Sacrifice and Islamic Identity

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1 Introduction

In recent years, representatives of the monotheistic religions in the Netherlands have debated the subject of sacrifice. These discussions took place against the background of a more general debate on religious discourse and identity. For Jews, Christians and Muslims the position of religion within modern society poses both a challenge and a problem. For Jews and Muslims, this culminated in the issue of ritual slaughter being branded as a primitive habit that should be forbidden.

Ritual slaughter constitutes an essential element of the religious identity of both Jews and Muslims. The story of Abraham/Ibrahim sacrificing his son plays an important role. Each religious group tries to interpret the story of this 'nearly-sacrifice' according to its own holy book and in line with centuries of interpretation. From the point of view of Jewish and Christian traditions, Isaac was Abraham's son intended to be sacrificed. The Muslims generally believe that Ismail was the son that was meant to be sacrificed, although Islamic tradition knows of other opinions too.

This article is not about the differences in views between the Muslims, Jews and Christians on who was the son to be sacrificed. I shall limit myself to the discussion of the story of this sacrifice from Islamic perspective in order to highlight the connection between sacrifice and religious identity. In Islamic tradition, this sacrifice is associated with two issues. The first issue relates to the qur'anic story of Ibrahim and his son. The second concerns the Festival of Sacrifice (*id al-adha*).¹ According to Sura 37, Ibrahim, known in the three monotheistic religions as the close friend of God (*khalil al-Rahman*)², receives in a dream the command from God to sacrifice his son. According to common

1 This festival is considered the most important religious festival in Islam. It takes place annually on the 10th of Muharram, which is the first month of the Muslim year. See e.g. C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Het Mekkaansche Feest* (Leiden: diss. Universiteit Leiden, 1880). More information about the festival of sacrifice in Islam can be found in E. Gräf, *Jagdbeute und Schlachtvieh in islamischen Recht* (Bonn: Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars, 1959).

2 In Isaiah 41:8, Ibrahim is described as a friend of God. See "Ibrahim" in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), vol. III, 980–81.

Islamic interpretation, this command constitutes a divine test for Ibrahim. The major question in this article is: What are the different views of Muslim scholars regarding the story of this sacrifice and how is this discussion related to the question of Muslim religious identity?

Here is the story of Ibrahim's sacrifice in Sura 37:100–113:

My Lord, grant me [a child] from among the righteous.
 So We gave him good tidings of a forbearing boy.
 And when he reached with him [the age of] exertion, he said, "O my son, indeed I have seen in a dream that I [must] sacrifice you, so see what you think." He said, "O my father, do as you are commanded. You will find me, if Allah wills, of the steadfast."
 And when they had both submitted and he put him down upon his forehead,
 We called to him, "O Abraham,
 You have fulfilled the vision." Indeed, We thus reward the doers of good.
 Indeed, this was the clear trial.
 And We ransomed him with a great sacrifice,
 And We left for him [favorable mention] among later generations:
 "Peace upon Abraham."
 Indeed, We thus reward the doers of good.
 Indeed, he was of Our believing servants.
 And We gave him good tidings of Isaac, a prophet from among the righteous.
 And We blessed him and Isaac. But among their descendants is the doer of good and the clearly unjust to himself.

2 Interpretations by Muslim Scholars of the Story of the Sacrifice

In the story of the sacrifice, the question whether the son who should be sacrificed is identified with Ismail or Ishaq remains open.³ Because both persons, Ishaq and Ismail, play an important role in the interpretation of this story, it is relevant to pay attention to these two names in the Qur'an. Ishaq⁴ is mentioned

³ See "Isma'il" in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. IV, 184.

⁴ About the biblical Isaac, see E. Noort and E. Tigchelaar, *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and its Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

in sixteen passages in the Qur'an.⁵ Six of these⁶ refer to him together with Ismail, while he is mentioned without Ismail in ten passages.⁷ Ismail⁸ is mentioned in twelve passages of the Qur'an: Six times without Ishaq,⁹ and the aforementioned six times together with him.¹⁰

It is remarkable that Ishaq is mentioned twice together with his father Ibrahim in the *Meccan* Sura 12:6 and 12:38, which reads respectively:

And thus will your Lord choose you and teach you the interpretation of narratives and complete His favor upon you and upon the family of Jacob, as He completed it upon your fathers before, Abraham and Isaac. Indeed, your Lord is Knowing and Wise.

