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Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac: The Bonds of Family

Response to the Spring McGinley Lecture Delivered by Rev. Patrick Ryan, SJ

April 13 and 14, 2011, Fordham University

Amir Hussain

Greetings and good evening, *al-salaamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatahu*, peace be upon you and the Mercy and Blessings of God. I am honoured and delighted to be invited back to Fordham to offer a brief response to the superb spring McGinley lecture that we heard from Father. Ryan. A very simple and a very sincere “Thank you” to all of you here. I need to single out, as always, Father President Joseph McShane for his hospitality, Provost Stephen Freedman for his support, Sister Anne-Marie Kirmse for her help with the arrangements, Rabbi Polish for his wise words, and of course, Father Ryan for inviting me to respond to his lecture.

The title of my talk is “Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac: The Bonds of Family.” I was in Pittsburgh yesterday for a meeting of the Association of Theological Schools, so maybe this is an inspiration from “We are Family,” the Sister Sledge disco song that became the theme for the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1979. The famous five, Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac are of course not the first family in the Bible, but they are crucial to understanding our three religious traditions. They are, of course, a messy, dysfunctional family, illustrating the problems of sister wives long before *Big Love*, the reality show *Sister Wives*, and other modern television shows about polygamy.

Father Ryan has, with his usual erudition, discussed the role of Abraham in our three traditions. For Muslims, it is important to remember the significance of Abraham, who is mentioned by name the second-most of any of the prophets in the Qur’an, 69 times. It is also instructive to remember that Moses is the prophet mentioned most by name (137 times) in the

Qur'an, and also that Isaac is mentioned more times (17) by name than Ishmael (12). As a Muslim, I cannot understand the Quranic stories about them without being familiar with their roles in the Bible and oral traditions. For me, the metaphor is of a triptych, a painting in three panels, each panel unique, but when viewed together, part of a greater whole.

Father Ryan quoted the following line from Jon Levenson's article: "however sharply Jews and Christians differ in the interpretation of the scriptures they hold in common, they are after all working from the same text." While that is of course true, it seems to me important to point out that that same text, the Hebrew Bible, is read very differently by Jews and Christians. Christians read the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament, or at least through the prism of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Muslims, I would argue, need to understand both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in order to properly appreciate the Qur'an. Certainly, the first hearers of the revelation were familiar with the Biblical stories, or else, to take one example, 5:27, "recite to them the truth of the story of the two sons of Adam," would make no sense. Clearly the first hearers knew something of Adam and his two sons. Here, I make a plea to Muslims to become familiar with the Biblical texts and traditions.

To return to the family of Abraham, it is instructive to remember that the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II, made his first visit outside of Rome in 1979 to Turkey. In Ankara, he said this about our connections to Abraham: "Faith in God, which the spiritual descendants of Abraham, Christians, Muslims and Jews profess, when it is lived sincerely so that it penetrates life, is an assured foundation of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom and a principle of rectitude for moral conduct in life and society."¹

Abraham is crucial to the prayer life of Muslims. At the end of our five daily prayers, when we are on our knees in submission, we ask God to bless Abraham and the family of

Abraham, saying:

Allahumma salli 'ala Muhammad wa 'ala 'aali Muhammad kama sallayta 'ala 'Ibrahim wa 'ala 'aali 'Ibrahim. 'Innaka Hamidun Majid. Allahumma barik 'ala Muhammad wa 'ala 'aali Muhammad kama barakta 'ala 'Ibrahim wa 'ala 'aali 'Ibrahim. 'Innaka Hamidun Majid.

Oh God send prayers on Muhammad and on the family of Muhammad as You sent prayers on Abraham and the family of Abraham; Truly You are Worthy of praise, full of Glory. Oh God send blessings on Muhammad and on the family of Muhammad as You sent blessings on Abraham and the family of Abraham; Truly You are Worthy of praise, full of Glory.

It is the family of Abraham, especially his wife Hagar, that I would like to discuss further.

