

1

FROM THE PARTING OF THE WAYS TO THE PARTING OF THE WAVES: FROM ABRAHAM عليه السلام TO MOSES عليه السلام

We gave Moses the Book, and made it a source of guidance for the Children of Israel, commanding: 'Take no other guardian beside Me!'

(The Qur'an, 17:2, Bani Isra'il—
The Children of Israel)

Two of the most important Prophets in the monotheistic tradition are Abraham and Moses. The first of these is Abraham, *Ibrahim* to Muslims. His inclusion in a book about Jerusalem is debatable, because there seems to be nothing in the Qur'an or Hadith that links him (or Moses for that matter) with the city. Although he travelled from the north to the south and so would have passed through the area, there was no Jerusalem at the time of his life. It is, however, because Jews and Christians do link him with the city for an event which most Muslims

14 TRANSCENDING JERUSALEM

specifically do not that he must be considered. In considering the different claims that are made concerning the would-be sacrifice of the son, I intend to show how the very non-importance of Ibrahim to Jerusalem is of paradoxical significance to that city and ultimately to our understanding of religion.

In each of the faiths, Ibrahim, or Abraham, is a figure of enormous importance. He is both the biological father of the monotheistic family and the one who established the fundamental pattern of man's relationship to his Creator, in his willingness to sacrifice his beloved son.

If this much is held in common there are differences in the answers to the three questions of who, where and how, that distinguish Islamic and Judeo-Christian belief and that are crucial to our understanding of the three faiths and also of our own self-image. Muslims generally believe that Ibrahim prepared to sacrifice Ishmael (although this is not stated categorically, and some scholars believe that it was Isaac) near Mecca, while Jews and Christians believe that he prepared to sacrifice not Ishmael but Isaac (Ishaq) on Mount Moriah on the rock that is now the centre of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Of all the differences in historical vision there are few that are greater than these.

The arguments that are in favour of the Islamic version are several, even when based on what is said in the Bible. They include the thrice-mentioned 'Take your son, thine only son', an order that could not apply to Isaac, who was never an only son. This incongruity suggests that the original story has been altered to have the story be about Isaac. Also, when the supposed spot is later made the site of the Temple of Solomon, no mention is made of this alleged defining moment. As well as the 'who' and the 'where', importance must ultimately be attached to the 'how', the how of the inner workings of the protagonists, because if this sacrifice is to be a defining moment, it must speak to our hearts and not simply have an outward form.

15 CHAPTER ONE

In the Qur'an, when Ibrahim has the dream in which he sees himself sacrificing his son, he tells his son on waking and the boy responds immediately, saying: 'Father, do as you are bidden. God willing, you will find me one of the steadfast.' (37:102) In the Bible, the son is effectively duped into being the sacrificial victim, even inquiring at the last moment where the object of sacrifice is. In the former both submit willingly. In the latter it is only the would-be sacrificer who knows.

This is one of the first (but by no means the last, as we shall see), rather unedifying biblical stories in which the biblical Patriarchs or Prophets come across as being rather unholy. One writer even attributes the near silence of Isaac in the rest of the Bible to the shock of discovering that *he* was the answer to his question. The Bible's main aim seems to be not to make any exemplary point but rather merely to emphasise that Isaac survived and perpetuated the line. It is this, more than anything else, that frequently appears as the Bible's main concern. The Biblical text often seems to be merely a book that has been written down by and about Jews in order to justify themselves. God in the Bible often appears to be merely a means to that end. In this context, the son's knowledge and his acceptance or rejection of the Divine will, or otherwise, does not seem worth mentioning at all.

If the book of the Jews reflects the name of the faith of its main concern, namely the Jews, the book of Islam, the Qur'an, can also be seen to reflect the name of its faith. Islam means submission to God and the ultimate concern of faith and Book is God, to whom we must submit. The stories of the Prophets are there to illustrate this, and none more so than the story of Ibrahim.

In the greater scheme of things—the three monotheistic faiths and their relationship to God, to *Allah*—these two sons of Ibrahim, or at least their stories in the different traditions, begin twin traditions of possible relationships to God. The line of Isaac, according to the writers of the Bible at least, represents those who do not submit to God's will. Isaac, as

16 TRANSCENDING JERUSALEM

we have said, does not submit but is tricked. According to the Bible, his son consequently tricks his elder brother Esau out of his inheritance and his father's blessing and is finally renamed 'Israel' after wrestling with an ambiguous *jinn*/angel/God figure—Israel (*Isra'-El*) means 'he who struggles with God' in Hebrew. He struggled and, the Bible proudly says, did *not* submit.

This is not to say that the Jewish Prophets *were* like that, but rather to suggest that a collective will to disobedience has seen them and wished them that way, and that the writers of the Bible have served and perpetuated that wish.

In this paradigm, it is the line of Ishmael that carries the relationship of submission to God.

‘As for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.’

(Genesis 17:20)

The Bible says that a daughter of Ishmael marries Esau. But the next, and last, Prophet of this line is the Prophet Muhammad (upon him be peace) who finally brought the latent stream to the surface in bringing the message of Islam, submission, to all humanity.

The Qur'anic version of the sacrifice is thus far closer in spirit to a relationship to God that is based on total obedience and to the example of the last Prophet in all that we know of him. While the Jewish biblical tradition seems at once to venerate and ignore the message of the sacrifice, the very meaning of Islam is summed up in Ibrahim and Isma'il's acceptance of God's command. Having waited scores of years—he was 100—to be granted a son, Ibrahim accepted the command from a far greater power to do something that went against everything he had felt and thought and believed within the limits of his own self. It is as if he recognised the essential insignificance of his own ego, his own *nafs*, as did

17 CHAPTER ONE

his son. The message of the Muslim proverb: 'Slaughter your *nafs* with the dagger of self-discipline' is that we are all required to do this with our lives. As Abdal Hakim Murad writes, it is 'so pivotally important that we commemorate it not just on Hajj, but every year at home' when we sacrifice an animal to celebrate the end of the Hajj and the beginning of Eid Al Adha.

In all this we can see that the differences between the stories of Ibrahim and Abraham are more than geographical. They are fundamental. As Muslims we believe in the essential simplicity of our faith, a fact that is reflected geographically in the purely Islamic environment of Arabia and theologically in the total submission of father and son. So, what of Jerusalem? What of the Holy Land and all the Prophets who came there to the Children of Israel?

The Qur'an says: 'And if ye turn away, He will substitute in your place another people, and they will not be like you.' (47:38) It can only be inferred that the Children of Israel were Chosen precisely because they were a 'stiff-necked people' (Exodus 32:9; Deuteronomy 9:1, 4-6). Given this, if Jews were to submit there would indeed be hope for humanity because this Jewish refusal to submit to God is typically human. ('The Jews are just like everyone else, only more so,' runs the graffito.) We find this tendency, to act as if we are chosen but to try always to adapt the rules to *our* terms, in all of us, Muslims, Christians, atheists, but nowhere more strongly than in this archetypal Biblical form.

However humility, the other side of this, is present within all of us, though often dominated by ego. As one writer says:

We come nearest to the essence of Judaism when we view it as the product of the tensions between opposites. Judaism can often be expressed paradoxically. Whenever it is being presented in terms of one stream only, ignoring or denigrating its rivals, it is being falsified.

(Dow Marmur, *Beyond Survival*)

This is true whether we are talking of a liberal or conservative stream, or a religious or anti-religious one, or, indeed, of any other tendency. For the purpose of this argument, we can say that within Judaism and the line of Isaac there is a tradition of, and yearning for, a submission to the will of God, a tradition that coexists with this profound tendency to disobey or struggle. (Jewish orthodox prayer with head rocking backwards and forwards is sometimes said to combine the stiff neck and the will to submit.) However, the striking feature of Jewish belief, which could be inferred from this quotation, is that the two streams or tendencies are equally valid and valuable, or are even complementary, and should be accepted.

While Islam acknowledges the human tendency to both good and evil, it does not seek to define itself around that idea. Essentially, we are weak and God is greater (literally, *Allahu akbar*) and we will only achieve goodness, or greatness, if we submit to Him. To imagine that we can live with this psychic tension without submission to God would be seen as nothing other than the whisperings of Shaytan in the heart to lead us astray; what psychologists might call the unconscious victory of the ego. This is the very thing we seek to fight against when we fulfil, as mentioned above, the rites of Hajj, and it is to Ibrahim that we look as an example.

This internal twin stream within the line of the Children of Israel is seen much later in the story of Moses, where Moses more or less represents the positive aspect, and the people of Israel the negative. Moses is regarded as the greatest of the Prophets by Jews, but he is also highly revered by Muslims. Many dimensions of his story appear in the Qur'an, where there is, in fact, more about Moses' story there than any other Prophet, including Ibrahim, Jesus and *sayyidina* Muhammad, peace be on them all.

Common ground includes the casting of the baby Moses upon the river to escape Pharaoh's massacre, the upbringing in Pharaoh's household, the killing of an Egyptian and the

19 CHAPTER ONE

subsequent flight. This is followed by the meeting with his bride-to-be and working for his father-in-law, and then the calling from the burning bush, when God ordered Moses to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt. Signs and plagues eventually persuade the Pharaoh that he has to let the people go; but when he tries to pursue them, he and his army are drowned in the waters of the sea that had parted for Moses.

In the wilderness, the theme is of recurring lack of faith among the Children of Israel, manifesting itself as a general atmosphere of complaint, but reaching a defining intensity firstly when Moses receives the Ten Commandments, and secondly when the people are commanded by God to take possession of the Promised Land. In the first case, Moses returns from Mount Sinai to discover that the people have made a golden calf which they are worshipping. He tells them: 'O my people, surely you have wronged yourselves by your turning to the calf, so turn in repentance to your Creator and overcome yourselves.' (2:54) In the Bible, Moses orders three thousand of the transgressors to be put to death for this.

