A Conversation with Abraham: Exploring the Image of God in the Bible and the Qur’an, Part 2

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Abstract

The patriarch Abraham has a special place as a central figure in all three monotheistic religions. Although essentially the "One" God that all monotheistic religions consider as their Lord, the God of Abraham in the Old Testament, Bible, and the Qur'an are arguably very different Gods. Part 1 of this series included God's image and characteristics in both the Old Testament and the Qur'an as compared and contrasted in regards to "seeing" God, His knowledge, His all-hearing quality, and His justice, and how these aspects contribute to an image of Him.

This part expounds on the relationship between God and Abraham. Throughout these stories, we get an interesting look into the nature of the relationship between God and Abraham. Although we have touched on this briefly in some of the previously-mentioned characteristics of God, the nature of the relationship between Abraham/Ibrahim and God has not been discussed in detail. Abraham's relationship with God seems to be defined by two things:

1. His complete submission to God and lowliness in front of Him, and

.2. His recognition of God's power as the ultimate provider

Part 2: The Relationship between God and Abraham

1. Submission to God

An important idea shared in both the Biblical and Qur'anic narratives is Abraham/Ibrahim's complete submission to the will of God, and his acknowledged inferiority before Him. Although this is not a characteristic of God per se, that fact that God deserves or demands this type of submission is an important factor in understanding the image of God in both narratives. This type of required and obligatory submission and loyalty to God can be seen as an extension of his Lordship. The very nature of God requires that His servants be loyal, humble, and submissive to Him.

In the Bible, Abraham approaches God with a humbleness and fear which shows that the God he is dealing with is not one like him as a human, but a being far greater than him. Further, even though he questions God, he does not commit an open rebellion either (i.e. with his

actions).

In the story of the sacrifice of his son, we see unrelenting submission, and in that case, he does not even question the command of God: he submits with no questions asked. In fact, this story is usually used to represent the pinnacle of perfect submission to an all-powerful Lord. Abraham knows that his Lord is just and greater than him. Therefore, he should be able to surrender himself completely to him and obey his every command, which he does:

After these things, God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So, Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.1

Another instance in which he unquestioningly submits is when he sends Hagar and his son Ishmael away, obeying the command of God to obey his wife:

The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." So, Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away.2

It could be argued that in the Bible, Abraham is not submissive when it comes to the destruction of the people of Lot since he voices his discomfort to God. However, even in his questioning of God with regards to the destruction of Lot's people, Abraham acknowledges his inferiority before God, describing himself as "but dust and ashes."3

His appeal is precisely because he cannot fathom for God to do anything unjust: "Far be it from you to do such a thing. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"4 In this case, it could be argued that Abraham's problem was not failing to recognize that God is just, but rather, failing to understand justice itself. He did not understand how God's justice was in line with the destruction of innocent people, but God never destroys anybody innocent.

This was after all, just a conversation with God, not an open rebellion against Him. This does not truly negate his submissiveness to Him as there was no type of action required from Abraham. He did not actively rebel; it was simply a dialogue and conversation. After all, in submission to God, Abraham does not fall short: he is prepared to desert his son and ready to kill him.5

The attitude of submissiveness and meekness of Abraham in front of the Lord also appears in other instances throughout Genesis:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face and God said to him.6

When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant."7

In the Qur'an, there is also an overwhelming attitude of submission from Ibrahim and this is what defines his relationship with God. In one interesting verse where Ibrahim's religion is discussed, the Qur'an calls him a Muslim. However, in this case it means that what defined him was not a label, but rather his submission to God, which is the literal meaning of a Muslim in Arabic.

Here, it is obvious that the meaning of Muslim does not mean the same label as being a follower of the Prophet Muhammad since the Qur'an rebukes the Christians and Jews for applying this type of logic to Ibrahim. Rather, Ibrahim was a hanif and one who submitted to the will of God, i.e. a Muslim, which was the very nature of any true religion:8

O People of the Book! Why do you argue concerning Abraham? Neither the Torah nor the Evangel were sent down until [long] after him. Do you not apply reason? Ah! You are the very ones who argue about that of which you have knowledge. Why then do you argue about that of which you have no knowledge? And Allah knows and you do not know. Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian. Rather he was a hanif, a Muslim, and he was not one of the polytheists (3:65-67).

Although it is true that God corrects Ibrahim's actions in several instances (ex. when Ibrahim prays for his uncle/father who is a polytheist), this does not negate Ibrahim's overall submissiveness once God corrects his actions or orders him to act otherwise. Tt is difficult perhaps in many instances for Ibrahim to submit, for example in the sacrifice of his son, but he does it regardless. Ibrahim embodies a type of humbleness in front of God and this can be seen in the various passages of the Qur'an that speak of his demeanor in front of God and complete submission in the face of difficult tests.

'My Lord! Give me [an heir], one of the righteous.' So, we gave him the good news of a forbearing son. When he was old enough to assist in his endeavor, he said, 'My son! I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you. See what you think.' He said, 'Father! Do whatever you have been commanded. If Allah wishes, you will find me to be patient.' So, when they had both

submitted [to Allah's will], and he had laid him down on his forehead, We called out to him, 'O Abraham! You have indeed fulfilled the vision! Thus indeed do We reward the virtuous! This was indeed a manifest test.' Then we ransomed him with a great sacrifice, and left for him a good name in posterity.(37:100-108)

Another instance describing Ibrahim's demeanor with God includes:

Indeed Abraham was among his followers, when he came to his Lord with a sound heart. When he said to his father and his people, 'What is it that you are worshiping? Is it a lie, gods other than Allah, that you desire? Then what is your idea about the Lord of all the worlds?'(37: 83-87)

Further, from the prayers of Ibrahim to God, his loyalty and humbleness is clear. One of the effects of his submission is his 'sound heart'. There are several prayers from Ibrahim quoted in the Qur'an, most of which show his humbleness before God, his complete submission to Him, and his relentless campaigning for people to believe in and worship Him, even at the cost of his own life (which will be discussed later).

There is certainly a good exemplar for you in Abraham and those who were with him, when they said to their own people,

'Indeed we repudiate you and whatever you worship besides Allah. We disavow you, and between you and us there has appeared enmity and hate forever, unless you come to have faith in Allah alone,' except for Abraham's saying to his father, 'I will surely plead forgiveness for you, though I cannot avail you anything against Allah.'(60:4)

In one particularly beautiful conversation of Ibrahim with the polytheists, he describes the way that he has submitted to God, completely turning himself towards Him.

'Indeed I have turned my face toward Him who originated the heavens and the earth, as a Hanif, and I am not one of the polytheists.' His people argued with him. He said, 'Do you argue with me concerning Allah, while He has guided me for certain? I do not fear what you ascribe to Him as [His] partners, excepting anything that my Lord may wish. My Lord embraces all things in [His] knowledge. Will you not then take admonition? How could I fear what you ascribe [to Him] as [His] partners, when you do not fear ascribing to Allah partners for which He has not sent down any authority to you? So [tell me,] which of the two sides has a greater right to safety, if you know? (6:79-81).

Abraham enjoined this [creed] upon his children, and [so did] Jacob, [saying]:

"My children! Allah has indeed chosen this religion for you; so never die except as (Muslims."(2:132

God as the Provider for all needs (i.e. the Powerful) .2

In both the Bible and the Qur'an, it is clear that God has agency and interferes in the lives of His creation. He can, and He does, interfere in the well-being of human beings, especially those that He cares about, including Abraham/Ibrahim. Another factor is that in both texts, Abraham/Ibrahim prays to the Lord, recognizing that God is his provider and that God is all-powerful. Abraham/Ibrahim has complete faith in the power of God and surrenders to Him, relying on Him for his needs and going to Him in prayer. He understands that his and his progeny's destiny lies in the hands of God.