Her story is described in the hadith, the oral traditions of Islam, in the most authoritative collection of Al-Bukhari:²

Abraham brought Ishmael's mother and her son Ishmael while she was suckling him, to a place near the Ka'ba under a tree on the spot of Zam-zam, at the highest place in the mosque. During those days there was nobody in Mecca, nor was there any water. So he made them sit over there and placed near them a leather bag containing some dates, and a small water-skin containing some water, and set out homeward. Ishmael's mother followed him saying, "O Abraham! Where are you going, leaving us in this valley where there is no person whose company we may enjoy, nor is there anything to enjoy?" She repeated that to him many times, but he did not look back at her. Then she asked him, "Has God ordered you to do so?" He said, "Yes." She said, "Then God will not neglect us," and returned while Abraham proceeded onwards, and on reaching the Thaniya where

they could not see him, he faced the Ka'ba, and raising both hands, invoked God saying the following prayers [Qur'an 14:37]: "O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring dwell in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House [i.e., the Ka'ba] in order, O our Lord, that they may offer prayer perfectly. Fill the hearts of people with love towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks" [end of Quranic verse].

Ishmael's mother went on suckling Ishmael and drinking from the water she had.

When the water in the water-skin had all been used up, she became thirsty and her child also became thirsty. She started looking at Ishmael tossing in agony; She left him, for she could not endure looking at him, and found that the mountain of Safa was the nearest mountain to her on that land. She stood on it and started looking at the valley keenly so that she might see somebody, but she could not see anybody. Then she descended from Safa and when she reached the valley, she tucked up her robe and ran in the valley like a person in distress and trouble, till she crossed the valley and reached the Marwa mountain where she stood and started looking, expecting to see somebody, but she could not see anybody. She repeated that running between Safa and Marwa seven times.

The Prophet said, "This is the source of the tradition of the walking of people between Safa and Marwa." When she reached the Marwa mountain for the last time she heard a voice and she asked herself to be quiet and listened attentively. She heard the voice again and said, "O, whoever you may be! You have made me hear your voice; have you got something to help me?" And behold! She saw an angel at the place of Zam-zam, digging the earth with his heel [or in other traditions, "his wing"], till water flowed from that place.

Of this portrayal, Muslim scholar Riffat Hassan writes that Hagar is:

... a woman of exceptional faith, love, fortitude, resolution and strength of character.

Once she hears from Abraham that God commands her and her infant son to be left in the desert, she shows no hesitation whatever in accepting her extremely difficult situation.

She does not wail or rage or beg Abraham not to abandon her and Ishmael. Instead, surrendering spontaneously and totally to what she believes to be God's will, she says that she is 'satisfied with God,' who will never neglect her. She lets Abraham go, without any words of recrimination or sorrow, and returns to her infant son.³

It is also important to mention that Hagar is understood to be a black slave, and thereby has to deal with a triple threat of racial, class and gender bias. And it is instructive for Muslims to remember this heritage, as the Prophet Muhammad claimed descent from Ishmael and his mother. He comes not from a lineage of princes and kings, but from the quiet dignity of a slave woman. Father Tom Michel sees Hagar as our "Mother in Faith," and writes:

I believe that Hagar is a key religious figure and that meditation on her story can enrich the understanding of Jews, Christians, and Muslims concerning the nature of the God whom we worship and what it means to do God's will in contemporary societies. The image of Hagar and her child in the desert is part of today's reality. The low-born, hard-working domestic laborer, used and misused and cast out by her employers, the single mother abandoned by the father of her child, the foreigner and the refugee far from her native land, desperately trying to survive, frantic in her maternal concern for the safety of her child –this Hagar I have met many times.⁴

The account of Al-Bukhari continues in the hadith literature:

Then Abraham stayed away from them for a period as long as God wished, and called on them afterwards. He saw Ishmael under a tree near Zam-zam, sharpening his arrows.

When he saw Abraham, he rose up to welcome him and they greeted each other as a father does with his son or a son does with his father. Abraham said, “O Ishmael! God has given me an order.” Ishmael said, “Do what your Lord has ordered you to do.” Abraham asked, “Will you help me?” Ishmael said, “I will help you.” Abraham said, God has ordered me to build a house here,” pointing to a hillock higher than the land surrounding it.” The Prophet added, “Then they raised the foundations of the House [i.e., the Ka’ba]. Ishmael brought the stones and Abraham was building, and when the walls became high, Ishmael brought this stone and put it for Abraham who stood over it and carried on building, while Ishmael was handing him the stones, and both of them were saying, “O our Lord! Accept this service from us, Truly, You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing” [Qur’an 2:127]. The Prophet added, “Then both of them went on building and going round the Ka’ba saying: ‘O our Lord! Accept this service from us, Truly, You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.’”