In the second incident, the Children of Israel stand on the borders of the Promised Land, afraid. Moses declares:

'O my people, remember God's blessing upon you when He appointed Prophets from among you, and made you kings, and gave you what He had not given to anyone else in all the worlds. O my people, go into the Holy Land which God has written for you, and do not turn back on your heels—for then you would return as losers.' (5:20)

Their fear persists, and this lack of faith, despite all the miracles that had been wrought, consigns the people to the full forty-year term in the wilderness, implicitly something of a punishment or a lesson, depending on what the people choose to take from it. 'For this it shall remain closed to

them for forty years, while they wander aimlessly in the land.' (5:26)

Moses pleads with God to distinguish between the good and the bad, but the point is made with reference to the story of Kabil and Habil (Cain and Abel) that the many and the one are the same: 'We decreed for the Children of Israel that whosoever killeth a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind.' (5:32) In other words, they all shared the same destiny. (This idea is echoed in the modern Jewish belief that the Messiah will come either when all the Jews are righteous, or when all the Jews are unrighteous).

In both Qur'an and Bible, it is Moses and Aaron who embody virtue, fear of God, faith and obedience, and the people who embody the opposite. On five occasions in the Bible Moses calls them 'stiff-necked' and on one occasion he says: 'Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked' (Deuteronomy 10:16). Clearly, mere physical circumcision as a sign of the Covenant, as established by Abraham, is not enough. Although they are finally granted the Promised Land, though without Moses, the People of Israel do not change, despite all their years in the wilderness before and the chastisements they would receive within the Land in the years to come, as we shall see.

What we learn from this is that Moses is clearly a great man, Prophet, and leader, despite the waywardness of his people. He was a statesman, lawgiver, and the creator of a people from a loose group of slaves. Moreover, they were a people who developed some sense of God and their own chosenness in His eyes under Moses' guidance, though they were much given to backsliding. In many ways he is like the Prophet Muhammad, and this similarity is stated in the Bible in a passage in which Moses tells the people what the Lord had told him:

21 CHAPTER ONE

I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee (Moses), and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. (Deuteronomy 18:18)

This Prophet, who Christians sometimes see as Jesus (Acts 3:21-22 says that this prophecy will come true when Jesus comes again), in fact sounds more like the Prophet Muhammad (upon him be peace). In many ways—in the nature of their births; their marital status; their political power; their direct message from God; the new laws they established; their acceptance by their people; their natural deaths—Moses was most unlike Jesus and much more like the Final Prophet. Further, ‘brethren’ suggests something more distant than would the use of the words ‘family’ or ‘from amongst you’, and this would point to the children of Ishmael rather than the children of Isaac. It was told of Ishmael that ‘he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren’ (Genesis 16:12) and ‘die in the presence of all his brethren’ (Genesis 25:18), giving the exact sense of this phrase: Ishmael’s brethren were Isaac, and his descendents.

Before his death Moses gave this blessing to the Children of Israel: ‘The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from Mount Par’an, and he came with ten thousands of saints; from his right hand went a fiery law for them.’ (Deuteronomy 33:2) Before he comes to blessing the individual tribes of Israel he says that, though God ‘came from’ Sinai, his full glory would be from Mount Par’an, a place whose only reference in the Bible is as the place where Ishmael and Hagar lived after being sent away by Abraham. Ishmael was the ancestor of Muhammad (upon him be peace) and the Arabs. When Muhammad entered Mecca victorious he did so with ‘ten thousands of saints’, and with him he brought the ‘fiery law’ of the Qur’an. There has been no other such law since Moses.

The gentile, non-Israelite, import of this message is emphasised by the words that follow: ‘Yea, he loved the

people; all his saints are in thy hand: and they sat down at thy feet; *every one* shall receive of thy words. Moses commanded of us a law, *even* the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.’ (Deuteronomy 33:4-5) In other words, while the words of Moses were solely for the ‘congregation of Jacob’ (the Children of Israel), the words of the other will be a universal message for everyone, a message to ‘every one’, ‘to all mankind’ (34:28).

There is, though, one significant difference between the Prophets Moses and Muhammad, peace be upon them. Moses died at the age of 120 *before* the arrival within the Promised Land, although he is described as being at the height of his powers. This can only be seen as profoundly significant in the message it conveys—the deepest meaning of the story of the Children of Israel is to be found in the journey. The essence of their Chosenness is to be found in the Wilderness. Arrival would still impose requirements of submission to God, as we shall see in the following chapter, but Moses actually founded the community while it was on the move.

In contrast, though the era of the Prophet Muhammad actually begins in the exodus from Mecca to Madina, the significance of Islam is that it is a universal religion that was founded in an established, urban community in Madina under the leadership of the Blessed Prophet. The importance of migration is preserved in the ritual requirement of pilgrimage. Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam, but the other four pillars, particularly prayer and fasting in Ramadan, actually require stability to be performed fully: when travelling, prayers can be shortened and fasting postponed.

In short, while Judaism is the model for life’s journey and struggle, Islam, at its heart, appears as the model for submission, arrival and peace. We can take this on a personal level or on the level of the history of humanity. Though Jews may be like everyone else, only more so, as the Qur’an says, we were all Muslims initially and we are all to be so again ultimately, *insha’Allah*.