

Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegesis

Shari L. Lowin*

Stonehill College

Abstract

Jewish and Muslim exegetical narratives on the shared forefathers (known as *midrash aggadah* and *tafsīr/ḥadīth/qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ/isrāʾīliyyāt*) have long been recognized as a meeting point of Judaism and Islam. Early studies of the forefathers, Abraham in particular, strove to ‘prove’ that much of what appeared in the Islamic exegetical materials derived from the traditions that predated Islam, mainly Judaism. More recent scholarship has abandoned such a reductionist approach for a more moderated view. Studies of the Jewish and Muslim exegetical material on Abraham show that while scholars continue to trace the historical development of the Muslim exegetical narratives, they also look to uncover the inner meaning of the narratives themselves. This article traces the shift from the purely reductionist treatment of the Muslim and Jewish exegetical narratives to the more nuanced approach, especially as it applies to Abraham. Four categories of Abrahamic motifs are singled out here: Abraham and his sacrifice of his son, Abraham and his relationship with Sarah, Abraham and his later visit to Ishmael, and narratives relating to Abraham’s birth and early life.

The stories a people tells about its ancestors often hold the key to understanding who and what that people understands itself to be. Where the Islamic and Jewish accounts of the founding forefathers are concerned however, academic scholarship has often ignored this significant aspect of the source material. Instead, comparative studies of Islamic and Jewish exegetical narratives on scriptural figures have focused on determining the influence of one tradition’s materials over the others. While such studies prove valuable for our understanding the historical development of certain motifs, the approach that takes only this aspect into account results in scholarship that misrepresents the complex and often symbiotic relationship between Islam and Judaism and ignores the intrinsic creativity of both exegetical traditions.

Over the past 25 years or so, a shift toward a more nuanced view of the Muslim–Jewish exegetical relationship has been at work and nowhere is this more apparent than in studies relating to Abraham. Indeed, where earlier studies aimed at uncovering the Biblical/Jewish (or Christian) source for a given Muslim exegetical narrative on Abraham, more recent studies have moved to understanding not only the development of the motifs but also the local significance embedded in these narratives. In so doing, scholars have recognized two elements crucial to the meaningful comparative study of the Islamic and Jewish exegetical accounts. Namely, rather than seeing a one-way influence from Judaism toward Islam, scholars now recognize that relationship as intertextual, what Wasserstrom (1995) terms a ‘synergy’; after all, not only were many of the early converts to Islam Jews who brought with them their texts and narratives but Judaism itself continued to develop during the many years under Islamicate civilizations and absorbed from its surroundings. Equally if not more importantly, scholars have begun to appreciate the creativity of the Islamic narratives themselves, recognizing that Islam not only adopted external materials but then purposefully and creatively adapted them to fit the Islamic value system.

Definition of Terms

Very generally speaking, the rabbinic exegetical materials concerning the Biblical characters are known as narrative midrash (*midrash aggadah*). *Midrash*, a term that originally appears to have meant something akin to ‘research’, constitutes a genre of exegetical literature, dating from roughly 400 to 1200 CE, in which rabbinic scholarly attention was drawn to the irregularities of the Biblical text. Such irregularities could be missing words, extraneous words, difficult to parse grammar, unclear terminology, repetitive phrases or episodes, intertextual allusions and contradictions, and even homiletical messages that seemed to the rabbis at odds with the values of Judaism. In explaining these ‘problems’, the rabbis drew from all over the Bible, seeing all of its parts as interconnected. Importantly, since the explanation of a particular pericope thus derived from materials drawn from the Bible itself, the rabbis understood the exegesis to have been part of the Biblical text itself, part of the divine plan in its composition.

Such midrashic explanations of the Bible fall into two categories, *midrash aggadah* (narrative midrash) and *midrash halakha* (legal midrash). The more easily definable of the two, *midrash halakha*, concerns itself with scriptural interpretation regarding matters of legal interest and importance. By contrast, *midrash aggadah* provides exegesis for issues of narrative, conceptual, spiritual, or homiletical concern. While the distinction between the two categories in terms of format is not always precise, generally speaking in *midrash aggadah* the explanations provided for the ‘problems’ encountered by the rabbis reading the Bible took the form of narrative expansions of the biblical account. Not surprisingly, the lion’s share of the exegetical materials regarding the Biblical forefathers falls under the rubric of narrative midrash (*midrash aggadah*).