These, for Muslims, are also crucial elements in the story of this family. The well revealed to save Hagar and Ishmael is the well of Zam-Zam, the well that to this day still waters the pilgrims that come to Mecca. Part of the pilgrimage ritual is running between the hills of Safa and Marwa, remembering the frantic search of Hagar. Then there is the rebuilding of the Ka’ba, the first place of monotheistic prayer, by Abraham and Ishmael. There are traditions that say it was first built by the first human being, Adam, and then rebuilt by Abraham and his son. This is why Mecca is central to Muslims. Not because the Prophet Muhammad was born here, even though he was. Not because this is where the Prophet Muhammad received his first revelations, even though he did. Mecca is important because this is where Ishmael and Abraham rebuilt the Ka’ba, the house of prayer to God.

For Muslims, there is a connection to the Biblical stories. The Qur'an 2:136 states: "Say: We believe in God, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to all prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them: And we surrender to God."

Later in this same chapter of the Qur'an is this intriguing little verse (2:260), that has elements from the covenant ritual that Father Ryan described in his lecture: "When Abraham said: 'Show me, Lord, how You will raise the dead,' God replied: 'Have you no faith?' He said 'Yes, but just to reassure my heart.' God said, 'Take four birds, draw them to you, and cut their bodies to pieces. Scatter them over the mountain-tops, then call them back. They will come swiftly to you. Know that God is Mighty, Wise.'"

While some may see the difference in these stories as a barrier, I see them as a bond. I mentioned earlier the metaphor of the triptych. Perhaps another way to look at it is as the same characters, but in three different plays, each of which needs to be read together, a trilogy. And just to be clear, I said triptych and trilogy, not trinity.

Another difference in the stories that Father Ryan outlined is the sacrifice of the son of Abraham. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, this is Isaac. In the Muslim tradition, it is Ishmael, although a few important commentators such as Ibn Masud and al-Tabari say it was Isaac. In the Qur'anic story, Abraham asks his son what he should do when he has been commanded to sacrifice his son. The son, like his mother Hagar before him, puts his trust in God.

For me, there's a connection here with the Jewish tradition, if only tangentially, in the poetry of Leonard Cohen. I need to disclose here that as a Canadian, I am required by Canadian law in any gathering outside of Canada to mention by name at least one Canadian artist, so yet another reason for choosing Leonard. In 1969, with memories of both the 1967 war and the

Vietnam War, he wrote a song about the sacrifice, but from the point of view of the son. What must the son of Abraham have felt? Leonard, of course, sees this in the long tradition of prohibiting the sacrifice of children, but extends his meditation in a time of war. It is with his song, "Story of Isaac," that I end.

The door it opened slowly,
my father he came in,
I was nine years old.
And he stood so tall above me,
his blue eyes they were shining
and his voice was very cold.
He said, "I've had a vision
and you know I'm strong and holy,
I must do what I've been told."
So he started up the mountain,
I was running, he was walking,
and his axe was made of gold.
Well, the trees they got much smaller,
the lake a lady's mirror,
we stopped to drink some wine.
Then he threw the bottle over.
Broke a minute later
and he put his hand on mine.

Thought I saw an eagle
but it might have been a vulture,
I never could decide.
Then my father built an altar,
he looked once behind his shoulder,
he knew I would not hide.
You who build these altars now
to sacrifice these children,
you must not do it anymore.
A scheme is not a vision
and you never have been tempted
by a demon or a god.
You who stand above them now,
your hatchets blunt and bloody,
you were not there before,
when I lay upon a mountain
and my father's hand was trembling
with the beauty of the word.
And if you call me brother now,
forgive me if I inquire,
"Just according to whose plan?"
When it all comes down to dust
I will kill you if I must,

I will help you if I can.

When it all comes down to dust

I will help you if I must,

I will kill you if I can.

And mercy on our uniform,

man of peace or man of war,

the peacock spreads his fan.⁵

Notes

¹ Quoted in Irfan Omar, editor, *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue by Thomas F. Michel, SJ* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 82.

² *Volume 4, Book 55, Number 583*. Narrated Ibn Abbas Accessed from <http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/hadith/bukhari/055.sbt.html>

³ Riffat Hassan, “Islamic Hagar and Her Family”, in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Tribble and Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 154.

⁴ “Hagar: Biblical and Islamic Perspectives”, in Omar, ed., *A Christian View of Islam*, 87.

⁵ Story Of Isaac lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC