they may keep up prayer; so make the hearts of some people fond of them, and provide them with fruits, that they may be grateful.

38 Our Lord, you do indeed know what we conceal and what we reveal; and nothing whatever is hidden from God, on earth or in the sky.”

The “land,” Syria, from which Abraham speaks is clearly different from and some distance from the uncultivated “valley” near the “House” where some of Abraham’s family are meant to maintain prayer, attract others, and enjoy friendly associations. Subsequent commentators on the Qur’an presumed that Abraham’s comment referred to his compliance with Sarah’s demand that he take Hagar and her son not simply to some far place, but to Mecca, which the commentator al-Tha’labi writes was “at that time a place of thorny shrubs, acacia, and thistles.” If the Qur’an interpreters were correct in believing that 14:37–38 did resonate with Jewish and Christian scripture’s narration of the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael to a wild place, then this passage indeed incorporates Hagar, as matriarch, among “my
children” (presumed to be Ishmael and his descendants) whom Abraham settled near the “sacred House.” Major emphases in the text, however, bear no correspondence to the biblical narrative: it is for prayer that this band of Abraham’s kin have been sent to this valley where God’s holy bayt is found, and furthermore, Abraham gives voice to a hope that his people in the barren place will find acceptance and support there. There is a coding in the text, and Muslim exegetes will relish deciphering it.

A second passage which points to Hagar occurs in Surah 2:158:

Note that the mountains
Safa and Marwa are among the emblems of God:
so whoever makes the seasonal pilgrimage
to the House,
or an off-season pilgrimage,
it is not held against anyone
if he circles them both.
And if anyone willingly
does what is good,
God is appreciative and cognizant.

The ritual running, the sa’y, between these two hills at Mecca by those on pilgrimage (the greater, al-Hajj, or the lesser, al-`Umrah, the “visitation”; the text marks a distinction) re-enacted Hagar’s search for help when Ishmael was at the brink of death. Her running may indeed be seen as her test, a trial analogous to that met by Abraham when asked to sacrifice his son. The sa’y becomes for those who travel to do their devotions at Mecca a prescribed circumambulation undertaken after prayer at the place Abraham stood, and after drinking from the water of the Well of Zamzam—the water source believed to have possessed, and to possess still, the
powers of salvation and healing. We cannot be certain how fully developed this particular ceremonial “running” was at the time of the Qur’an, but our verses approve of the action on the part of pilgrims to Mecca—the prayerful runners “[do] what is good.” There is more at stake in this endorsement than is evident, since it is a monotheist and specifically Muslim displacement and reform of earlier religious practices at the site: the kind of sa’y endorsed in the Qur’an and given more narrative authority by later commentators is, Reuben Firestone noted, actively “substituting Hagar’s actions for the pre-Islamic practice of running between the idols that graced the peaks of the two hills.”

Hagar, then, can be said to be present in the Qur’an no less than Sarah, the wife. The two texts, 14:35–41 and 2:158, without giving her name, invoke memories of Hagar’s significant place in the Muslims’ foundational story—the discovery of the place of the Ka`ba, its building by the patriarch and his first son, and the institution of proper prayer in that holy place.

Though their mothers go unnamed in the Qur’an, Ishmael and Isaac are referred to often—in interesting patterns. Firestone observed two idiomatic phrases that occur, the first not unexpected by those familiar with the Bible, namely, “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” and another which appears several times, “Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac” (2:133), and an extended form, “Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes” (2:136, 140; 3:84; 4:163).

Because Ishmael had become a name associated with Israel’s foes, the Ishmaelites, in the time of the rabbis, and because Christianity understood its own covenant with Abraham’s God to have come via kinship with Isaac, moderns familiar with those religions can only be struck by Ishmael’s status and prominence in the Qur’anic groupings of God’s favored ones, his envoys and prophets. Certainly Isaac is regularly counted among those righteous servants sent by God to warn and guide humankind, both together with Ishmael and independent of him.

Surah 29:27 stands in parallel and in contrast to Genesis 17:21–22. (“As for Ishmael ... I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall
be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you this season next year.”) The Qur’anic form of the divine promise to Abraham that will be sustained through Isaac reads:

27 And We bestowed Isaac and Jacob on him,

and We placed prophecy and scripture

on his descendants,

and We gave him his reward in the world;

and at the end he will certainly be

one of the worthies.

To Isaac and Jacob were granted prophecy and scripture—that is, the revelation manifested through Muhammad’s recitations of God’s words.

Another mode of listing Abraham’s sons names them both, but separates them.

38:45 Remember also Our servants

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

Endowed with ability and vision:

46 We purified them by a pure quality,

remembrance of paradise;

47 and they were to Us

among the chosen, the best.

48 And remember Ishmael and Elisha,

and the holder of responsibility;

every one of them was one of the best.

In the first three verses Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are saluted for their power and wisdom, and for the blessing that made
them capable of remembering—that is, yearning for—Paradise. Here and elsewhere Ishmael is found not in immediate association with Abraham and Isaac, but in other clusters of renowned prophets. At the end of this passage (38:48) he is grouped with Elisha and with “the holder of responsibility” (as our translator, Thomas Cleary, renders Dhul Kifl, commonly understood to be Ezekiel). A similar phrase puts Ishmael in the prophetic company of Idris (Enoch) and Ezekiel, and notes their shared qualities of patience and steadfastness (21:85). It is not evident what elements in the lore surrounding these three heroes served as a qur’anic rationale for their association—or for the attraction of Ezekiel and Enoch to the name of Ishmael. Was it Elisha’s wondrous healings and his capacity to confront an unrighteous ruler? Enoch’s being “taken up” to heaven by God? Ezekiel’s visionary powers, enabling him to (p.195) see a chariot in the heavens and a valley in which human skeletons were resurrected? The same mystery surrounds Surah 6:86, in which Ishmael and Elisha are joined by Jonah and Lot, the latter two not identified by a particular trait (what attributes or virtues might early hearers of the Qur’an have thought linked Jonah and Lot—and Ishmael?), but who with all the prophets earlier listed gained God’s (unranked) favor among his creatures.6

In one instance Ishmael, by himself, is described. Surah 19:54–55 reads:

54 And mention Ishmael in the Book,
for he was true to his promise
and was a messenger, a prophet.
55 He used to enjoin prayer
and charity on his people,
and he was acceptable to his Lord.

What is distinctive about Ishmael, according to these verses? A parallel passage in Surah 21:73 steals much of his individual thunder in that it attributes also to Abraham, Lot, Isaac, and
Jacob the virtues of establishing true worship (“perform[ing] the prayer”), urging zakat, and living in submission to God. What remains particular to Ishmael, alone, is the claim that “he was true to his promise.” Later commentators, as we shall see, knew or fashioned stories to substantiate the claim. Reuven Firestone argued that despite the dozen references to Ishmael in the Qur’an we learn little about him, his slender characterization a result of his being a comparatively minor character in a drama strongly focused on his father.

Perhaps the same argument applies to the others in Abraham’s family. Insofar as Hagar and Sarah and Isaac gain notice in the Qur’an, it is as if they are small planets circling Abraham, khalil Allah. And yet the sacred book’s placement of Hagar and her son in the arid land near God’s House, the running between the two mountains there, and Ishmael’s placement near the Ka’bah, are rich soil for the further cultivation of Islam’s celebration of the guidance it received from God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

The Stories of Ibrahim’s Women, Interpreted

In taking up that portion of his History of the Prophets and Patriarchs that tells of Sarah, Hagar, and their sons, we gain access to the kinds of inquiries and discussions that fascinated both the predecessors and contemporaries of al-Tabari. And yet he does not merely report; at various points we learn also of his own intellectual and interpretive leanings and conclusions.

Moving from the Qur’an to literature that seeks to understand and to expand upon its messages, we notice quickly that Hagar and Sarah become more visible—and audible. Islamic tafsir shows awareness of biblical materials developed by Jews and Christians, and of pre-Islamic Arabic remembrances of Abraham and members of his household. Ardent Muslim interest in the religion’s great ancestor, Abraham, brings with it a new and important shift of emphasis, one that Barbara Stowasser highlighted:
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Among all of sacred history’s female images ... Hagar’s may have been the most productive of ongoing change and interpretation in the Islamic imagination. Inasmuch as the palpable tensions embodied in the scripturalist tales on Sarah and Hagar have to do with the Islamic processes of acceptance of the Biblical heritage while also establishing its own, the figures of Sarah and Hagar symbolize Islam’s self-definition as continuation, but also corrective completion, of the monotheistic tradition.

During the early medieval period, the stories of Isaac’s (Syrian) and Ishmael’s (Meccan) role as Abraham’s chosen sacrifice both appear to have existed side by side for a while; thus, these sons’ mothers were then also more ambiguously ranked. With the ninth and tenth centuries, however, the Mecca-Ishmael-Hagar tradition rose in prominence, and with it, Hagar’s rank as one of Islam’s most important female figures, a symbol of Islamic identity.

The section on “Abraham, the Friend of the Merciful” in al-Tabari’s multivolume history gives a colorful presentation of Hagar, but necessarily commences with questions and opinions about Sarah’s genealogy (questions taken up by the rabbis as well) that motivated al-Tabari to provide two accounts of the origins of Sarah’s belief—of her becoming a Muslim. The first tells that, being the daughter of Haran the Elder, Abraham’s paternal uncle, she was among the early followers who, impressed by the prophet’s deliverance from King Nimrod’s fiery furnace, believed in the God who saved him. An alternative explanation of Sarah’s faith in God drew upon a tradition that she, the daughter of the king of the land of Harran, had herself resisted the polytheism of her people, “so [Abraham] married her, since he would thus have a believing wife without having to convert her.”

When his father, Azar, and his people refused Abraham’s call to honor the single God, he and his small company, Sarah included, took up the “fugitive” life of wayfarers (Surah 19:41–50).

The trauma caused by Sarah’s “goodness and beauty” in their sojourns is at once familiar and yet, in Muslim interpreters’ tellings, particular in its presentation. The troublesome “lie” of Abraham to the ruler who asks to meet the virtuous and
stunning Sarah is given a justification by way of an argument for religious kinship. Fearing for his life should the king desire her, and believe him to be her husband, Abraham says to Sarah:

This tyrant asked me about you, and I told him that you are my sister. So do not give me the lie when you see him. You are my sister in God, for in all this land there are no Muslims except ourselves.¹¹

Her marriage-minded (and aroused) host, once Sarah is within reach, suffers repeated frustration. Paralysis overwhelms his arm as he attempts to touch her. Each time the paralysis is eased by Sarah’s prayer, which she offers on the pledge that he will not try again to grab or fondle her. Declaring finally that he has been brought a devil, not a human, the tyrant ejects Sarah from his presence, sending with her Hagar—as a gift, or as an act meant to guarantee that the powerful Sarah will not visit harm on him and his house. Sarah reports to Abraham that God protected her “from the unbelieving libertine and has given me Hagar as a servant.” We note that Hagar comes to Sarah from God, and only secondarily from the tyrant. Following these words al-Tabari reports:

According to Muhammad b. Sirin: When Abu Hurayrah related this account, he would say, “This is your mother, O Arabs!”¹²

A tradition attributed by Abu Ja`far to Ibn Ishaq recounts Sarah’s later decision to make Hagar, a person of “good appearance” and a “clean woman,” available to Abraham, that he might gain a son from her: “So he had intercourse with Hagar, and she bore him Ishmael.”¹³ Again, we meet an interjection that preserves conversation among the sages. The first part, whose chain of transmitters stems from Muhammad and ends with Ibn Humayd, reads: “When you conquer Egypt, treat its people well, for they are kin (to you) and deserve protection.” Al-Zuhri (also listed in the isnad) was asked, “What is their kinship that the Messenger of God mentioned?” and he answered, “Hagar the mother of Ishmael was one of them.”¹⁴ These scholars are eager to know how many ways Hagar should be identified and understood. She, the matriarch
of the Arabs, hailed from Egypt (from the Pharaoh’s household) and this ties her and her native people to the future (or, at the time of al-Tabari’s writing, the past) mission and expansion of Islam. The Egyptians are a kindred people; they are to be accorded favor and defense. In the Qisas al-anbiya’ of al-Kisa’i, composed four centuries later, the elaboration of the importance of the mother is shown to have extended to the son. Though from Isaac’s loins many prophets would issue, from Ishmael would come a “prophet whose name would be Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets.”

Indeed, it is told that when Hagar “was delivered of Ishmael … [his] face radiated the Light of our Prophet Muhammad like the moon.”

The Qur’an’s telling of the visit of the Messengers to Sarah and Abraham undergoes elaboration in the sources preserved by al-Tabari. Knowing that Lot’s people were doomed because of their “vile deeds” and their heedlessness despite prophets and good advice sent to them, God had his traveling angels stop at Abraham’s camp, “commanding him to leave their [i.e., the people of Lot’s] community”—that is, to sever any relations with his nephew’s folk. The other reason for the visit had to do with the tidings to Sarah and Abraham of the coming of Isaac “and also of Jacob who was to come after him.” Eager to give hospitality and awed by his guests, grander than any to whom he’d previously extended his generosity, Abraham determines that only he will cook for and serve them. When the messengers do not reach for the fare, their host is chagrined and fearful. What next transpires, al-Tabari the commentator tells us, is what the Qur’an indicates about this encounter and Sarah’s reactions.

They said, “Do not be afraid! We are sent to the people of Lot” (Surah 11:70). Sarah was standing nearby, and when she heard of God’s command, she laughed, knowing what she knew of the people of Lot. Then they told her of the coming of Isaac and, after Isaac, of Jacob—that is, they told her she would have a son and grandson. She struck her face (in surprise) and said, “Woe is me! How can I have a child when I am a barren old woman?” (Surah 11:72)
The reasons for Sarah’s reactions are clarified, as is the relationship of Jacob to Isaac. Firestone notes that it was to Jews and Christians that early Muslims turned for information concerning this event, which, while being a prominent moment in the biblical tale, was not part of any “pre-Islamic Arabian consciousness” or legend concerning Abraham. Hence the etymological connection in Hebrew between Sarah’s “laughing” and the name “Isaac,” having no consonance in Arabic, dropped from Muslim commentary as a detail.17

The event next recorded in al-Tabari’s chronicle—God’s command that Abraham build “the House” in which worship and the speaking of God’s name will occur—receives the author’s focused attention. Where does the building of the Ka`bah fit in Abraham’s history? Several of the preserved Muslim traditions make no reference to what, besides God’s injunction, may have preceded and affected the journey.18 But our chronicler writes that some have said that … the reason he took Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca with him was that Sarah was jealous of Hagar’s having borne Ishmael by him.19

Holders of that opinion told an arresting narrative, features of which are known in rabbinic midrash, that expands upon the measures Sarah took in her jealousy and anger:

Sarah said to Abraham, “you may take pleasure in Hagar, for I have permitted it.” So he had intercourse with Hagar and she gave birth to Ishmael. Then he had intercourse with Sarah, and she gave birth to Isaac. When Isaac grew up, he and Ishmael fought. Sarah became angry and jealous towards Ishmael’s mother and sent her away. Then she called her back and took her in. But later she became angry and sent her away again, and brought her back yet again. She swore to cut something off of her, and said to herself, “I shall cut off her nose, I shall cut off her ear—but no, that would deform her. I will circumcise her instead.” So she did that, and Hagar took a piece of cloth to wipe the blood away. For that reason women have been circumcised and have taken pieces of cloth down to today. Sarah said,
“She will not live in the same town with me.” God told Abraham to go to Mecca, where there was no House at the time. He took Hagar and her son to Mecca and put them there.”