The Muslim exegetical materials likewise expand upon tersely worded sacred Scripture, though the Muslim literature does not relate to the Qur’ān in precisely the same way in which the Jewish exegetical materials do the Bible. Rather, the Islamic materials that concern the forefathers serve less as exegesis of a specific Qur’ānic text and more as narrative supplements to it. These supplements take either historical form, filling in details missing from the Qur’ānic rendition, or provide homiletical enhancements, or both. Such materials were known as *isrā’īliyyāt* (Israelite tales) and/or *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* (Stories of the Prophets). While scholarly debate remains as to which of the two served as a subdivision of the other, as Adang (1996) notes, both were understood to constitute a subcategory of the Islamic *tafsīr* and *ḥadīth* genres.

Frequently, the *isrā’īliyyāt* and *qīṣaṣ* accounts concerning Qur’ānic characters reveal a Jewish or Christian origin, a fact that was neither concealed nor denigrated by the Islamic tradition in the early years.¹ Indeed, *ḥadīth* reports relate that Muhammad encouraged the early Muslims to check with the People of the Book when they found the Qur’ānic or *ḥadīth* accounts in need of elucidation (Kister, 1972). Only later, by the time of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), did the term *isrā’īliyyāt* come to designate dubious traditions which were to be rejected because of either objectionable content or its non-Muslim origin. While the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* often contained the same materials, the genre avoided such criticism. Instead, when Muslim scholars objected to the *qīṣaṣ* materials and their authors, they did so on the grounds that the storytellers had deviated too wildly from normative teachings and had veered toward the fantastic or heterodox. Such critiques did not prevent either the *isrā’īliyyāt* or the *qīṣaṣ* material from continuing to appear in classical Islamic literature, however.

Trends in Scholarship on the Forefathers

The most famous work in early comparative studies of Muslim and Jewish exegesis remains Abraham Geiger's *Was hat Mohammed aus den Judenthume aufgenommen?* (translated as *Judaism and Islam*, 1898). While Geiger attempts to uncover the many motifs, terms, and concepts he understood Muhammad as having adopted from the Jewish materials, he stresses that the existence of parallel themes does not in itself present conclusive proof of Islam's direct borrowing from Judaism. Such a claim, he insists, requires more specific corroboration. Geiger's foray into tracing the rabbinic matter in Islamic exegetical materials was followed by a stream of similar scholarship. The most sophisticated and knowledgeable among such scholars include Horovitz (1926) and Speyer (1961), both of whom investigate Biblical stories found in the Qur'ān by tracing the latter to the former. Other important works on the forefathers include that of Weil (1846), who looks at similarities between the Jewish tradition and al-Kisā'ī, a well-known 11th century transmitter of prophetic narratives. Similarly, Rosenblatt (1945) carefully traces parallels between the Muslim and Jewish accounts on Adam, Abraham, Moses, and David.

While many scholars conducted sensitive comparisons between the Jewish and Islamic corpora, a reductionist-oriented movement soon arose among other scholars engaged in the field. These often insisted that any narrative element shared by Islam and Judaism could be traced back to Judaism, even when no textual support existed for such a claim. A particularly severe case of reductionism appears in the work of Katsh (1954), who engages in a verse-by-verse analysis of surahs 2 and 3 of the Qur'ān in which he links each Qur'ānic verse with a Biblical or Talmudic 'source'. His thesis resembles the earlier work of Sidersky (1933), who insists that prophetic account after prophetic account in the work of the famed exegete and historian al-Tabarī (d. 923 CE) derived straight from the Talmud or other Jewish sources, with little intervention or disruption. Reductionism appears even in the writings of the famed and sensitive Goitein (1955) when he asserts that even those Islamic stories that have no clear Jewish origin may still indicate some divergent Jewish tradition.

More recent reductionist-oriented scholars include Zaoui (1983) who, like Katsh, engages in a verse-by-verse 'sourcing' of the Qur'ān and attributes to Jewish sources even those ideas found in the Qur'ān that would logically have been shared by all monotheisms. Taking a different but also somewhat reductionist stance, Schwarzbaum (1982) insists that one can reconstruct now-lost Jewish legends based on accounts found in early Islamic texts since, as Sidersky earlier wrote, the latter have clearly drawn from the former directly. A more moderate perspective appears in the work of Halperin (1995a,b) who writes that the Muslim transformation of the rabbinic materials in some cases can be understood not as a uniquely Muslim take on the materials but as exegesis of the Jewish texts, exegesis in which the *Jewish* meanings are clarified and emphasized.

A newer strain of scholarship has begun shifting away from such a heavily reductionist approach, although it continues to acknowledge the influence of the Jewish exegetical accounts on the development of the Islamic narratives. According to this perspective, while Islam clearly adopted elements from the earlier tradition, it simultaneously and consciously remolded the materials in its own image. As Wheeler (1998) insists, rejuvenating an idea posited earlier by Heller (1934), the Muslim commentaries were not interested in getting the original (midrashic) story straight but in constructing narratives based on themes relevant to the Muslim message. Rubin (2007) echoes this stance when he writes that the Islamization of Biblical history was guided not by error but by a conscious urge to highlight the Arab origins of Islam. Lassner (1993a,b) adds that one declare a Jewish

text to be the source of a Muslim narrative only when there is an actual, not hypothetical, text available for comparison. Others, including Lassner (1993a,b), Yafeh (1992), Wasserstrom (1995), and Lowin (2006), assert that traditional Jewish materials served not only as the influence on Islam but were also influenced by Islamic civilization and materials in turn.

Exegetical Themes in the Life of Abraham

Both the more reductionist approach and the more moderate two-pronged approach to the materials can be found in comparative studies on the forefather Abraham, whose popularity has risen in recent years both inside and outside academic circles. The following constitutes an overview of some of the comparative scholarship as it relates to a number of important themes found in Muslim and Jewish exegetical retellings of Abraham's life. These are Abraham's almost-sacrifice of his son, Abraham's relationship with his wife Sarah, Abraham's later visit to Ishmael, and motifs relating to the birth and early life of the forefather.

THE BINDING OF ISAAC AND THE BINDING OF ISHMAEL

One of the more significant episodes in Abraham's life for both Muslims and Jews concerns his bringing his son as a sacrifice to God, an account that appears in both Gen. 22:1–19 and in the Qur'ān 37:99–110. For Jewish and Muslim exegetes alike, the scriptural episode cried out for interpretation. After all, both versions commend Abraham for his willingness to engage in child sacrifice, an abhorrent act at odds with the values of both Judaism and Islam. In the Muslim realm, the difficulties were compounded; while the Bible identifies the son five times as Sarah's son Isaac, the Qur'ān leaves out such key information. Namely, in the Qur'ān, the son's identity remains undisclosed and he remains unnamed.

In his study of the sacrifice accounts in Islamic and Jewish exegesis, Calder (1988) addresses neither issue in the Islamic sphere. Instead, he carefully traces the many midrashic motifs that appear to have influenced the Islamic accounts while acknowledging the difficulty in determining the absolute original. The midrashic elements, Calder explains, were created largely in order to comment on textual or ritual issues of particular interest to the rabbinic authors. When these same motifs later made their way into the Islamic realm, they did so only because of their value as elements that heighten the pathos and drama of the narrative; elements that were perceived as serving no dramatic purpose were simply left out of the Muslim texts. Calder adds that at some point Islamic exegesis combined these adopted rabbinic materials with Arab sanctuary traditions associated with Mecca, making the account relevant to the Arabs. However, he sees no greater significance to the Islamic versions of the sacrifice other than that they tell a good story.

