

THE MUSLIM WORLD

Vol. LXXX

April 1990

No. 2

THE PROBLEM OF SARAH'S IDENTITY IN ISLAMIC EXEGETICAL TRADITION¹

The character known from the Bible as Sarah, the wife of Abraham, is never mentioned by name in the Qurʾān. It is clear, however, that Sarah is the intended personage in the Qurʾānic renditions of the three visitors to Abraham, a story that can be found also in Genesis 18:1–16.² The exegetical comments treating these Qurʾānic passages and the various tales that evolved to provide detail to the many Qurʾānic references to Abraham all refer to her by the name Sarah. This is fully in keeping with the Genesis rendition. Nonetheless, the biblical story of Abraham and Sarah in some ways proved problematic to Islam, and one such example is the issue of Sarah's genealogical relationship with her husband.

Unlike the Bible, the Qurʾān displays no interest in the genealogy of ancient patriarchs or prophets. The concern with Sarah's identity in Islam actually originates from a knowledge of Genesis 20:12, where Abraham claims that Sarah is his sister through a common father, though not a common mother. The question raised by Muslim exegetes regarding Sarah's identity derives from the legal problem of incest resulting from marriage with one's sibling through either or

¹ The Islamic sources cited in this essay are

Al-Bukhārī, Abū ʿAbdallāh Muhammad b Ismāʿīl b Ibrāhīm b al-Mughīra b Bardizbāh Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Juʿfī, *Al-jāmiʿ al-sahih* (Lahore, 1979)

Ibn Hanbal, Ahmad b Muhammad, *al-musnad* (Beirut al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1389/1969)

Ibn Kathīr, ʿImād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl b ʿUmar, *Qisas al-anbiyāʾ* (Beirut, 1402/1982) These are the first two volumes of his *Al-bidāya waʾl-nihāya*

Ibn Qutayba, Abū Muhammad ʿAbdallāh b Muslim al-Dīnawārī, *Kitāb al-maʿārif* (Cairo Dār al-maʿārif, n d)

Ibn Saʿd, Abū ʿAbdallāh Muhammad b Mānīʿ al-Basrī al-Hāshimī, *Kitāb al-tabaqāt al-kabīr*, 9 vols (Beirut Dār al-Sādīr lil-tibāʿati wal-nashr, 1380/1970)

Al-Kisāʾī, Muhammad b ʿAbdallāh, *Qisas al-anbiyāʾ*, edited by Isaac Eisenberg and titled, *Vita Prophetarum* (Leiden E J Brill, 1922)

Al-Masʿūdī, Abū al-Hasan ʿAlī b al-Husayn, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawāhir*, 4 vols (Beirut. Dār al-Andalus, 1385/1965)

Al-Qummī, Abū al-Hasan ʿAlī b Ibrāhīm b Hāshim b Mūsā b Babawayhi, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, 2 vols (Najaf, 1385/1966)

Al-Tabarī, Abū Jaʿfar Muhammad b Jarīr, *Tārīkh al-rusul waʾl-mulūk*, ed, M J De Goeje as *Annales* Vol 1 (Leiden E J Brill, 1964)

Al-Thaʿlabī, Abū Ishāq Ahmad b Muhammad b Ibrāhīm al-Nisābūrī, *ʿArāʾis al-majālīs* (Cairo Mustafā al-Babī al-Halabī, 1374/1954)

Al-Yaʿqubī, Ahmad b Abi Yaʿqub b Wadhī, *Tārīkh*, ed, M T Houtsma and titled *Historiae* (Leiden E J Brill, 1969)

² In the Qurʾān S 11 71–72 gives the most explicit rendition (cf Genesis 18 10–15, 21 3), though S 51 29 also refers to Abraham's wife, presumably Sarah. Other loci such as S 15 51–59 and S 29 31 refer to the same episode, though they contain no allusions to a wife of Abraham

both parents. Although Abraham's claim of being Sarah's half-brother is nowhere mentioned or alluded to in the Qurʾān, the problem nevertheless occupied the Muslim chroniclers of pre-Islamic history, who were typically familiar with biblical legends and often treated even those legends from the Bible that were absent from the Qurʾān.

A fine solution to the problem is offered in a story recounting Abraham's and Sarah's experiences with a king who desired to take Sarah to wife.³ When the king asks him who Sarah is, Abraham explains that she is his sister. In a private conversation afterwards, Abraham cautions Sarah not to contradict his words, and reminds her that she is indeed his sister in religion.⁴

The historians do not refer to this solution when they account for Abraham and Sarah's family kinship, though they follow its reasoning by finding an acceptable genealogical relationship for husband and wife that would avoid the problem of incest. Only Ibn Kathīr⁵ discusses the problem openly when he notes that it may have been legal in Abraham's day for a man to marry his sister, even if forbidden later. Ibn Kathīr's comment demonstrates his sophisticated and almost modern sense of historical self-consciousness, but it failed to solve the problem of Sarah's and Abraham's kinship because of the widely held Islamic doctrine of the moral infallibility of prophets (*ʿisma*). According to this belief, Abraham, like all the prophets, was innately immune to sin. He was incapable of breaking even a future law because he was guided constantly by God's moral protection as well as his own exceptional sense of moral virtue.⁶ Abraham would not have married his half-sister even if this were technically legal at the time he lived, because it was explicitly forbidden in Islam to marry one's sister (S.4:23).⁷

³ This legend is not in the Qurʾān, though it is found repeatedly in the tradition literature (Ibn Saʿd, 1 48–50, Ibn Ḥanbal, 2 403, Bukhārī, 3 230–32, 4 368–69, Tabarī, 267–69, *Kisāʾī*, 141, Ibn Kathīr, 214ff, Qummī, 1 332–33, Ibn al-Athīr 100f, etc.) The Islamic legends derive ultimately from the three renditions of the theme found in Genesis 12 10–20, 20 1–18, 26 6–12

⁴ Other versions have Abraham telling her that they are the only true believers on earth. The immediate purpose of this legend is not to solve the incest problem, but rather to solve the problem raised in the renditions of the narrative attributed to Abū Hurayra: "Abraham told only three lies: his comment when he called to their gods 'I am sick' (S 37 89), the verse, 'No! Their big one here did it!' (S 21 63), and his statement when he said, 'She is my sister.'" By stating that he and his sister are "siblings in religion," Abraham avoids the onus of the lie, for they are indeed considered the only Muslim believers of their day, therefore holding a common religious kinship. At the same time, the story solves the problem of incest since it demonstrates that Abraham and Sarah are not biological siblings, though the immediate concern of the legend as rendered on the authority of Abū Hurayra is the ostensible problem of a prophet lying (with possibly dire consequences to his wife) in order to save himself.

⁵ Ibn Kathīr, *Qisas al-anbiyāʾ* (Beirut, 1402/1982), I 214

⁶ *ET* 4 182. Cf. Moshe Zucker, "The problem of *ʿisma*—prophetic immunity to sin and error in Islamic and Jewish literatures" (Hebrew), in *Tarbiz* 35 (1966), 149–73. The issue of *ʿisma* of course, was also the concern expressed in the comment attributed to Abū Hurayra above (n 4).

⁷ A similar approach is taken by the rabbis to Abraham's offer of both milk and meat to the three strangers at the terebinths of Mamre (Genesis 18 8). According to one view, even though the Torah had not yet been given, Abraham would nevertheless not have made the error of offering both milk and meat to his guests in violation of the kosher laws. He therefore offered milk first, and then waited the appropriate length of time until he could offer the meat (Commentary on *Targum Yonatan* Gen 18 8).

The chroniclers treating the story of Abraham had no consistent early traditions to give them acceptable guidance in solving the problem of Sarah's identity. The traditions they cite vary considerably and are attributed to a variety of authorities. Of the thirteen explanations of Sarah's identity collected from the sources, five provide no authority for their explanation. Fully five different identities for Sarah are suggested. A complete sample of suggestions regarding Sarah's kinship are provided in the schema below:

Sarah's Identity⁸

ù Identity/source	Authority ù
A married S in Syria Ibn Sa'd 46	Father of Hishām b. Muḥammad
S = daughter of Haran, who is brother of A & Nahḳ ⁹ Ibn Qutayba 31	Wahb from the Torah
S = daughter of Kharan, ¹⁰ A's paternal uncle. Ya'qubī 22	(Ya'qubī)
S = daughter of Haran, Abraham's paternal uncle. ¹¹ Ṭabarī 266	Ibn Ishāq
S = daughter of King of Harran. Ṭabarī 266	(no source)
S = daughter of Abraham's maternal uncle Qummī 1:332	(Qummī)
S = daughter of Bethuel b. Nahor and was A's 1st cousin Mas'ūdī 1:57	(Mas'ūdī)
S = daughter of A's paternal uncle, Haran. Tha'labī 79	Ibn Ishāq
S = daughter of the king of Haran Tha'labī 79	Suddī
S = daughter of the king of Harran, named Haran Kisā'ī 141	Ka'ḳ al-Aḥbār

⁸ A = Abraham, S = Sarah

⁹ Milkah and Sarah are given as sisters.

¹⁰ The spelling of Haran varies in the sources. Generally, the individual is named *Haran*, and the land named *Haran* or *Harran* (Cf. the biblical Hebrew equivalents, *Haran* for Abraham's brother, and the land spelled *Haran*).

¹¹ According to the two renditions attributed to Ibn Ishāq, both Abraham's paternal uncle and his brother are named Haran.

Sarah's Identity⁸

ù Identity/source	Authority ù
S = daughter of the king of Haran Ibn Kathīr 213	Suddhī
S = daughter of Abraham's paternal uncle Haran for whom Haran is named. Ibn Kathīr 213	(Ibn Kathīr)
S = daughter of Abraham's brother Haran & sister of Lot Ibn Kathīr 214	Qutaybī & Naqash

Two genealogies are repeated in the sources. According to Ibn Ishāq, Ya'qubī, and Ibn Kathīr, Sarah is the daughter of Haran, who is Abraham's paternal uncle (rather than Abraham's brother, as in Genesis 11:27). Qummi's slightly variant comment claims that she is the daughter of Abraham's maternal uncle, though he does not provide his name. According to this genealogy, Sarah would be Abraham's first cousin and a perfectly acceptable, even desirable, marriage partner.

According to the interpretation of Suddhī, Ka'b al-Aḥbār, and one anonymous comment provided by Ṭabarī, Sarah is the daughter of the king of Harran and therefore unrelated to Abraham, thus solving the incest problem. This view acknowledges the similarity expressed in Genesis 11:27–31 between the name for Abraham's brother and the geographical entity Haran. In fact, this interpretation also considers Sarah to be the "daughter of Haran," though this Haran is the ruler of a land by that name rather than a relative of Abraham.

Mas'ūdī claims that Sarah is the daughter of Bethuel b. Nahor and is Abraham's first cousin on his father's side (*bint 'amm Ibrāhīm*). Ibn Sa'd avoids the issue by citing Hishām b. Muḥammad's father, who noted simply that Abraham married Sarah while in Syria (*al-sha'm*). All of these explanations provide an identity for Sarah that eliminates (or avoids) the problem of kinship, but all differ significantly from the biblical genealogies.

The only explanation remaining in our list is that of Wahb, found in Ibn Qutayba's *Kitāb al-ma'ārif* and repeated by Ibn Kathīr on the authority of Qutaybī and Naqash. Wahb claims that he found in the Torah (*wajadtu fī al-tawrāt*) that "Nahor and Haran were born to Terah, the father of Abraham; and Lot, Sarah and Milka were born to Haran. Haran died while his father Terah was still living in the land in which he was born. Abraham married Sarah the daughter of Haran, and Nahor married Milka the daughter of Haran."¹² Wahb's explanation is closest to the biblical genealogy. According to Genesis 11:27f, Haran is indeed Abraham's brother rather than his paternal uncle, and Haran does have a son and two daughters. But according to the biblical kinship lists, their names are Lot, Milka, and Yiska. No mention is made of Sarah.

¹² Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-ma'ārif* (Cairo: Dār al-ma'ārif, n.d.), p. 31. Ibn Qutayba is referring to Wahb b. Munabbih, the early South Arabian expert on Jewish and Christian legends (*EI* [new printing, 1987] 8:1084–5).

Wahb's reading is very close, but it does not correspond exactly with the genealogy of Genesis. What Wahb was actually describing is the rabbinic interpretation of the Torah text. The Palestinian Targum on Genesis 11:29 reads, "And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of the wife of Abram is Sarai and the name of the wife of Nahor is Milkah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milkah and of Yiskah who is Sarai (*va'avo'i d'yiskah hi sarai*)." The Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 14a reads: "Rabbi Isaac said, 'Yiskah is Sarah. Why is she called Yiskah? Because she could see by means of the holy spirit (*shesakhtah b'ruah haqodesh*).'" The words here for "see" (*sakhtah*) and for Yiskah have the identical Hebrew root, *s-k-w*. By connecting Sarah with the root meaning for *s-k-w*, the rabbis identify her with Yiskah through the analogy of verbal congruity. The Talmudic passage adds a second interpretation based on the same principle: "Another explanation is: because all gazed at her beauty (*shehakol sokhin b'yofyah*)." Clearly, the rabbis were puzzled by the fact that Sarah was not included in the genealogies. They supplied the connection through Haran's daughter Yiskah, who would have been otherwise unaccounted for. Just as Yiskah's sister Milkah was wedded to Abraham's brother Nahor, so too Abraham must have married Yiskah—that is, Sarah—making the relationships parallel.

Wahb's explanation of Sarah's identity follows rabbinic lore exactly and comes much closer to the biblical genealogy than the other Islamic explanations. It is likely that his comment represents the link between Jewish tradition and the Islamic interpretations. The rabbis of the Targum and the Talmud felt the need to create a genealogy for Sarah that would obviate the problem of sibling marriage. They used the convenient genealogical lists of Genesis 11 to place Sarah as Abraham's niece. Like the rabbis, the Muslim commentators assumed that Sarah was the daughter of Haran. But normative Islam could not accept the Jewish interpretation of Abraham marrying his niece (his brother Haran's daughter) because the Qur'ān (S.4:23) explicitly forbade marriage between those relations. Haran, the father of Sarah, therefore, had to have been someone other than Abraham's brother, according to normative Islamic exegesis. We find, thus, that Haran was either the name of Abraham's uncle or the name of the ruler of the land of Harran, thereby solving the kinship problem in acceptable Islamic terms.

According to the rabbinic understanding, repeated by Wahb in the Islamic sources, Abraham actually married his brother's daughter—not his own biological sister. This may have been stretching the biblical text, but it did avoid the immediate problem of incest for Judaism.¹³

Was Wahb's claim that he found his solution to the problem in the Torah mistaken or a case of misreading? It was neither, for Wahb was referring to the rabbinic concept of "Torah," meaning the entirety of Jewish learning and lore.

¹³ Sexual relations with one's half sister is explicitly forbidden in Exodus 18:9,11 (Cf. II Sam. 13:13), though relations with one's niece is not (Cf. BT *Yebamot* 21a, Maimonides, *Yad Ishut* 1:6). This rabbinic interpretation solved the problem of incest but not all the problems of the biblical text, for Abraham did indeed tell Abimelech that Sarah was his half-sister (Gen. 20:12). Just as striking, the early rabbis noted that if Sarah were Haran's daughter, Haran would have had to conceive his first child at age six according to the biblical chronology (*Genesis Rabbah* 45:1).

That corpus of learning was classified by rabbinic Judaism into two categories: the Written Torah, referring to the Hebrew Bible and especially the Pentateuch; and the Oral Torah or rabbinic lore, including the Talmud, Midrash, and other post-biblical works. The confusion over the meaning of Torah in Islam is evidenced by the ambiguity in the Qur'anic and extra-Qur'anic use of the word *tawrat*.¹⁴ There can be no mistake in this instance, however, that Wahb was referring to the Midrash or legendary interpretive literature of the rabbis when he said, "I found in the Torah." His solution to the problem of Sarah's identity is straight out of rabbinic Judaism—acceptable to that religious system but unacceptable to Islam.

On the one hand, it is no wonder then that the traditions attributed to Wahb b. Munabbih are regularly considered suspect in the eyes of normative Islam. His attempt to solve the problem of Sarah's identity failed the test of Islamic religious law found in such an important and basic source as the Qur'ān itself. On the other hand, one cannot but remark that the two acceptable Islamic solutions to the problem of Sarah's identity inevitably derive from the tradition attributed to Wahb or directly from rabbinic sources. Both consider Sarah the daughter of Haran: either Abraham's uncle, or the king of the land by the same name. Both represent acceptable Islamic variations on the rabbinic suggestion that Sarah was none other than Yiskah, the daughter of Abraham's brother Haran.

Despite the clear connection between the Islamic solution to the problem of Abraham's kinship with Sarah and that found in earlier Jewish sources, it is inaccurate to claim that the Muslims simply borrowed or copied their answer from the Jews. In fact, the Islamic resolution to the problem is a unique working through of an unprecedented Islamic issue. It is indeed clear that some Muslims knew of the Jewish attempts to solve the kinship dilemma. But aside from Wahb (whose opinion was generally rejected in later generations), the Muslim exegetes treating the problem could not accept the Jewish solution. Nevertheless, they did not reject the process. They worked with the problem in order to arrive at acceptable solutions that fit the particular religious needs and sensibilities of Islam.¹⁵

Rather than simply dismissing the close parallels as a case of Islamic "borrowing" or "copying" from Jewish sources, modern critical scholarship might more accurately understand it as a case of similar needs demanding similar solutions. Both the early Muslim exegetes and the earlier rabbis inquired into the meaning of Scripture in order to settle important issues within their individual religious civilizations. The demands of each were often different, but they sometimes overlapped. When this occurred, particularly during the first few generations of Islam, Muslim religious scholars were willing to examine the so-

¹⁴ J. Horowitz, "Tawrat," in *EI*, 8:706f (new printing, 1987); Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), pp. 95–96.

¹⁵ For a fuller discussion of this process of development in Islamic exegesis, see R. Firestone, *The Evolution of Islamic Exegesis in the Abraham-Ishmael Legends* Ph.D. diss., (New York: New York University, 1988).

lutions proposed even by non-Muslim scriptuaries.¹⁶ This was not a wholesale acceptance of Jewish or Christian tradition, but rather a process of careful inquiry and finally, where appropriate, application through *islamization*. Just as ancient Israelite religion, though unique, was influenced by neighboring Near Eastern religious notions, and Christianity and Judaism by religious ideas common in the Mediterranean of later times, so too was Islam influenced by the ideas and practices of its neighboring religious civilizations. All participate in the religious phenomenon of Scripturalism while remaining unique expressions of that ongoing process.

It can be said, therefore, that while the Islamic solution to the problem of Sarah's kinship relation to Abraham evolved out of an earlier Jewish attempt to solve the same problem, the answers proposed by Muslim exegetes represent new and uniquely Islamic formulations.

Boston University
Dept. of Modern Foreign
Languages & Literatures
Boston, Massachusetts

Reuven Firestone

¹⁶ M. J. Kister, "Haddithū 'an Banī Isrā'īla wa-la haraja. A Study of an early tradition," *Israel Oriental Studies* I (1972), 215–39; Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 8–10.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.