We are most struck, encountering this brief tradition, by the reference to Sarah’s ultimate choice of circumcision Hagar, on the grounds that that would not deform her—at least in terms of public visibility. It has the character of an etiological tale that, as William Brinner suggested, “probably reflects the antiquity of the practice of circumcision (both male and female) among the Arabs, which antedates Islam.”

We saw that rabbis whose views were preserved in Genesis Rabbah speculated freely about the play or sport which Ishmael entered into with his younger half-brother. Al-Tha‘labi reports simply that “one day Isaac and Ishmael fought as boys do,” stirring Sarah’s anger toward Hagar, whom she wanted to deface, before Abraham convinced her to relent. He advised: “Lower her status and pierce her ears,” which Sarah did.

Within this same piece of lore we find an episode combining the competition between the boys and the source of Sarah’s jealousy. After presiding over an archery contest between his sons, Abraham takes Ishmael, the winner, onto his lap, while placing Isaac next to himself. In her ire Sarah says to him: “You have turned to the son of the servant-girl and have seated him in your bosom, whereas you have turned to my son and seated him at your side, while you had vowed that you would not injure me or do any evil to me.” So it happened that “the jealousy that overcomes women overcame her.” In both al-Tabari’s and al-Tha‘labi’s stories of the clash between Abraham’s women we see the traces of available biblical and ante-Islamic lore, but these sources contribute to a decidedly Islamic representation of the Abraham narrative—one that leaves the figures of Sarah and Isaac behind, moving forward to the religion’s full exposition of Abraham’s service to God—at Mecca.

Although ready and willing to obey God’s call to build the House (cf. Surah 2:124–128), Abraham, according to Muslim interpreters, needed help in discovering its destined location. The guidance, some scholars said, was provided by Gabriel.
Many others favored the view that the “Shakinah” led the prophet to the propitious site. Drawn from imagery of the cloud-like divine presence, the shekinah, which stood over and accompanied the Israelites’ tabernacle in their long journey in the wilderness (Exodus 40:34ff.), this motif was adapted and altered by Muslim interpreters as they considered what kind of divine helper could reveal the location of the bayt Allah—the Ka`ba.

The Shakinah that leads Abraham toward Mecca takes many forms in the traditions al-Tabari cites—a two-headed strong wind that, having arrived at the place intended for the Ka` bah, coils, snake-like, to mark it, or a wind with a single head and wings, or, most colorfully of all, a wind-being equipped with a voice who proclaims three times, while circling the sacred site’s location, “Build on me!” We are reminded more than once which branch of Abraham’s family has traveled southward with him. Hagar and Ishmael are present, and the notice in the Qur’an (14:37) of Abraham’s settling some of his family “in a valley without crops near Your sacred House” hovers over the now expanding narrative. Indeed, in a tradition traced to the eminent eighth-century CE scholar Ibn Ishaq, Hagar receives privileged and prior information concerning the location of the “Temple,” or House:

Sa` id b. Salim, who got it from `Uthman b. Saj, who got it from Muhammad b. Ishaq, told us: It reached me that an angel came to Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, after Abraham settled her in Mecca, before Abraham and Ishmael raised up the edifice of the Temple, and showed her the Temple, which was a round, red hill, and said to her, This is the first temple for mankind on earth, and it is the Temple of God. Know that Abraham and Ishmael will erect it for mankind.24

Commentators, aware of speculations about the earliest histories of God’s holy places, wondered about the antiquity of “the House.” Did it have an earlier existence, Adam having built, Shith/Seth having rebuilt, and Noah having protected it? Yes, according to the source just quoted. Abraham and Ishmael in their digging found the foundation put in place by Adam, discovering a stone so large that “three men could not
surround it. . . . then [Abraham] built on the first foundation of Adam. “25 No, there was no earlier sanctuary, one tradition dependent on a saying of `Ali b. Abi Talib argues, “but it [i.e., this construction] was the first House built with the blessing of the standing-place of Abraham, and whoever enters it will be safe.”26

Numerous legends speak of the process of the Ka`bah’s construction, and about the roles played by Abraham and his assistants. The patriarch is credited with building the structure up to the last and necessary capstone. He then turned to Ishmael for assistance. In one account, the boy is absent, having wandered away to do his own project. In others, Abraham does not like the stone offered him and sends Ishmael on another search. Or, Ishmael sets out to find a proper capstone and returns with one in hand.

But he found that Abraham had already set the Black Stone in place. He said, “O my father, who brought you this stone?” Abraham answered, “Someone who did not rely on your building brought it to me. It was Gabriel who brought it to me from heaven.” Then the two of them finished it.27

Mixed in with the themes of wonder that explain the completion of the “sacred house” are the slightly comic and disparaging glimpses of Ishmael—a curious feature that may serve to contrast the son’s youth (seen alternately as “a baby” or “a boy”) with the preeminence of his father, the especially favored servant, God’s obedient one.

Quite different conclusions to the story of the discovery and building of the Ka`ba appear in two reports in the History. In one a hierarchy of authority among the actors is made plain through the dialogue between angel and prophet.

At last they reached Mecca, which at that time was nothing but acacia trees, mimosa, and thorn trees, and there was a people called the Amalekites outside Mecca and its surroundings. The House at that time was but a hill of red clay. Abraham said to Gabriel, “Was it here that I was ordered to leave them?” Gabriel said, “Yes.”
Abraham directed Hagar and Ishmael to go to al-Hijr, and settled them down there. He commanded Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, to find shelter there. Then he said, “My Lord! I have settled some of my posterity in an uncultivable valley near your Holy House”... [with the quotation of Surah 14:37 continuing until] “that they may be thankful.” Then he journeyed back to his family in Syria, leaving the two of them at the House.28

In renditions like this one attributed to Ibn Abbas, Hagar’s voice is heard:

As he was leaving, Hagar called out to him, “O Abraham, I ask you three times, who commanded you to set me down in a land without grain, without cows’ udders, without people, without water, and without provisions?”

He said, “My Lord commanded me.” She said, “Verily, He will never lead us astray.” As Abraham was retracing his path (back to Syria) he said, “O Lord! You know both the sadness we hide and the sadness we reveal. Nothing on earth or in heaven is hidden from God.”29

By a deft addition to the drama, Abraham’s poignant acknowledgment of his pangs is given scriptural weight in his concluding quotation of the verse in Surah 14:37. Yet Hagar’s earlier response to the answer she has drawn from Abraham is the central element in the passage. Testifying to her trust in God she identifies herself as a Muslim woman, expanding upon earlier recognition of her as matriarch of the Arabs, and also upon what may have been presumed about Hagar’s faithfulness on account of her accompanying Abraham in his journey toward the place of the bayt Allah. Sarah’s status as a believer having been established in the earlier part of Abraham’s history, Hagar now commands the spotlight, and states her confidence in God’s protective oversight of her and her son in the barren place where Abraham has deposited her. Her faith, we know, is put to an immediate test.

The revelation of the spring of Zamzam that rescues from death Hagar and Abraham’s beloved first son, the guarantor of the line that will produce Muhammad, is remembered in
numerous ways. Details vary. Ishmael is an infant, still nursing, or he is a young boy. Hagar is identified as one who, in flight from Sarah, used the hem of her garment to cover her tracks (and, in another etiological tale, as “the first Arab woman who voided ordure and dragged the edges of her garment over it”).

In her search for water Hagar hears no sounds, or she hears the noise of beasts, causing her to rush back to where her son languishes. Ibn Abbas is credited with the report that at one point in her running, Hagar

heard a faint voice. Being unsure that she had really heard it, she said “Hush!” to herself, until she was sure of it. Then she said, “You have made me hear Your voice, so give me water, for I am dying and so is the one with me.”

The saving stream gushes forth, and it is the work of Gabriel, or of Ishmael—one or the other digs with his heel. We are told that when Zamzam began flowing, Hagar hastily worked to gather the water into her depleted waterskin—an action that is criticized by Muhammad, the commentators recall, on the grounds that without her frantic intervention, “Zamzam would still be a free-flowing spring.” The source and rationale of this accusation is obscure. It does not seriously diminish the maternal heroism that is understood to have summoned God to act in mercy, redeeming the promising son of Abraham.

Ishmael’s mother is celebrated as “the first person to run between al-Safa and al-Marwah,” and on account of this she stands alongside Abraham as one whose ancient deeds of faith constitute the foundations of Islam’s pilgrimage rituals.

Further narrative development of the tradition preserved by al-Tabari is seen in the writing of his successor Al-Tha`labi:

She heard a sound coming from al-Marwah and ran, taking pains not to run like an exhausted person. She was the first to run between al-Safa and al-Marwah (as is the custom of the Hajj). Then she climbed al-Marwah and heard a voice, as if disbelieving her hearing, then she
knew for certain, and began to call out: “Ishmael!” by which she meant: “God, You have made me hear your voice, so help me, for I and he who is with me will perish.” Suddenly Gabriel stood before her, asking “Who are you?” “Abraham’s concubine,” she answered, “He left me here with my son.” He said: “To whom did he entrust you?” “She said: “He entrusted us to God.” He said: “Then he has entrusted you to One [who is] Generous and Sufficient.” Their food and drink had run out and he brought them to the place of Zamzam, where he thrust his foot into the ground and a spring burst forth. Therefore Zamzam is called “The Foot Thrust of Gabriel.”

Recognizably biblical motifs resonate in the recognition that Ishmael’s name, in Hebrew, means “God hears” (Genesis 16:11), and in the notice that Hagar, confronted by an angel, identifies herself here, as Abraham’s concubine (while in Genesis 16:8, as Sarah’s slave girl). But Muslim pilgrimage practices hold sway over the episode—in the mention of the Hajj, in the prescribed way of running, in the enunciation of God’s attributes, and in the reminder that Muslims refer to the spring as the angel’s “Foot Thrust.” Worshippers at Mecca run in the steps of Hagar the believer, the mother who stands at the beginning of their heritage. As Michael Wolfe wrote of modern pilgrims in his One Thousand Roads to Mecca, the tawaf, or seven circuits of the Ka`ba, is succeeded by a period of refreshment at the Zamzam well, prior to the sa`y:

To perform it, pilgrims cross the mosque to the east side of the building, where a course about a third of a mile long, the Masa`a, stretches between the Safa and Marwa hills. Here Ishmael’s mother, Hagar, is said to have run back and forth seven times in a frantic search for water in the desert. During her final lap, the child cried out. Returning, she found an unearthed desert spring. Today this rite gives pilgrims a participatory taste of a timeless drama in which parental love and religious faith are weighed in the balance. At an ethnic level, the story explains the survival of all Arabs, Ishmael being their progenitor.
Though it is to be expected, we should pause to notice that in these traditional Muslim representations of Abraham’s Meccan-settled family all traces have vanished of rabbinic deprecation of Ishmael, whose “sport” was thought by some to be idolatry—the playing at sacrifices—and of similar charges against his mother, who in desperation in the wilderness (according to Rabbi Eliezer and others) is said to have sought help from the gods of her former people.\textsuperscript{35}

The Muslim Hagar’s story is its own. Barbara Stowasser captures and highlights in a few lines what has emerged from our engagement with Hagar in al-Tabari’s \textit{History}, and in other Muslim commentary:

Islamic interpretation has not seen Hagar’s expulsion from Abraham’s household at Sara’s hands as an occurrence of female oppression but as part of the divine plan to establish God’s true sanctuary and its pure rituals in the wilds of a barren valley far away. Hagar had to endure the distress and danger that have typically marked the careers of God’s historical agents. Like God’s prophets, Hagar persevered, and thus her name and memory came to be part of Islam’s sacred history and ritual.\textsuperscript{36}

Our inspection of Muslim perceptions of Abraham’s women can very nearly be concluded at this point, even if later episodes in Abraham’s life bring them back on the scene (for example, each is portrayed as the mother of the son which Abraham prepares to sacrifice). Al-Tabari’s \textit{History} moves from the events at Zamzam to other stories relating to Mecca and the establishment of true worship there. A people named the Jurhamites, spying birds above the spring, come and succeed in gaining from Hagar the privilege of living near her and Ishmael in the valley. When Hagar dies, according to one account, Ishmael marries a woman from the Jurhum people. Multiple reports are given of Abraham’s later journeys to Mecca. He hopes to see Hagar and Ishmael, and then, when it is known to him that Hagar is dead, he visits Ishmael’s home and tests the hospitality of his successive wives. These narratives regularly begin by noting the conditions Sarah
imposed on Abraham’s trip: he is not to settle there; he is not to get down from his camel!

The stories in which Abraham sees to it that his son dispatches one wife and finds a proper one are best understood as serving to promote and celebrate the Ka’ba and the Hajj in particular, providing an origin-story for the *maqam Ibrahim*, the prophet’s “standing place” that comes to adorn the sacred precinct of God’s House. One account has it that while extending the courtesy of washing the head of her unknown visitor (Abraham, her father-in-law), Ishmael’s second wife made use of a stone standing place—a place for his feet to rest. Several traditions assume that the building of the Ka’ba occurred at this time, after Hagar’s death, and in connection with Abraham’s return to the site where he had settled her and her son. So, after the building’s completion, narrative context is provided for a number of important qur’anic statements, especially the exhortation found in Surah 22 (*The Pilgrimage*) at ayat 27–29:

22:27 And announce the pilgrimage
to the people: they will come to you on foot,
and on every lean mount,
coming from every recondite mountain pass,
28 that they may bear witness
to the blessing they have
and remembrance of the name of God
on special days
over domestic animals
God has provided them.
So eat from them
And feed the poor in distress.
29 Then let them clean themselves up,
fulfill their vows, and circle the ancient House.

Standing on the stone Abraham performs God’s command to announce the pilgrimage. All beings and things in heaven and earth hear him. Al-Tabari wrote:

And his voice reached even those yet unborn in the loins of men and the wombs of women. All who believed among those of past generations in God’s knowledge that they would perform the pilgrimage between then and the Day of Resurrection answered Abraham, “Here I am, my God, here I am.”

Another element in the collected stories has Abraham initially hanging back, pleading lack of capacity (“O Lord! What will my voice reach?”), only to be reassured by God (“Proclaim! The reaching is my responsibility”).

Early Islam is eager to blot out any recollections of pre-Islamic cultic activity at Mecca and at the Ka’ba, and the commentators work assiduously and enthusiastically to locate (and secure) the first worship done at Mecca in the story of Islam’s patriarch. Nowhere is this effort made in such detail as in al-Tabari’s record of the testimony of `Ubayd b. `Umayr al-Laythi:

[Abraham] took Ishmael out and went with him on the day of Tarwiyah and stayed at Mina with him and with the Muslims who were with him, and he prayed with them the prayers of midday, afternoon, sunset, and late evening. Then he spent the night with them until they arose, and he prayed the dawn prayer with them. In the morning he went out with them to `Arafah, and spoke to them there until sunset drew near. Then he joined the two prayers, midday and afternoon, and then he went and stood with them at the thorn bush which is the standing-place of `Arafah, where the prayer-leader stood teaching him and demonstrating to him. When the sun had set, he urged on the prayer leader and those who were with him until they came to al-Muzdalifah. There he joined the two prayers of sunset and late evening. Then he spent the night with him and those with him until,
when the dawn broke, he prayed the morning prayer with them. Then he stood with them at Quzah of al-Muzdalifah. This is the standing-place where the prayer leader stands. When day came, he demonstrated and explained to them what to do, including the throwing of the great stone. He showed them the sacrifice-ground of Mina, then performed the sacrifice and shaved his head. From Mina he went into the crowd to show them how to perform the march around the Ka`bah. Then he took them back to Mina to show them how to throw the stones, until he had completed the pilgrimage and proclaimed it to mankind.

Al-Tabari appends the teaching of the Messenger of God and some of his companions, preserved by Abu Ja`far: “Gabriel was the one who showed Abraham the ritual acts when he made the pilgrimage.”

This description of the initial pilgrims’ ordered acts of worship is based on a testimony deriving from a contemporary of Muhammad. One of its effects is to represent in the narrative of Abraham’s Hajj exactly those patterns and practices well-known in Islam’s first century. The text outlines the activities of al Tarwiya (the day of “deliberation”), the tawaf, prayer at the maqam Ibrahimm, the drinking of Zamzam’s water and the s`ay, and the night spent at Mina; the day’s “standing” or “waiting” at Mina with its led prayers and recitations of the talbiyah, the statement of preparedness and confession (Labbayka allahumma labbayka, “Here I am, my God, here I am”), the feast of sacrifice, `Id al Adha, and the collection of stones for casting at the pillars at Mina, the offerings at the sacrifice ground, followed by the cutting of hair. Throughout this text, Abraham, along with stationed prayer leaders, is shown to model and preside over the devotional acts of the Meccan pilgrimage. He has purified God’s house, and now leads in true worship “those that shall go about it and those that stand … those that bow and prostrate themselves” (Surah 22:26).

There are still other narratives concerning Abraham’s women that the writers of tafsir and qisas al-anbiya take up and deploy. Two parts of their stories remain—one confusedly
Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham’s Family in Mecca

intertwined, and the other having to do with the deaths and burials of each. A significant amount of text in al-Tabari’s History pertaining to Abraham’s life is spent on the two opposing opinions Muslim commentators held in the discussion of whether it was Isaac or Ishmael that he offered for sacrifice. Both in al-Tabari’s chronicle and in the larger body of traditional commentary-literature, the groups of “those who say” that it was Isaac, and “those who say” it was Ishmael are nearly equally divided. While giving full treatment to the two schools of thought, al-Tabari sides with the view that the near-victim was Isaac. His argument and choice (one which will not prevail among Muslims in subsequent centuries) depends upon his interpretation of the relevant (and, as we saw earlier, debatable) Qur’anic passages. In relation to our subject, this debate among Muslim sages about which son of Abraham was chosen for the dhabih results in a dramatic scene in which either Sarah or Hagar is present. Satan’s effort to tempt Isaac’s mother during the time Abraham journeys toward the place of sacrifice we encountered earlier in Jewish legend. Its counterparts in Islamic story-telling feature both Sarah and Hagar. In one account, Ka`b tells Abu Harayrah:

Satan visited Abraham’s wife, Sarah, in the shape of a man whom Abraham’s people knew, and asked her, “Where is Abraham going so early with Isaac?” She said, “He went off early on some errand.” Satan said, “No, by God! That is not the reason. . . . He took him out early to sacrifice him.” Sarah said, “There is no truth to that, he would not sacrifice his own son.” Satan said, “By God, it is true.” Sarah said, “And why would he sacrifice him?” He replied, “He claims that his Lord ordered him to do it.” Sarah said, “If his Lord ordered him to do that, it is best that he obey.” Then Satan left Sarah.

In a different report, attributed to “Ibn Humayd—Slamah—Ibn Ishaq—certain scholars,” we read of Iblis being rebuffed in his attempts to dissuade Abraham, and then Ishmael, from obeying the divine command. (It is this attempt of Satan to tempt Ishmael that underlies the Muslim Hajj ritual practice of the lapidation—the hurling of stones at the three large
columns (jamarat) at Mina.) In his last attempt to frustrate the purposes of God,

Iblis went to Ishmael’s mother Hagar in her dwelling and said to her, “O Mother of Ishmael! Do you know where Abraham has taken Ishmael?” She said, “He took him to gather wood for us on the trail.” Iblis said, “He took him only to sacrifice him.” Hagar said, “Never! He is too merciful to him and loves him too much for that.” Iblis told her, “He claims that God commanded him to do it.” She said, “If his Lord commanded him to do it, then one should surrender to the command of God.”

The event takes place in the vicinity of Mecca, with Abraham taking his son to Mt. Thabir, and a definitive Qur’anic tone sounds at the end of Iblis’s failure to tempt: the enemy of God rages, and the narrator notes that “the family of Abraham ... had all refused to deal with him, by God’s help, and they had agreed with God’s command, saying, ‘To hear is to obey.’”

Some Muslim Qur’anic commentators familiar to al-Tabari believed that the near-sacrifice of Isaac took place when he was on pilgrimage to the House with his father and his mother (Abraham sending Sarah back to the Ka`ba after the lapidation, at which point he proceeded with his son to al-Jamra al Wusta in Mina). This view gave way, over time, to that tradition within Meccan pilgrimage associated with the killing of an animal, the `Id al-Adha on the 10th Dhu-l-Hijjah—namely, that Hagar’s son Ishmael was the one redeemed by the dhabih, the “mighty sacrifice” (Surah 37:107) which God provided in Ishmael’s stead. This identification of Ishmael as the son intended for sacrifice, and the location of the divine intervention in one of Mecca’s hills (al-Tabari, in arguing for Isaac, was forced to contend with the tradition that the horns of the victim were known to be on display in the Ka`ba), brought into play the story of Hagar’s sa’y between Safa and Marwa, and also remembrance of her as one who, faced by Iblis, reaffirmed her trust in God—Abraham’s God and hers.

Information about the deaths of Sarah and Hagar do not present us with any particular narrative drama; these notices are summary statements about the progeny of Abraham (who,
with two later wives, fathers eleven more sons). The interest in these passages centers in the extension of the children of Abraham into future generations. Al-Tha`labi’s obituary information for the two mothers reads:

The men with knowledge of the accounts of past generations have said, “Sarah died in Syria when she was one hundred and twenty-seven years old, in a town of the Jababirah of the land of Canaan, that is, in Hebron, in a field that Abraham had bought, and she was buried there. Hagar had died in Mecca before Sarah, and was buried in the Hijr.”

He writes that at age one hundred thirty-seven, Ishmael died, “and was buried in the Hijr near the tomb of his mother Hagar.” To this al-Tha`labi appends a colorful saying by `Umar b. `Abd al-`Aziz to the effect that

Ishmael complained to his Lord of the heat of Mecca, whereupon God revealed to him, “I shall open for you one of the gates of the Garden from which its breeze will blow upon you until the Day of Resurrection,” and at that place Ishmael was buried.

Reference to the Hijr brings us to the end of the story of Hagar and her son, and also to the continuation of their memory in Muslim celebrations of God’s signs in Mecca. The Hijr being referred to in these texts is the semicircular area adjacent to the Ka’ba’s northwestern wall that is within the circuit of pilgrims’ tawaf (circumambulation). Much discussed by modern scholarship in relation to this space’s use and understandings by pre-Islamic visitors to and inhabitants of the site (the era Islam tagged as al-Jahiliyya—the time of pagan “ignorance”), the area possesses significance for our commentators of the early centuries of Islam precisely because what al-Kisa’i calls the “rock” at the Hijr contains the bodies of the religion’s heroine and her son by Abraham. As holy spaces within the Ka’ba’s sacred precinct, the tombs of Hagar and Ishmael make a triad with the maqam, or standing place, that commemorates Abraham’s blessed presence and accomplishment there. We observe how carefully the Islamic narrative concerning Hagar and Ishmael, the patriarch’s
family in the valley near the House, both inspires and is reinforced by the “true worship” established and continued there as generations of pilgrims come to make their prayers at this holiest of places.

The Family at Mecca

Here we discuss interpretations of the family at Mecca in a painting (Figure 6.1), and in the text of a manuscript of al-Nisaburi’s *Stories of the Prophets*. The viewer’s eye takes in both the central figures around the door, and also the elaborate building which seems too prominent in the painting to be simply backdrop. In their publication of the image in *Stories of the Prophets: Illuminated Manuscripts of Qisas al-Anbiya*, Milstein, Rührdanz, and Schmitz supplied the caption, “Ibrahim and Isma’il praying after the building of the Ka’ba.”47 Did they correctly identify the illustration’s subject? It does not seem to be the case that Abraham and Ishmael are

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*Figure 6.1* The angel Jabril visits Ibrahim’s family. From a 1577 copy of Nisaburi’s *Qisas al-Anbiya*. © The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations. Spencer Collection, Persian Ms. 1, folio 33b.
praying, nor is it at all evident that the mosque’s completion is the focus of the action portrayed.

Some literary and artistic archaeology is called for. The manuscript containing our painting is a sixteenth-century copy of al-Nisaburi’s Persian Qisas al-anbiya’ which was composed in the eleventh century. Al-Nisaburi’s version of the collected histories and legends of the prophets was itself reliant largely upon Balʿami’s edition-revision of al-Tabari’s History forty years after the latter’s death in 923 CE—a little less than three centuries after the death of the prophet Muhammad. Our manuscript, then, while not itself early, bears the clear marks of its primary source, the work of the Islamic chronicler and Qu’ran commentator now familiar to us, al-Tabari. At the same time, it is important to note that we find in Nisaburi’s narrative significant additions to al-Tabari’s story of Abraham’s women and sons, and to these narrative elaborations we shall want to return, for they interject a quite surprising turn of events into Abraham’s saga.

We return to the painting in order to investigate more closely its content and possible intended meanings. Present in the scene are five recognizable figures, three with halos. To each side of the black door we see Abraham (on the left) facing winged Gabriel. Standing behind his father is the prophet Ishmael, a beardless youth. On the right, in back or to the side of the angelic messenger, are two women—Sarah the closest, I infer, and then, Hagar. There are onlookers nearby and at a distance in the background. Gabriel’s proclamation to Abraham (and his family) of the coming birth of Isaac/Ishaq is the painting’s subject—definitely this, and not the establishment of the Ka’ba and the prayers of its builders. Gestures of response to Gabriel’s tidings take the form of extended hands by the principals in the drama, while onlookers strike poses indicating a range of attitudes from curiosity and wonder to earnest gazing, or devotion. In taking up this subject, the painting is, to my knowledge, unique—that is, without a parallel among the extant Muslim qisas illuminations of the story of Abraham.

Are we able to know why the artist chose to produce a painting of this event, and why he opted to have the Ka’ba as its setting?
One piece of explanation lies in the format of al-Nisaburi’s book, which our painter seems to have taken seriously. His *Stories of the Prophets*, including that portion dedicated to Abraham’s saga, is presented in brief and clearly delineated segments (each termed a “story” and each devoted to a particular incident). So, for example, we find the story of the early encounter of Abraham with Nimrod his persecutor, and a later one telling the birth of Ishmael, and at the end, a story telling of the patriarch’s death. Al-Nisaburi’s narrative plan has a feature that becomes noteworthy after studying the painting: a brief story that treats the birth of Isaac follows immediately the story of the building of the Ka’ba. The textual transition between the incidents gives no indication of a change of scene. The artist has, then, pictorially heeded the conjunction of the two episodes—one (the twenty-sixth story) centered on the Ka`ba’s construction, the other (the twenty-seventh) on Gabriel’s declaration of God’s gift to Abraham and Sarah—their son, Isaac.

The writing that stands above and below the painting is the continuous text of al-Nisaburi’s *Qisas* in its sixteenth-century form—not an inscription nor an identifying description of the picture per se. The passage from the page preceding the text at the top of the illumination and running to the end of the writing above the image reads:

After completing their praying, Gabriel came and said: “Behold, Abraham! ‘Invite people to pilgrimage to the House (Surah 22:27).’ ” Abraham said: “My God, who can hear my call?” God responded: “You proclaim. I shall spread the calling.” Then Abraham said: “People! Truly the Almighty Lord ordered me to build the Ka’ba. I did build it and brought its construction to completion according to his command and his call. So now, answer His calling to [text continues in the space above the painting] make the pilgrimage. The Most-High God will forgive you.” The Most-Holy Lord brought the voice [of Abraham] to all people, even those in the loins of the fathers. And all who would make the pilgrimage someday between then and the Day of Judgment answered: “Yes!”
In red letters beneath the painting, we find the next episode’s heading, “Twenty-seventh story: Birth of Isaac (peace be upon him),” followed by this story’s opening words:

When Gabriel (peace be upon him) gave Abraham (peace be upon him) the news of the birth of Isaac, then after seven days Sarah got pregnant, and after nine months she gave birth. When Isaac (peace be upon him) was born,

The text continues on the next page,

One thousand stars gathered in front of Abraham’s house, and he asked, “My God, what sign is this?” And God responded through his angel, “I decided that one thousand prophets would issue from Isaac’s seed.” Abraham was pleased, and praised God. Then he asked, “My God, you gave this mercy to Isaac—what about Ishmael who is also my son?” And God said, “Abraham, do not worry. Leave him and his progeny to Me. I shall bring from among his offspring a prophet who is more exalted than a thousand prophets—even more than one hundred twenty-four (thousand).”

The artist’s inclusion of the Ka`ba and the divine promise of Isaac’s birth in a single scene is, therefore, fully explicable on the basis of the sequencing of stories or incidents in al-Nisaburi’s Abraham narrative.

The twenty-seventh story’s account of the birth of Isaac is, interestingly, the author’s second reference to the event. Earlier, in the twenty-fourth story, al-Nisaburi narrated Gabriel’s tidings to Abraham that Sarah will have a son and that Lot, his nephew, will be spared from the destruction of Sodom. There it was reported that Sarah was pregnant within the week, and further, that her delivery of Isaac, her first born, was difficult. Hagar’s derisive laughter at Sarah’s distress in labor is given as the cause of Sarah’s anger, explaining her demand that Hagar and Ishmael be expelled. Upon his birth, Isaac is declared a “good and great child” from whom a thousand prophets of the people of Israel will issue.

We may surmise that those closing sentences about the great succession of prophets to issue from Isaac prompted al-
Nisaburi’s return, three stories later, to the subject of Isaac’s birth, which occurred subsequent to the construction of the Ka`ba.

The twenty-seventh story stands, therefore, as an embellishment and corrective variant on what was told in the twenty-fourth. When a thousand stars gather in front of his house and he hears the divine declaration of the thousand prophets to come from his second son, Abraham is filled with delight. But this revelation also causes him to make a plea for the good fortune of Ishmael, his firstborn—the passage quoted above, in which God speaks about Ishmael’s posterity, and promises the appearance of that “prophet who is more exalted” than all the others—Muhammad. In this episode’s recalibration of the status of Ishmael in relation to Isaac, Abraham’s first son gains more prominence—in his progeny there will be more than a thousand prophets.