And I have followed the religion of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The same fact is true for Ismail, who is also mentioned twice with his father. This was, however, in a *Medinan* Sura, 2:125 and 2:127:¹¹

And We charged Abraham and Ishmael, [saying], "Purify My House for those who perform Tawaf¹² and those who are staying [there] for worship and those who bow and prostrate [in prayer]".

And [mention] when Abraham was raising the foundations of the House and [with him] Ishmael, [saying], "Our Lord, accept [this] from us."

5 W. Montgomery Watt refers in his article "Ishaq" only to fifteen qur'anic passages, see *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. IV, 109.

6 These are the following Suras: 2:133; 2:136; 2:140; 3:84; 4:163 and 14:39.

7 Namely 6:84; 11:71; 12:6; 12:38; 19:49; 21:72; 29:27; 37:112; 37:113 and 38:48.

8 See M. Hayek, *Le Mystère d'Ishmael* (Paris: Mame, 1964).

9 In the Suras 2:125; 2:127; 6:86; 19:54; 21:85 and 38:48.

10 See note 6 for the Suras where Ishaq and Ismail are mentioned together.

11 The Meccan Qur'an was revealed before the emigration of the Prophet to Medina in the year 622, even though its revelation did not take place in Mecca. The Medinan Qur'an was revealed after the emigration of Mohammed to Medina, even though its revelation did not take place in Medina. Compare A. Ljamai, *Introduction to the Study of the Koran: Legislative history and methods of the Quran exegesis* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2005), 61–63.

12 Circumambulation of pilgrims around the Ka'bah; a ritual during the pilgrimage to Mecca.

3 Al-Tabari on Ishaq as the Son to be Sacrificed

For a proper understanding of the subject, it is very important to notice that the debate among Muslim scholars about the identity of Abraham's son is related to the fact that the name of the sacrificed son is not mentioned in Sura 37:100–110, the verses referring to Ibrahim's intended sacrifice of his son. Actually, there has been a strong controversy among Muslim scholars about the identity of the sacrificed son.¹³ In classical Islam, there have been two opposite opinions in relation to the question which of the two sons of Ibrahim – Ismail or Ishaq – was to be sacrificed.

The first opinion is of the Persian founder of the *Tafsir bi'l-ma'thur* (religious exegeses), Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (who died in 923). In his qur'anic commentary *Jami'al-bayan*¹⁴ and in his book *The History of al-Tabari*,¹⁵ he declared that Ibrahim received the command from God to sacrifice his son Ishaq. To buttress his view, he refers to various statements by the companions of the Prophet and his followers. For example, in his interpretation of 37:101: "So We gave him the good news of a boy ready to suffer and forbear", he emphasizes that in this text the Qur'an speaks about Ishaq.¹⁶ He supports this interpretation with the following statement by Qatada (who died in 735): "No one is complimented as forbear, except Ibrahim and Ishaq." Furthermore, al-Tabari relies on a statement by Suddi that Ibrahim, when he received the good news that his wife Sara was going to have a baby, promised God that he would sacrifice his newborn child. Years after the birth of Ishaq, Ibrahim saw in his vision an angel telling him that he had to fulfill his promise to God, according to Sura 37:102:

Then, when (the son) reached (the age of) (serious) work with him, he said: "O my son! I see in vision that I offer thee in sacrifice: Now see what is thy view!" (The son) said: "O my father! Do as thou art commanded: Thou wilt find me, if God so wills, one practicing Patience and Constancy!"

Al-Tabari uses this story as an argument to show that the son who was obedient to his father was Ishaq.¹⁷

13 Compare *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. IV, 109.

14 See Jarir al-Tabari, *Jami' al-bayan fi-ta'wil al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Dar al-Salam, 2009), in particular his exegesis of Suras 12:6 and 37:107, see vol. 6, 4466 and vol. 8, 6916–6920.

15 Titled *Tarikh al-Tabari, Tarikh al-umam wa-'l-muluk* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1991), vol. 1, 164–165.

16 *Jami' al-Bayan*, vol. 8, 6911.

17 *Jami' al-Bayan*, vol. 8, 6911, and *Tarikh*, vol. 1, 164.

In his interpretation of this story, al-Tabari was aware of the different views of Muslim exegetes on the theme of the sacrificed son. But he believed, as an exegete and a historian, that Ishaq was the *dhabih* (the one who should be sacrificed) and not Ismail. To enforce his statement, he referred to al-'Abbas Ibn 'Abd al-Muttaleb (died in 653), the uncle of the Prophet of Islam, who also declared that Ishaq is the one to be sacrificed. According to al-Tabari, this explanation was enforced by the interpretations of Abu Ishaq Ka'b al-Ahbar (died in 653), Masruq (died in 682) and Jabir (died in 697), who said that the Qur'an speaks in Sura 37:102 about Ishaq and not about Ismail.¹⁸

Al-Tabari was not the first Muslim scholar to connect the identity of the sacrificed son with the person of Ishaq. The famous Islamic scholar of Persian origin, Abu Muhammad Ibn Qutayba (died in 885) had already chosen for Ishaq as the *dhabih* in his book *al-Ma'arif*. Likewise, he referred to the statement of al-'Abbas Ibn 'Abd al-Muttaleb that Ishaq, and not Ismail, was Abraham's sacrificed son.¹⁹ Even after the period of al-Tabari, it became clear that some authors of the stories of the prophets (*Qisas al-anbiya'*) also opted for this interpretation. For example, there is the relatively unknown author of the stories of the prophets, al-Kisai (eleventh century), and the more elaborate work of al-Tha'labi (died in 1038). They both mention the two options. Al-Tha'labi eventually decides for Ismail, al-Kisai seems to opt for Ishaq.²⁰

Likewise, al-Tabari continues quoting the views of others who believe that in Sura 37:102 the Qur'an speaks about Ismail. People who have opted for this interpretation were Ibn 'Abbas (died in 687) and Abdullah Ibn 'Umar (died in 693), companions of the Prophet. Ibn 'Abbas said: "The one who had to be sacrificed was Ismail. The Jews claimed that it was Ishaq, but they lie!"²¹ After quoting both views, al-Tabari declares that the argument of those who say that it was Ishaq is much stronger, because the Qur'an said: "And We ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice" (Sura 37:107). Ibrahim received the good news about Ishaq and not about Ismail, because he said in Sura 37:100: "O my Lord! Grant me a righteous (son)!" The son who should be sacrificed is the same as the one mentioned by the Qur'an, about whom Ibrahim will receive the good news. This means that the son was Ishaq rather than Ismail.²²

18 *Jami' al-Bayan*, vol. 8, 6916–6918.

19 See *Al-Ma'arif*, edition al-'Amira al-Sharqiyya, 1883, vol. 1, 13. See in this framework I. Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden: Brill, 1920), 79–81.

20 Compare M. I. A. A. al-Kisa'i, *Kisas al-anbiya'* (ed. Eisenberg; Leiden: 1922), 150–153, and M. al-Tha'labi, *Kisas al-anbiya'* (Cairo: 1894), 40–60.

21 See *Jami' al-bayan*, vol. 8, 6919.

22 Ibidem, 6916–6920.

4 The Majority of Muslim Scholars Claim Ismail was the Sacrificed Son

In contrast to the opinion of Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, the majority of Muslim scholars, including the exegetes, determine that the sacrificed son was Ismail and not Ishaq. The supporters of this interpretation use several arguments to buttress their views.

An example of this is Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya in his book *Zad ma'ad*. He believes that the Jews are erroneously stating that the son was Ishaq. He refers to a verse from the Torah, in which God was said to have given the command to Ibrahim "to sacrifice his *elder* son",²³ that is, Ismail, while in another verse He said: "Your *only* son" (Genesis 22:2). Ibn Qayyim concludes that a consensus exists among Muslims and Jews that Ismail was the elder son of Ibrahim. Indeed, he emphasizes that the biblical text, "Sacrifice your son Isaac", must be wrong, because this text is in conflict with another verse from the Torah, "Slaughter your elder and only son." Next to this exegetical argument he uses what he calls a "rational argument", which goes as follows. How is it possible that Ibrahim and his wife Sara received from God the good news about Ishaq and later about Jacob, but that God nevertheless commands him to sacrifice his son Ishaq? Ibn Qayyim considers this a contradiction and not rationally possible. He bases his arguments on the Qur'an and gives his own interpretation of Sura 37. He says the good news about Ishaq was in fact a reward for Ibrahim, because he had not protested against the divine test: In this context, the sacrifice of his elder son. Indeed, the so-called *al-dhabih* was in Mecca and that points to Ismail and his mother Hagar.²⁴ Furthermore, the time of the sacrifice was also attached to the place of sacrifice which was Mecca. If the sacrifice would have been in Syria, the sacrifice of the Muslims now should take place in Syria and not in the holy house in Mecca.²⁵ We see here how the issue of the sacrifice is connected to that of religious identity, *in casu* to the holy places of Islam. Religious identity is intrinsically connected to not only the exegesis of holy texts but also to holy places.