In the Bible, this is especially clear in a few instances where Abraham's progeny is clearly in the hands of God:

"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."9

"Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."10

"I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you."11

The "I" in these passages is of course, God Himself, and He notes Himself as the agent here, capable of providing for Abraham. Abraham also builds several altars throughout his life to call on (i.e. pray to) God: "and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord."12

References to him praying at the altar are numerous. In another place, it says he returned "to the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord."13

Similarly, in the Qur'an, Ibrahim constantly goes to God for all his needs. He realizes that his provision lies solely in the hands of God, and this is his argument against the polytheists. Numerous times in the Qur'an, Ibrahim voices this fact to the disbelievers. Why would they worship things that would be of no benefit to them, when it is only God that can be of any benefit?

And Abraham, when he said to his people, "Worship Allah and be wary of Him. That is better for you, should you know. In fact, instead of Allah you worship idols, and you invent a lie. Indeed those whom you worship besides Allah have no control over your provision. So seek all [your] provision from Allah, and worship Him and thank Him, and to Him you shall be brought back.(29:16-17)

Another interesting aspect to Ibrahim's relationship with God is that he is also described as the "friend" of God - the only person in the Qur'an to be named as such:

Who has a better religion than him who submits his will to Allah, being virtuous, and follows the creed of Abraham, a Hanif? And Allah took Abraham for a dedicated friend.(4:125)

The word friend in Arabic is Khalil, which comes from the word al-khullah, which means need. Therefore, your friend is the one who asks his needs only from you.14 This is an interesting point brought up with regards to the nature of the word 'friend' in Arabic, which seems to fit the relationship between Ibrahim and God. Ibrahim constantly turns to God for his needs, and in this aspect, is his 'friend'.

When rebuking the polytheists for their disbelief in God, Ibrahim explicitly says that this is futile. Only God can cause benefit or harm to a person; He is the only One worth being asked. Thus, Ibrahim only goes to God for his needs and this is clear throughout various verses of the Qur'an. Understanding that only God can cause him benefit or harm, Ibrahim submits completely to Him and relies solely on Him, even if his own life and the lives of his family are at risk. Ibrahim's reliance and complete faith in God can be beautifully understood throughout many of the stories of the Qur'an. He understands the power of God such that he asks God for a child even after he has become an old man, and he is granted two.

In one particularly beautiful story, Ibrahim is thrown into a fire because of his claim that the idols of the polytheists were futile to humans:

He said," Do you then worship, besides Allah, that which cannot cause you any benefit or harm? Fie on you and what you worship besides Allah! Do you not apply reason?" They said," Burn him, and help your gods, if you are to do anything!" We said," O fire! Be cool and safe for Abraham!"(21:66-69)

God, the one that Ibrahim has relied on completely for protection and provision, saves him from being burnt alive in a miraculous event. It is Ibrahim who is logical and who has applied reason by believing that only God can provide for him and protect him, and he relies on God for his safety. After all, he fears nothing except God15. He knows that God's power has no bounds, and thus asks for what others might consider impossible.

His faith in God providing for him and his family is so complete that, as mentioned earlier, he is also prepared to leave Hajar and Ismail in a desert in submission to God. Here is his prayer to God in the Qur'an, where he seems to know that the destiny of his family and himself lies only in the hands of God. Understanding God's power, Ibrahim prays to Him:

When Abraham said, "My Lord! Make this city a sanctuary, and save me and my children from worshiping idols. My Lord! Indeed they have misled many people. So whoever follows me

indeed belongs to me, and as for someone who disobeys me, well, You are indeed all-forgiving, all-merciful. Our Lord! I have settled part of my descendants in a barren valley, by Your sacred House, our Lord, that they may maintain the prayer. So make the hearts of a part of the people fond of them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks.

Our Lord! Indeed You know whatever we hide and whatever we disclose, and nothing is hidden from Allah on the earth or in the sky. All praise belongs to Allah, who, despite [my] old age, gave me Ishmael and Isaac. Indeed my Lord hears all supplications. My Lord! Make me a maintainer of the prayer, and my descendants [too]. Our Lord, accept my supplication. Our Lord! Forgive me and my parents, and all the faithful, on the day when the reckoning is held."(14: 35-41)

His recognition that everything is at the disposal of God is a major aspect in what defines Ibrahim's relationship with Him.

Conclusion

Surveying Abraham in the Bible and the Qur'an is no simple task. God's image in these stories is multifaceted and there are many characteristics of God which manifest themselves in these stories. Here, we have commented on just a few of them: God's visibility/invisibility, omniscience/knowledge, hearing, and justice. Although the Biblical God and Qur'anic God diverge in their characteristics on a few points, they share many characteristics, and the stories of the Bible and the Qur'an can be recognized as referring to one and the same Lord, the maker of the heavens and the earth. Although at first glance, they may seem very different, upon a closer read, they are more similar than not.

The relationship between God and Abraham also proves to be multi- faceted. Here, major differences can be recognized between the overall impression of Abraham in the Bible and in the Qur'an. The Biblical rendition of events focuses more on the tangible aspects of Abraham's life. For example, it surveys in detail where he goes, what he does, his children, his covenant, etc.

On the other hand, the Qur'anic rendition tends to focus on Ibrahim's understanding of God and his relationship with Him. For example, Ibrahim's prayers are extensively quoted in which he describes God and his faith in Him. Ibrahim's campaign for monotheism is also explored in detail and his arguments against the polytheists make up a large portion of the story.

This is unlike the Bible, where Abraham does not share much with regards to the depth of his belief and faith in God or why he believes in Him. Although he does not describe his belief, he does constantly go to God in prayer, building several altars to call on God and ask Him for his

needs.

Further, his campaign for monotheism does not seem to exist in the Bible. Rather, his submission and love for God is shown through his actions (ex. in his sacrifice and obedience), as opposed to his words or feelings. Nevertheless, in both the Qur'an and the Bible, Abraham's relationship with God is defined by his submission to Him and his recognition of God's power to provide him with his needs.

As the father of monotheism, Abraham is famous for his belief in one God and his relationship with God. Because of his submission, he has become celebrated and legendary amongst monotheists. To understand the monotheistic religions correctly, understanding their forefather (i.e. Abraham) is essential.

There is much to learn from the example of Abraham and how followers of the monotheistic religions are encouraged to emulate him in his submission and in his understanding of God. In fact, it could be argued that understanding Abraham and how he recognized God is indispensable as it is at the very foundation of monotheism and the monotheistic religions.

In his relentless submission and obedience, Abraham succeeded in pleasing God and securing himself a position with God-something that followers of all monotheistic religions will strive to achieve throughout their lives. Because of this, Abraham's conversations with God will remain celebrated and immortal.

Notes

1. Genesis NRSV, 22:1-3.
2. Genesis NRSV, 21:11-14.
3. Genesis NRSV, 19:27.
4. Genesis NRSV, 18:25.
5. In the Biblical version of events, Isaac, son of Sarah, is the son who was to be sacrificed. The Qur'an does not name the son who was sacrificed, but it is implied that it was Ismail, son of Hajar, who was to be sacrificed.
6. Genesis NRSV, 17:1-3.
7. I Genesis NRSV, 18:2-3.
8. This has been explained by Allamah Tabatabai in Tafsir al-Mizan: "To say that Ibrahim (a.s.) was a Muslim and not a Jew or a Christian does not imply a claim that he was the follower of the Prophet of Islam, acting according to the Qur'anic Shari'ah. Nobody should rush to say that as Ibrahim (a.s.) had preceded the revelation of the Torah and the Injil and therefore could not be counted as a Jew or a Christian, so had he preceded the

revelation of the Qur'an and the advent of Islam, therefore, in a completely identical manner, he should not be called a Muslim. As a matter of fact, the use of 'Islam' for the Qur'anic Shari'ah is a terminology which came up after the revelation of the Qur'an, when the fame of the religion brought by Muhammad (s.a.w.) had spread far and wide. The Islam which is attributed to Ibrahim means submission to Allah, humbling oneself before His Lordship." (www.al-mizan.org, 3:65-67)

9. Genesis NRSV, 12:2-3.

10. Genesis NRSV, 15:1.

11. Genesis NRSV, 13:16-17.

12. Genesis NRSV, 12:18.

13. Genesis NRSV, 13:4.

14. This point has been brought up by Allamah Tabatabai in Tafsir al-Mizan (www.almizan.org, 4;125)

.15. Ref. The Qur’an, 6:80