Other parts of this Qisas’s account of Abraham and his family prove consequential. In the twenty-fifth story, we learn that during one of his periodic visits to the valley (this one allowing him to interact with Ishmael’s second wife, an Arab), Hagar (still alive) and Ishmael came on the scene. Abraham “saw them” and rejoiced.

Upon receiving the command to construct the Ka`ba, Abraham summons (from Syria) Sarah and Isaac, along with others loyal to him. Abraham then informs Sarah that the time has come for her to be at peace with “my son and his mother.” Sarah does not resist her husband’s request, even though there follow grudging comments. Sarah claims that God has shown partiality to Hagar and Ishmael, showering them with greater mercy and property, blessing them in their residence in Mecca, and giving them good and bounteous offspring. For story-teller al-Nisaburi, Sarah’s muttering recalls the element of her resentment in the two women’s earlier dealings, but it has a more important purpose as a distinctly Muslim counterplay to biblical teachings about the privileges and favored status of Isaac. Jewish and Christian estimations of Sarah’s preeminence are being rebuffed.
When Abraham’s wives and sons are present in Mecca together, mutual forgiveness takes place. Sarah and Isaac pardon Hagar and Ishmael, and they reciprocate, Ishmael extending, as the text says, “great kindness to Sarah.”

According to al-Nisaburi, the completion of the Ka`ba’s building took three years, and a few years afterward Abraham, having circumambulated the House, took his family members to a mountain, where they raised their hands and prayed. For those who would make the Hajj, Abraham made his petition on behalf of learned Muslim leaders, asking God that these be rewarded and blessed in the Day of Reckoning. In the same formula, Ishmael prayed for the males sixty years old or older, Isaac for the young, Sarah for every Muslim, and Hagar for every religiously trained Muslim woman who aids women making the pilgrimage.

Abraham’s family functions as a quintet of worshipful patrons seeking divine beneficence for all who will come to the Ka’ba. Though this is presented as a unified and comprehensive act of prayer, it is not to go unnoticed that in relation to the hierarchy of Muslim believers represented, from the educated elders and leaders down to the young males and the observant women, the prayers of Mecca’s primary human trio—Abraham, Ishmael, and Hagar—are aligned with, and are designated to, ask God’s blessings upon the most worthy and eminent among the believers. The next words in the twenty-sixth story are those that commence above our painting: “After completing their praying, Gabriel came and said: ‘Behold, Abraham! Invite people to pilgrimage to the House, etc.’ ” (cf. Surah 22:27).

This tour of al-Nisaburi’s literary portrayals of Abraham and his women and sons indicates that however dependent his Qisas may be upon traditions from al-Tabari, it adds remarkable twists to the tale. Together these fresh elements constitute and advance a strong Muslim vision and perspective. In its unexpected resolution of a fractured family’s bitter tale, al-Nisaburi’s narrative locates the healing of grievances and the subsequent prayers for a united community of believers in Islam’s sacred precinct, and thereby shows these dynamics to be entirely a part of the pilgrimage,
the ritual entering upon “the straight path, the path of those You have favored” (Surah 1:6–7).

It is difficult to believe that those who surveyed this image would have missed its iconographic assertion: the prediction of Isaac’s birth—an event that Jews and Christians (and perhaps many Muslims) understood to have happened near the oaks of Mamre at Hebron—is here firmly placed in Mecca. How many issues and possibilities of meaning might be at stake in this happening’s relocation? Most obviously and most significantly, those stories which we saw the commentators elaborating as they shifted the Abrahamic saga’s center of gravity to Islam’s cultic center—namely, the rescue of Ishmael and his mother at Zamzam, the building of God’s House, the “great sacrifice” of the ram at Mina, which preserved Ishmael’s life—now exercise their influence in this painter’s revisionist theme. It is difficult to imagine a more forceful way to illustrate this claim than to have the fortunes of both of Abraham’s sons, his first and his second, shown as unfolding near his standing place in the Ka’ba.

Present in both al-Nisaburi’s narrative additions and the painting’s scene are innovative messages that secure deeper meanings in the sacred history of Muslims. The pilgrimage from Syria by Sarah and Isaac, as well as the presence in Mecca of Sarah at the time of Gabriel’s promise of a son, communicate the loyalty of the other half of Abraham’s family to the God whose name is worshipfully pronounced at the Meccan House, and what transpires there between family members—especially the accomplishment of salaam between the patriarch’s two wives, the mothers of the Israelites and the Muslims—signals reunification of the Abrahamic household. This regathering of his family is, of course, effected by the help and power at work in the pilgrimage commanded and blessed by God.

So runs the narrative of Abraham and his family as it approaches its conclusion in al-Nisaburi’s telling, and so is revealed the imaginative artistry of the painter, whose image freshly interprets what the scene of the promise of Isaac’s birth signifies—in terms Muslims recognize and honor. The legacy of Abraham, Hagar, Ishmael—and, yes, also the
reconciliation of Sarah and Hagar and their sons—is a matter of Meccan celebration.

Muslim understandings of the story of Abraham’s women and sons, and the processes by which Islam took ownership of the story, give clear evidence of “exegetical encounters” with Jewish and Christian rivals. We noticed in the Qur’an’s account of the messengers’ visit to Abraham and “his wife” its correspondence to the biblical narrative in Genesis 18, but also that there was no reference to Hagar’s experiences in the patriarch’s household, or as someone expelled from it. Rather, a passage in which Abraham tells God of his settling of some of his family in desolate terrain near God’s house provided for interpreters a basis for recounting Gabriel’s rescue of Hagar and Ishmael at the spring called Zamzam. Muslim Qur’an interpreters and tellers of the stories of the prophets, while very much aware of Jewish Abrahamic traditions, chose to generate a continuance of the story of this half of the prophet’s family by situating them in Mecca and involving them in the prayers for which the Ka’ba was dutifully, and wondrously, built.

Because of the mother and son in Islam’s foundation story, and because of the lineage from them that includes Muhammad, Islam’s Ibrahim is neither Judaism’s nor Christianity’s Abraham. This orientation of Muslim religious history and loyalty is consistent, as we have seen in the Qur’an, in the tradition-building revealed in the writings of al-Tabari, al-Tha’labi, and al-Nisaburi, and in the splendid painting that makes unmistakable the holy place, Mecca, to which Abraham has gathered his family, that they might “keep up prayer” (14:37).

Notes:
(1.) The motif figures prominently in the encounter between angelic announcers and both Sarah, here, and Mary in Surah 19:45, as we shall see in chapter 15.

(2.) Al-Tha’labi, Lives, 139; he looks back on the Meccan valley from the 11th c. CE.

(3.) Reuven Firestone, Journeys in Holy Lands, 65.
(4.) See Firestone, “Abraham,” EQ I, 7–8, who comments on the inconsistency of references to Abraham’s sons and progeny, including the suggestion in some places that Jacob is also born of Sarah, and thus is Isaac’s brother, as well as the occasional listing of Ishmael as if he were not part of Abraham’s family.


(6.) In the preceding verses, 6:84–85, we find a listing that has no concern whatever for chronology, following mention of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes with Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, Solomon, and David. Though the combination of names in a string is sometimes presented with some attention to chronology (e.g., from Noah, onward, as in 3:33, or in 7:59–64, which moves from Noah to Hud, Shu`aib, Saleh and Moses), different kinds of orderings are common. There is supposed to be no ranking of God’s messengers (2:136). More important is the assertion that no generation of humankind, no people in the creation, was left without an apostle sent to warn and to exhort (10:47).