23 This text is not mentioned in the Bible!

24 The expulsion of Hagar and her child Ismail is described in accordance with Jewish tradition, based on Genesis 21. For the Islamic tradition about this expulsion compare R. Paret, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. IV, 184–185. See also "Zamzam" in *Encyclopedia of Islam* vol. XI (2004), 440–42; cp. M. Poorthuis, 'Hagar's Wanderings: between Judaism and Islam', *Der Islam* 90, 2 (2013), 213–237.

25 See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah *Zad al-ma'ad fi hadyi khayr al-'ibad* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Rajab, 2006), vol. I, 49–53.

4.1 *The Connection to the Holy Places of Islam*

The same argument is used by the historian and commentator Ibn Kathir (died in 1373), in his book *Stories of the Prophets*, to show that the son that had to be sacrificed was Ismail. His opinion is that al-Tabari used *ʿIsraʾilliyyāt*, that is, stories of Jewish origin, in his interpretation of Sura 37 about the story of the sacrifice.²⁶ These stories cannot be adopted without critical examination, according to Ibn Kathir.

Another argument to reinforce the view that the sacrificed person was Ismail and not Ishaq, is offered by the Muʿtazilite exegete Abuʾl-Qasim al-Zamakhshari (died in 1143).²⁷ In order to clarify his position, he refers to the words of the Prophet saying about himself: “*Ana Ibn al-dhabihayn*: I am the son of the two *dhabihayn* (sacrificed)”.²⁸ This means: I am the son of the first *dhabih*, ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Abd al-Muttaleb (his father), and the son of the second *dhabih*, Ismail, the forefather of the Arabs.

Still, it is important to note here that this prophetic statement is described by experts of the *hadith* as a non-correct (that is, not very reliably transmitted) *hadith*.²⁹ Next to the use of this prophetic tradition, al-Zamakhshari points out that the person described in the Qurʾan as full of constancy and patience (*sabir*) had to be Ismail, for the Qurʾan says: “And (remember) Ismail, Idris and dhu al-Kifl, all (men) of constancy and patience”. Ismail’s obedience to his father Ibrahim who wished to sacrifice him is undoubtedly a form of patience.³⁰ With this interpretation al-Zamakhshari tries to prove that the sacrificed son was Ismail and not Ishaq.

4.2 *Ishaq, the Son Who Never was in Mecca*

The same intention becomes clear in the way Al-Alusi (died in 1854), a supporter of symbolic exegesis, wants to prove that Ismail was the sacrificed son. In his exegesis *Ruh al-maʿani*, he buttresses this opinion stating that Muslims and Jews agree that Ismail lived in Mecca and that Ishaq had never been there.

26 See Ibn al Kathir, *Qisas al-anbiyaʾ* (Riyadh: Dar Ibn Khuzayma, 1998), vol. 1, 261–269.

27 The Muʿtazilite school originated in the eighth century; its adherents made a plea for a rational interpretation of the Qurʾan. Compare A. Ljamai, “Relationship between Islam and humanism,” *Journal of the Dutch-Flemish Levinas Society* 16 (2011): 7–13.

28 See Abuʾl-Qasim al Zamakhshari, *Al-Kashshaf ʿan haqaʾiq ghawamid al-tanzil wa-ʿuyun al-aqawil fi-wudjuh al-taʾwil*. Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1995, vol. 4, 54.

29 M.A. al-Albani, *Silsilat al-ahadith al-daʿifa wa-l-mawduʿa wa-atharuhu al-sayyiʾ fi-al-umma*. Riyadh: Maktabat al-Maʿarif, 2001, vol. 1, 500 (hadith number: 331).

30 See al-Zamakhshari, *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 54.

Because the sacrifice scene had taken place in Mecca, it is impossible, according to al-Alusi, that the dhabih would be Ishaq.³¹

The Imam Ahmed al-Thaqafi (died in 1308) tries in his *tafsir* book of exegesis of the Qur'an to find a link between the two verses 101 en 102 from Sura 37, where is spoken about "(a) boy ready to suffer and forbear" and also "one practicing patience and constancy!", and verse 28 from Sura 51 where is spoken about "(a) learned boy". The first description refers to the dhabih Ismail, whereas the second description surely refers to Ishaq, who is known in the Qur'an as "learned boy". Al-Thaqafi elaborates his interpretation and emphasizes that Ibrahim has received "good news" twice: The news of his son the dhabih, and the news of his newborn son, described as "learned boy". Besides, al-Thaqafi states, Muslim, Jewish and Christian scholars all agree that Ismail had been in Mecca, whereas Ishaq never was in Mecca.³²

We came across this argument by al-Thaqafi in the interpretation of al-Zamakhshari as well. This indicates how important the location of the sacrifice in Mecca is for Muslim scholars who want to defend the idea that the sacrificed son was Ismail. We have seen that, to declare Ismail as the dhabih, many interpreters, like Ibn Qayyim, Ibn Kathir, al-Zamakhshari, al-Alusi and al-Thaqafi, use the Qur'an, the prophetic traditions, Qur'anic commentaries, and work of their predecessors, and, in addition, draw upon the so-called rational argumentation. Without doubt, this interpretation is significant for Muslim scholars at a theological and polemical level, in particular when it comes to the dialogue between Muslims, Jews, and Christians. The Muslim scholars want to prove that the sacrifice concerns their own forefather Ismail, whereas Jews and Christians defend the idea that the sacrifice is about Isaac, since in the book of Genesis it is explicitly mentioned that the dhabih was Isaac. In terms of religious identity, the story of the sacrifice displays yet another dimension: Not only the relevance of sacred places but also the question which Scriptures are sacred and how to interpret them.

31 See Shihab al-Din al-Alusi, *Ruh al-ma'ani fi-tafsir al-Qur'an al-'azim wa-l-sab' al-mathani* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1997), vol. 13, 196–197.

32 See A. Al Thaqafi, *Milak al-ta'wil al-Qati' bi-dhawi al-ilhad wa-l-ta'til fi-tawdijh al-mutashabih al-lafzi min ay al-tanzil* (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1983), vol. 2, 960–961.

5 The Importance of Ismail for Arab Identity

Apart from the theological discussion among Muslims, Jews, and Christians, the following question comes up: Why is it so important for these Muslim scholars to connect the sacrifice story to the person of Ismail? Furthermore, why does al-Tabari, the famous exegete and historian, have different thoughts on this story?

From the sources we learn that the majority of the Muslim exegetes defend the idea that the person that had to be sacrificed was Ismail, probably because Ismail was considered the forefather of the Arabs. Muslim scholars usually rely on the statement of the Prophet of Islam: "I am the son of the two *dhabihayn*". Because of this genealogical connection, the story of the sacrifice is intrinsically connected to Islamic religious identity. Many Islamic scholars emphasize that the story concerns Ismail and not Ishaq, because this interpretation is an essential element of their religious identity.

At Islamic and Jewish schools, Jewish children will get more information about Isaac, who is viewed in a positive light, whereas Muslim children will hear more about Ismail, likewise viewed in a positive light. It is important, however, to keep in mind that there are also common points between Muslims, Jews, and Christians regarding the story of sacrifice. All three agree on the fact that it was a divine test for the father of monotheism, Ibrahim. To return once more to the difference of opinion among Muslim scholars on the story of sacrifice, the attitude of al-Tabari towards the story can be explained by the fact that in his interpretation he refers to the qur'anic passages and statements of the companions of Mohammed. His defence of the idea that Ishaq was the only *dhabih* does not mean that Islamic identity is not important to him. Al-Tabari asserts, as I see it, that from Islamic perspective all prophets are equal. Both sons of Ibrahim can be considered as prophets. Hence, whether the person to be sacrificed is Ismail or Isaac is not relevant to al-Tabari. His concern is to transmit as many arguments and interpretations of the texts as possible. His religious identity allows him to admit a wealth of different interpretations. We may even conclude that the different opinions themselves are an important element of the Muslim religious identity.

To summarize, we have seen that the story of Ibrahim and his son relates to religious identity at several levels: The performance of the ritual of sacrifice as a religious obligation for Muslims today; the attachment of the story to the holy places of Islam; the orientation towards sacred scriptures and the acceptance of different opinions as a legitimate aspect of religious tradition.