While Calder focuses on the similarities and differences between the Islamic and Jewish exegetical renditions of the sacrifice, Firestone (1990a, 1998) engages the same materials in an attempt to understand the messages embedded in the texts. In Firestone's analysis, both the Muslim and Jewish exegetical materials aim at transmitting the concept of the 'merit of the Patriarchs'. In the Jewish realm, this concept, *zekhut avot*, teaches that the Jewish people merit special protection because of the virtuous deeds of their forefathers, deeds which sometimes include their suffering. Thus, some midrashic versions of the sacrifice of Isaac relate that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son resulted in the parting of the Red Sea as the Israelites fled Egypt. Others teach that the patriarch's obedience serves as atonement

for the sins of his future progeny. In the Islamic materials, the concept appears in later Shi'ite renditions which present Abraham's binding of his son as prefiguring the martyrdom of Husayn, the son of the founder of Shi'ism, 'Alī. In the Shi'ite texts, Abraham's grief over Husayn's future martyrdom provides Abraham with credit, in the eyes of God, as if he had carried out the sacrifice of his son without his having to do so.

Firestone engages not only interpretations of the near-sacrifice in Muslim and Jewish commentaries, he also addresses the issue of the Muslim identification of the unnamed son in the Qur'ān. Although later Islamic tradition almost without a doubt identifies the son as Ishmael, Firestone (1989) reveals that this has not always been the case. Rather, until the time of the historian and exegesis-collector, al-Ṭabarī (838–923 CE), Islamic tradition largely named Isaac as the intended son, in agreement with the Biblical materials. Firestone explains the almost unanimous shift to Ishmael as reflecting the rising importance among the Arab Muslims of a genealogical connection to Ishmael. In indentifying the intended and willing sacrificial victim as Ishmael and not Isaac, the Islamic tradition brought the Arabs onto the scene as the true inheritors, biologically and spiritually, of God's covenantal relationship with Abraham.

A fascinating deviation from the Muslim insistence on Ishmael appears in the Shi'ite realm. Firestone (1998) points out that unlike their Sunni counterparts, early Shi'ite traditions not only identify the child as the Jewish forefather Isaac, they also relate that Abraham was commanded to sacrifice Isaac in Mecca while there on Hajj.² Firestone explains this odd championing of the Jewish forefather with a theory that takes inner Islamic politics into account. He explains that with the ever-increasing animosity between the Shi'ites and the Sunnites in the eighth century, a large number of non-Arabs (mainly Persians) found themselves joining the Shi'ite cause; as outsiders victimized by the Arab Muslims for their non-Arabness, these non-Arabs identified with the Shi'ites, similarly victimized by the Sunni establishment. The non-Arab Isaac resonated more strongly in such non-Arab circles. When these tensions abated, Shi'ite texts turned to Ishmael as well.

ABRAHAM AND SARAH

Another set of motifs in the narrative of Abraham's life important to both Muslim and Jewish exegesis revolves around Abraham's attempt to protect himself and his wife Sarah while in a foreign land by lying about their marital relationship and claiming to be siblings. The rabbinic and Islamic exegetical accounts find their origin in two different Biblical accounts, Gen. 12:10–20 and Gen. 20, which tell of Abraham and Sarah's experiences first with Pharaoh in Egypt and then with Abimelech in Gerar. Interestingly, although the incidents remain entirely absent from the Qur'ān, the story appears in an impressive number of works of Islamic exegesis.

Despite the obvious connection between the Islamic accounts and the Biblical/midrashic versions which clearly served as their source, this motif did not draw much attention from early comparative scholarship. This is not to say, however, that comparative scholarship has ignored this particular Abrahamic motif entirely. In three separate articles in 3 years (1990b, 1991, 1993), Reuven Firestone not only examines the exegetical responses to the problematic issue of Abraham's lie but breaks down the Jewish and Muslims retellings of the episode into six smaller motifs which he then compares and analyzes. As he does in his examinations of other Abrahamic episodes, Firestone not only traces the historical development of the motifs but also examines their theological and exegetical significance to their own communities.

Since the bulk of the Islamic materials regarding this episode center on the issue of Abraham's claim to be Sarah's brother, Firestone focuses the greater part of his analysis on this element as it appears in both Muslim and Jewish exegesis. As Firestone explains, the midrashic narratives serve to explain a very specific problem in the Biblical text. Namely, in claiming a sibling relationship with his wife, Abraham has either lied (the Bible never otherwise speaks of Sarah as Abraham's sister) or he has committed incest (see Lev. 18:9). The rabbis absolve Abraham from either misstep by explaining that Abraham and Sarah were uncle and niece, a relationship that fell under the rubric of siblingness in ancient terminology but which was not considered incestuous for marriage purposes.

For the Muslim reader, the Islamic sources present an even greater challenge. Most puzzlingly, while the Qur'ān does not mention this problematic episode at all, the exegetical texts include it as a matter of course. But to what end? Why introduce so problematic an element when there appears no Islamic/Qur'ānic text that requires it as explication? In addressing this conundrum, Firestone posits two intertwined theories. A survey of the Islamic materials, he explains, shows without a doubt that this motif was part of a series inherited by Islam from the Bible and the midrash. Since the episode formed such an integral part of the legend, which supported both the Jewish and Muslim claim of the inanity of idol worship, it could not be discounted. However, since the midrashic explanation—that Abraham and Sarah were uncle and niece—violated Islamic incest laws, the Muslim exegetes altered the relationship; the majority relates that Sarah was either Abraham's first-cousin or the daughter of the king of Haran, an unrelated man. They explain Abraham's claim of siblingness as necessary to teach an important Islamic homiletical lesson. As the Muslim exegetes write, Abraham's words meant that he and Sarah were brother and sister in religion; all Muslims, we are thus to understand, are brethren in faith.

ABRAHAM'S VISIT TO ISHMAEL

One particularly interesting Abrahamic exegetical motif concerns Abraham's later visit to an adult Ishmael, a story-line that constitutes one of a number of motifs found in both Jewish and Muslim exegesis on the interactions between Abraham and Ishmael. One of the essential scholarly works on the Abraham–Ishmael cycle remains Reuven Firestone's *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham–Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (1990a). Firestone not only traces the historical development of the Islamic accounts, uncovering the midrashic or Arab traditions behind many of these motifs, he also analyzes each episode in the Islamic cycle in order to reveal the internal messages imparted by the Muslim exegetical renditions. Among the episodes and motifs that Firestone examines, we find Abraham's early emigration from Haran, his building of the Ka'ba with Ishmael, the binding of his son, his travels to Beersheba and digging of a well there, and his later visit to a married Ishmael.

The exegetical materials on Abraham's visit to Ishmael bear particular interest because while both the Islamic and Jewish exegetical corpora record the story in much detail, the account remains completely absent from both the Bible and the Qur'ān. It is thus a purely exegetical creation. As the exegetes report, after Ishmael survives the ordeal in the desert in which he almost dehydrates to death—an incident related in Gen. 21 but not in the Qur'ān—he settles in the desert, marries, and establishes a household. Years pass and Abraham, having not seen his eldest son in some time, decides to visit him, saddles his beast and sets off. When he arrives at Ishmael's

home, Abraham is greeted by Ishmael's wife who rudely offers him no hospitality and informs him that her husband has left for the day. Abraham leaves a message for his son, instructing him to replace the doorstep of his house. Understanding that his father has disapproved of his wife, Ishmael divorces her and remarries. Some years later Abraham attempts a second visit, arriving once again when Ishmael is out of the house. This time, however, Abraham's daughter-in-law behaves appropriately, offering the visitor food and drink, and, in some renditions, washing and anointing his head. Upon departing, Abraham asks her to tell her husband that the visitor said that the doorstep is sound. When Ishmael hears the message, he understands that his father has now approved of his marriage choice.

Noting that the earliest midrashic renditions of this account appear in rabbinic sources that date to after the rise of Islam, earlier scholars like Heller (1925) and Heinemann (1974) understood the narrative as an original Islamic creation that made its way into the Jewish milieu. According to both Heller and Heinemann, the Muslim authors who created this account sought to accomplish two goals in doing so. On the one hand, they desired to extend the Qur'anic narrative of Ishmael's life, a narrative that appears with only minimal detail in Scripture (for example: Q 2:125–129; 3:96–97; 14:37; 22:26) and which ends abruptly. Additionally, Muslim exegetes strove to portray Ishmael in a positive light, as an obedient son, a brave hunter, and an intelligent decipherer of riddles. When later midrashic texts adopted and adapted this Muslim account, explain Heller and Heinemann, they did so in a similar attempt to solve for the abrupt ending given to the story of Ishmael in Gen. 21:21.

In an article that appeared shortly after Heinemann's, Schussman (1980) takes a completely opposing stance, insisting that even though the Jewish texts date to after the rise of Islam, the Jewish legend nonetheless served as the source for Islamic. In a well-laid out argument, Schussman presents her case with careful analysis of internal evidence and without descending into simple reductionism. In the first place, she notes, although the Jewish texts date to the Islamic period, they nonetheless predate the earliest Islamic sources in which this legend appears. Furthermore, Schussman writes, the many details relating to the wives' behavior, the food they served Abraham, the reason given for Ishmael's absence, Sarah's directive to Abraham not to get off his camel at Ishmael's house, and Hagar's role (or lack of it) all portray Ishmael in a negative light. This, she argues, presents a rabbinic attitude toward Isaac's rival, Ishmael, and appears to have been sparked by Gen. 21:21's report that Ishmael's mother arranged his marriage for him, an element the rabbis see as indicative of Ishmael's own poor character.³ What's more, she notes, while in many cases, the Muslim renditions 'correct' these details and present Ishmael more favorably, in some versions the Muslim texts oddly incorporate the negative elements.⁴ If the Islamic renditions constituted the original version, Schussman writes, such negative materials would not logically have been included there. Rather, she maintains, the Jewish version, crafted in order to present Abraham as a good father but Ishmael as a less than stellar individual, served as the inspiration for the Muslim versions.

Where earlier scholars might have then insisted, despite all evidence to the contrary, on the existence of a pre-Islamic midrash, Schussman makes no such claim. She proposes instead that these midrashic accounts were created specifically as a response to Islam. They were intended, she writes, as purposeful Jewish polemics against the Muslim foundation myths regarding Mecca, which relate that Ishmael made his home in Mecca when he and Abraham travelled to there in order to build the Ka'ba (a journey referred to in Q 2:125–129). Schussman's analysis hinges on a curious detail that appears in both the Jewish and Islamic accounts of Abraham's visit: Sarah's demand that Abraham not alight

from his camel at Ishmael's home. This, notes Schussman, points to the motif's origin as a Jewish polemic against Islam; if Abraham never gets off his camel while at Ishmael's, he can not have built the Ka'ba there as the Muslims have claimed. Since the Muslim authors failed to recognize the embedded Jewish polemics, they included both Sarah's directive to Abraham and Abraham's obedience in their versions. In order to explain this odd detail, they added an Islamically oriented explanation: since Abraham could not alight from his camel, Ishmael's second wife brought him a stone against which he balanced his feet while she washed his head. This stone, relate these Muslim accounts, became the *maqām Ibrāhīm*, a rock found in the Ka'ba and which bears the imprint of a foot. In reworking the midrashic Sarah's demand, the Muslim exegetes provided yet another link between the Meccan holy site and the forefather. Importantly, Schussman points out, this is *not* the accepted Muslim understanding of the origin of the foot-imprinted *maqām Ibrāhīm*. Traditionally, Islamic narratives explain and identify the rock's imprint (and name) as having resulted from Ibrāhīm's standing upon it while building the Ka'ba with Ishmael. While some renditions maintain that the building of the Ka'ba took place during a third visit by Abraham to the adult Ishmael, others relate that Abraham and Ishmael travelled to Mecca together for this purpose.⁵

EARLY LIFE OF ABRAHAM

Comparative scholarship has turned its attention not only to the accounts of Abraham's later life, but also to the Jewish and Muslim episodes concerning the forefather's early years—before he received God's blessings or even knew of God. The Jewish and Muslim narrative traditions record five distinct episodes in Abraham's early biography as significant. In the opening account, an idolatrous king named Nimrod receives a prediction that a child born in his kingdom will vanquish him. Alarmed, Nimrod sets elaborate plans to foil the prophecy's fulfillment. Despite his best attempts, Nimrod fails to prevent the birth of the child, none other than Abraham. The second episode concerns Abraham's birth and survival in a cave, in hiding from the king and his minions. The third episode recounts Abraham's discovery of God. In some versions Abraham learns of God's existence by observing the material world around him, most commonly the rising and setting of the celestial spheres. In others, Abraham turns to God after realizing the folly of worshipping idols. Abraham appears as a religious zealot in the fourth episode, attacking his people's idols, smashing them to pieces, and facetiously blaming the largest among them for the assault. The final episode records the punishment Abraham receives for his sacrilege/attempted deicide: Nimrod builds a fiery furnace and throws Abraham in it. A miracle occurs, however, and the fire proves harmless; the forefather exits the flames with not even a singed hair.

Because the earliest renditions of many of these episodes appear in the pre-Qur'anic midrashic materials, scholars have long argued that the Islamic texts clearly draw from the earlier Jewish tradition, copying the midrash into both the Qur'ān and the later exegetical works. In one extreme case, Sidersky (1933) assigns midrashic sources to all of the Muslim Abraham episodes in Abraham's life, claiming the Muslim exegetes simply lifted their materials from the midrash. Problematically, Sidersky pays little attention both to the chronology of his sources and to the details, neither of which supports his claims. Other scholars have similarly insisted that the Muslim texts lifted their narratives from the midrashic materials, attributing the differences between the two corpora either to Arab 'flights of fancy' or, like Schwarzbau (1982), to the vagaries of oral story-telling through which the information was assumed to have been transmitted.

More recent scholarship on these five episodes in their Islamic and Jewish exegetical manifestations exposes a more symbiotic relationship between Judaism and Islam. A comparative analysis of these accounts by Shari Lowin reveals that the narratives frequently began life as Jewish exegesis of a Biblical issue intended to explain a textual difficulty or elucidate a homiletically problematic matter. Because these midrashic texts provided important information on their shared forefather, they were later adopted by Islamic tradition. Once in the Islamic exegetical milieu, the Jewish narratives underwent an Islamicization; details that were too 'Jewish' or that broadcast a message at odds with the message of Islam were altered to fit Islamic values and needs. Lowin maintains that analysis of the later Jewish exegetical incarnations shows that these Islamicized narratives eventually made their way back into the Jewish tradition, where they were once again adapted to fit their new circumstances; elements at odds with Jewish teaching were excised or altered.

As Lowin shows, details were not modified haphazardly or randomly as the narratives traveled back and forth between the two exegetical environments. Rather, the Jewish exegetical narratives on Abraham's early life consistently depict Abraham as a proactive monotheist, the embodiment of free-will. This depiction holds true even with the materials adopted later from the Islamic environment, which were altered to fit this picture of proactive free-will. The Jewish narratives of Abraham thus urge Abraham's Jewish descendants to act as he did, using the faculties with which God armed each and every human, in order to do that which is right and good and to follow God's path; claims of ignorance do not function as an excuse for bad behavior.

In contrast to the midrashic characterization, Lowin shows, the Islamic exegetic corpus presents an Abraham whose role as prophet and forefather are predestined by God. When incorporating the midrashic materials into their texts, the Muslim exegetes amended the details to reflect this value. After all, the Islamic tradition insists that prophets remain free not only from sin itself but also, by extension, from the ability to sin. Thus, the Muslim exegetical biography of Abraham stresses God's supreme and active control of the universe and the existence of a Divine Will which humans cannot subvert. Lowin maintains that the consistent Muslim insistence upon Abraham as predestined exists for another reason as well: the legitimation of Muhammad and his prophecy. As the final prophet of Allah, Muhammad had to fit into the prophetic mold established by those monotheistic prophets who came before him, all of whom, in the Islamic understanding, were divinely ordained to be prophets. Whereas Moubarac (1951) had earlier explained that Muhammad's story reflects Abraham's, Lowin claims the opposite. In her analysis, the Islamic tradition reformulated the biography of Abraham to look like his descendant Muhammad so that it appears as if Muhammad followed in his, Abraham's, footsteps.

Other Important Works on Abrahamic Exegesis

Not all studies of the Islamic and Jewish exegetical accounts of Abraham engage the materials from a comparative perspective. Many are the valuable and informative analyses that restrict themselves to one tradition only. Among the most recent and thought-provoking of such studies, we find Suzanne Pinckney Stetkeyvich's analysis (1996) of Sarah's laughter at the prophecy of the birth of Isaac; Stetkeyvich compares the Qur'ānic usage of the term *ḍahīkat* (to laugh), the commentaries of the exegetes regarding the term, and its relationship to the use of the term in classical Arabic poetry. Equally interesting is Khalil Athamina's examination (2004) of the Muslim Abraham traditions as

providing insight into the view of Abraham in the pre-Islamic Arab milieu. An impressive array of scholarship on Abraham in the classical Jewish exegetical sources by scholars such as Uriel Simon, Michael Mach, Firestone, Noam Zohar, and Adolfo Roitman appears in a collection (Hallamish *et al.* 2002) that includes studies on Abrahamic materials from the ancient through the medieval to the modern. Although the collection appears in Hebrew, many of the individual works can be found in English.

Short Biography

Shari L. Lowin's research focuses on topics relating to intertextual Islamic–Jewish studies, focusing mainly on the classical exegetical materials on the shared legendary ancestors of Islam and Judaism. Her book, *The Making of a Forefather: Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegetical Narratives* (Brill 2006), investigates the ways in which the Muslim and Jewish exegetical materials on the early life of the patriarch Abraham were influenced by and influenced one another as each tradition strove to create the shared forefather in their own image. Other narrative traditions she has examined concern Moses and his mothers, and shared materials on villains such as Nimrod, Titus, and Nebuchadnezzar. Her current research project investigates the appearance of classical exegetical materials in the Hebrew and Arabic lust poetry of Muslim Spain. She has held fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies, Yad HaNadiv/Beracha Foundation, Albright Institute, Whiting Foundation, Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, and the Lady Davis Fellowship Trust. She received her PhD in Early Islamic Intellectual Thought in the department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. She currently serves as Associate Professor in the department of Religious Studies at Stonehill College, where she teaches Islamic and Jewish studies.

Notes

* Correspondence address: Shari Lowin, Department of Religious Studies, Stonehill College, 320, Washington Street N. Easton, MA 02139. E-mail: slowin@stonehill.edu

¹ It is important to note that this genre of literature also bears the imprint of influence from Persian, indigenous Arab, and African literature, traditions and realia as well. These, however, are not the topic of the discussion at hand.

² As Firestone notes, Sunni sources that speak of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac almost always place the event not in Mecca but in Syria (most likely a reference to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem).

³ Firestone (1990a) agrees that the narrative likely evolved originally as biblical exegesis to Gen. 21:21, although he does not explain further.

⁴ For example, the Jewish accounts report that Ishmael misses his father's visit because he is either collecting dates or camel herding, two low-level jobs in both the Jewish and Muslim perspective. The Muslim versions relate that Ishmael is either hunting or riding his steed. While Arab/Islamic worldview considers both honorable professions, in the rabbis' eyes there were ignoble. Writes Schussman, if the Muslim account had served as the source for the Jewish versions, there would have been little need for the midrash to shift Ishmael's activity from hunting to date-gathering in order to portray him in a negative light. The need to change Ishmael's profession arises only if the Jewish account influenced the Islamic.

⁵ A detailed analysis of the varied traditions regarding the building of the Ka'ba and its placement in the chronology of the Abraham–Ishmael relationship appears in Firestone's *Journeys in Holy Lands* (1990a), ch. 11.

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