(7.) Firestone, Journeys, 45.

(8.) Ibid., 47.

(9.) Barbara Freyer Stowasser, Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretation, 49.

(10.) Brinner, History II, 61–62.

(11.) Ibid., 63. The isnad gives Abu Kurayb, Abu Usamah, Hisham, Muhammad, Abu Hurayrah, the Messenger of God.

(12.) Ibid., 63–64. Brinner comments, in note 178 on p. 64, that his translation, “Arabs” in the quotation from Abu Hurayrah represents the Arabic yâ banî mâ´ al-sam â’, “O sons of the water of heaven.”

(13.) Ibid., 65.

(14.) Ibid.
(15.) Thackston, *Tales*, 151.


(17.) Firestone, *Journeys*, 58.

(18.) Ibid., 63–71, which surveys the variety in different scholars’ and storytellers’ treatments of the “The Transfer to Mecca.” The quoted phrase appears on p. 63.

(19.) Brinner, *History II*, 72. Brinner, in a note on the same page, comments that the commentaries reveal a range of assumptions about chronology: that when Sarah demanded the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, Isaac had not yet been born (al-Kisai), that both sons of Abraham were alive when he took Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca for the building of the Ka`ba (as here, in al-Tabari), and that among differing accounts in al-Tha`labi, one notes that conflicts between the boys, a motif found in Jewish legends, as we saw earlier, led Sarah to demand the ouster.

(20.) Ibid.

(21.) Ibid., n. 204. Brinner notes that al-Tha`labi mentions only the piercing of Hagar’s ear by Sarah—another tale of the origin of a culturally established practice. Stowasser, *Women*, 47, and 147, n. 55, comments upon the report in Ibn Kathir’s *Qisas I*, 202 that in response to Sarah’s vow to cut three of Hagar’s limbs, Abraham urges the piercing of her ears and circumcision, and says: “This and similar traditions must be read as religious legitimization of female circumcision. The scripturalist context is important in that Abraham’s circumcision, sign of God’s covenant, plays a prominent role in the Islamic Hadith.”

(22.) Brinner, *Lives*, 139.

(23.) Ibid.

(24.) Gordon D. Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, 74. Newby’s recovery of materials from Ibn Ishaq included interesting additional traditions concerning Abraham’s two women. It was Hagar who roasted the calf served to the
messengers visiting Abraham “to announce the glad tidings of Isaac and Jacob to him and to Sarah” (p. 7); she had been dead twenty years when Abraham “came from Armenia on Buraq, along with the Shechinah” to build the House, “and she was buried in al-Hijr” (p. 74). Sarah and Isaac are said to have made the pilgrimage from Syria, while Abraham, transported by Buraq, performed the Hajj annually (p. 76).

(25.) Newby, Last Prophet, 75.

(26.) Brinner, History II, 69. Ibn Kathir related that “Adam had previously pitched a tent [qubbah] over the spot, that Noah’s Ark circumambulated it for about 40 days, but this is all based on reports from the Israelites,” and cannot be verified, true or not. See Wheeler, Prophets, 101.

(27.) Brinner, History II., 70.

(28.) Ibid., 73, slightly altered.

(29.) Ibid., 76.

(30.) Ibid. In Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 216 we learn of a rabbinic tale about Hagar’s dress as she was expelled: “He sent her away with a bill of divorcement, and he took the veil, and he bound it around her waist, so that it should drag behind her to disclose (the fact) that she was a bondwoman.”

(31.) Ibid., 74.

(32.) Ibid.

(33.) Brinner, Lives, 140.

(34.) Michael Wolfe, ed., One Thousand Roads to Mecca, xxii. See William A. Graham, “Islam in the Mirror of Ritual,” 53–72 (quotations from 66, 68, 69) for an illuminating essay on how Islamic ritual is to be assessed as “commemorative.”

(35.) See PRE 216, and Ginzberg, Legends V, 247, n. 216, where a passage in Targum Yerushalmi is cited that attributes Ishmael’s fear in his dire circumstances that he and his mother were undergoing punishment for their idolatry.
(36.) Stowasser, Women, 44.

(37.) Brinner History II, 80.

(38.) Ibid., 80-81.

(39.) Firestone, Journeys, 135: “When all the traditions are collated we find a surprisingly close count. One hundred thirty authoritative statements consider Isaac to be the intended victim; one hundred thirty-three consider it to have been Ishmael.”

(40.) Ibid., 135–137, which describe al-Tabari’s exegetical answers to the issues raised by the “backers” of Ishmael.

(41.) See Ginzberg, Legends I, 278, and V, 250, n. 235.

(42.) Brinner, History II, 84–85.

(43.) Ibid., 92–93.

(44.) Ibid., 93.

(45.) The legend that the horns of the ram sacrificed in Ishmael’s place could be seen in the Ka`ba is found, among other places, in the writings of al-Tabari. (“According to Ibn al-Muthanna—`Abd al-A`la—Dawud—`Amir: This verse, ‘Then we ransomed him with a tremendous victim,’ refers to Ishmael, and the two horns of the ram are hanging in the Ka`ba.’ ”) See Brinner, History II, 87, and also al-Tha`labi’s report in Brinner, Lives, 158.

(46.) Brinner, Lives, 164.

(47.) Rachel Milstein (Milstein, et al., Stories, 122) writes that this episode, “central as it is to Islamic theology and historiography, has not been popular in Islamic painting, probably because it does not contain an astounding miracle or a serious conflict between good and evil, and it lacks dramatic elements that would suggest pictorial narrative.”

(48.) Our text bears a specific date: 18 Shawwal 984 (January 8, 1577).
(49.) A modern edition of the *Qisas* of Nisaburi (it should be noted that the same author Nisaburi is identified in Milstein, et al., *Stories*, as Ibrahim b. Khalaf al-Naysaburi) was produced in 1961 by Habib Yaghmai, who based its text on two of the work’s earliest surviving manuscripts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE. Yaghmai declared Abu Ishaq Ibrahim Nisaburi’s *Qisas* to be the most ancient and intriguing Persian rendition of the lives of the prophets, pointing to its inclusion of installments on Shith (Seth) and Yaʿqub (Jacob) not found in the *Qisas* writings of al-Thaʿlabi and al-Kisaʿi. Al-Nisaburi’s text follows that of al-Tabari’s *History*, or rather, that edition of al-Tabari made about forty years after his death by Balʿami, who himself is said to have translated this work into Persian in 963 CE. Distinctive features of the *Qisas al-anbiya‘* of Nisaburi include variations in the chronology of episodes in Moses’s life, a series of accounts of lesser figures after the treatment of Jesus’s/ʿIsa’s life, and a very full narrative of Muhammad’s story. A comparison of the text recounting the life of Abraham and his family in Yaghmai’s edition with that of our sixteenth-century illuminated manuscript reveals that editors and copyists in the intervening three hundred years were faithful; only minor changes occur—usually in forms of altered wording and vocabulary, or the occasional deletion or addition of phrases. See Habib Yaghmai, ed., *Qesas-ol-Anbiya*.

(50.) While finishing these lines, which mark the end of this story concerning the establishment of the Kaʿba, the copyist apparently ran out of room and was prevented from adding the anticipated further words of the *labbayka*—“Here I am!” In this passage, the section that runs from “People! ... forgive you” is in Arabic, rather than Persian, for a reason hard to uncover. It is not a quotation from the Qur’an, but may be an element preserved from a *hadith*.

(51.) Yaghmai, *Nisaburi*, 72–73.

(52.) Yaghmai, *Nisaburi*, 66.

(53.) Ibid., 72.

(54.) Ibid., 70.
(55.) Ibid., 72.

(56.) Ibid., 71.