Difficulties in Keeping a Beautiful Wife: The Legend of Abraham and Sarah in Jewish and Islamic Tradition

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The sharing of similar traditions between Judaism and Islam has long been recognized, but there has been little agreement about the historical and textual nature of the relationship between Jewish and Islamic tradition. By focusing on the contextual meanings of a legend found repeatedly in Jewish and Islamic sources, this study offers a reconstruction of its textual and historical relationship to Judaism and Islam. This, in turn, reveals another facet of the social history of the earliest Jewish–Muslim relations.

The legend[1] examined here depicts a hero protecting his wife's virtue or himself from harm in a foreign land by hiding his true marital status and claiming his wife as his sister. A classic story occurring three times in the Hebrew Bible, the Genesis 12:10–20 rendition describes Abram hiding his relationship with Sarai from Pharaoh, while in Genesis 20:1–18 Abraham hides his relationship with Sarah from Abimelekh of Gerar.[2] The third rendition of the theme in Genesis 26:1–17 depicts Isaac hiding his marital relationship with Rebecca from an Abimelekh. Modern biblical scholarship has grappled for more than a century with the repetitions and variations of plot, structure and style in the three renditions of the tale, and a wide range of opinion has been expressed as to the historical and literary relationship between the three renditions. Agreement has yet to be reached regarding the function and relationship of the various tellings of the legend, though one

[1] The narratives examined here fall into the category of legend: a story that is regarded by its audience as true, even if taking place in a rather distant past. Although it should be clear that the narratives referred to here are not folk-tales (which in the field of folklore studies are defined as narratives regarded by their audience to be fiction), they are occasionally referred to here as 'story' or 'tale' for convenience. For commonly accepted definitions of these terms, see William Bascom, 'The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives', in Alan Dundes (ed.), *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 5–29.

[2] Aside from textual citations in which the names Abram or Sarai are specifically mentioned, the two characters will be referred to here as Abraham and Sarah.

certainly finds no dearth of suggestions among the many studies tackling the 'thrice-told tale'.[3]

The legend is found in post-biblical exegetical literature as well, and it is this literature which serves as the subject matter for this study. The extra-biblical tellings of the story in Jewish tradition may be found in various works referred to as *Midrash*, a large genre of traditional exegesis on biblical and other themes. The Jewish re-tellings of the tale serve to fill out the terse but powerful versions of the legend found in Genesis and comment on a variety of issues suggested by the biblical texts. Similar tellings of the story regularly occur in Islamic exegetical literature as well, but with one major difference. They do not respond, as do the Jewish tellings, to a scriptural text, for the simple reason that the legend does not occur in the Qur'an. It is the primary purpose of this paper to examine the literary and exegetical affinity between the Islamic and extra-biblical Jewish renditions of the legend in order to suggest a logic of relationship between them.

A common technique of Midrash on the Bible is to provide interpretive meaning to a biblical text through the medium of narrative, and Jewish narrative exegesis in oral or written form (*aggadah*) has provided responses to the legend in question for at least two millennia. Narrative exegesis on the biblical renditions of the wife–sister legend may be found in such classic midrashic works as *Bereshit Rabba*, *Tanhuma*, *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eli'ezer*, *Yalqut Shim'oni*, *Sefer HaYashar*, *Midrash HaGadol*, and the *Zohar*. Less detailed references to the legend may be found also in the Babylonian Talmud, *Pesikta Rabbati*, Jubilees, the Genesis Apocryphon, Josephus' *Antiquities*, and other collections of early Jewish literature responding to the Hebrew Bible. Issues raised by the biblical text are typically treated in these works by retelling sections of the biblical story, and short sequences treating specific issues may often be found strung together to form longer extended narratives. The exegetical nature of the material is clear. Even the longer

[3] Some of the more interesting and better-known studies of the phenomenon include E. A. Speiser, 'The Wife-Sister Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives', in Alexander Altmann (ed.), *Biblical and Other Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1963), pp. 15–28; H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), p. 226; Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (translated by Bernhard W. Anderson; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 263–4, 47–62; E. H. Maly, 'Genesis 12, 10–20; 20, 1–18; 26, 7–11 and the Pentateuchal Question', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* XVIII (1956), pp. 255–62; K. Koch, 'The Ancestress of Israel in Danger', in *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition: The Form-Critical Method* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1969), pp. 111–32; Robert Polzin, '"The Ancestress of Israel in Danger" in Danger', *Semeia* 3 (1975), pp. 81–97; David Petersen, 'A Thrice-Told Tale: Genre, Theme, and Motif', *Biblical Research* 18 (1973), pp. 30–43; John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale, 1975), pp. 167–91; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 47–62; George Coats, 'A Threat to the Host', in *Sage Legend Tale Novella Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 35; Sheffield, 1985), pp. 70–98; Savina Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess*; Margaret Atwood, *A Handmaid's Tale*.

retellings of the tale can generally be reduced to specific responses to problems or issues raised by the biblical text.[4]

The Midrash exhibits an awareness of the problem of three renditions of a basic tale, but tends nevertheless to respond most often to those in which Abraham and Sarah served as main characters. Those that treat the Isaac/Rebecca rendition of Genesis 26 tend to call attention to the repetition of motifs with the observation that whatever befell Abraham also befell Isaac.[5]

As noted above, the legend of the hero publicly claiming his wife as sister appears also in Islamic exegetical literature. Here too, it is limited to renditions in which Abraham and Sarah serve as the protagonists. Similar in many respects to the Jewish narrative material, the Islamic renditions of the story are found in a wide sampling of collections of Islamic interpretive literature.[6] The problem from the point of view of scriptural exegesis, however, lies in the fact that the Qur'an itself contains no mention of or even allusion to the story. One must ask, therefore, what is being interpreted in the Islamic tellings of the tale; or indeed, at the most basic level, how and why the story can be found in Islamic religious literature at all.

Abraham is a frequent character in the Qur'an, which refers to him in 245 verses within 25 chapters (Suras).[7] Although many of the Abrahamic episodes found in Genesis are included therein, the legend of Abraham proclaiming his wife as sister is nowhere to be found. The question as to how material found in Jewish or Christian exegetical literature came to exist also in Islamic exegetical literature has been asked since Abraham Geiger first raised the issue in the middle of the last century,[8] and a variety of

[4] For Midrash, see Hermann Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1931 and repr. repeatedly); cf. now H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991); Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1961 and repr. 1973); Moshe Herr, 'Midrash', *Encyclopaedia Judaica*; Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadot Vetoldoteihen* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974); Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909 and repr. 1937, 1961).

[5] *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eli'ezer* (henceforth *PRE* 61a; *Midrash HaGadol* (henceforth *MHG*) 26:1.

[6] The legend may be found even in the canonical collections of Hadith such as Ibn Hanbal's *al-Musnad* and al-Bukhari's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, or in linear Qur'an commentaries which collect a great many traditions such as al-Tabari's *Jami' al-bayān*. They occur more frequently, however, in the popular and less rigorous collections of tradition found in the universal histories (*Ta'rīkh*) and the hagiographic collections (*Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*).

[7] Y. Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1958), pp. 27-9.

[8] Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam* (Madras, 1898, repr. New York: Ktav, 1970). This was originally published as *Was hat Mohammad aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (Bonn: 1833).

answers have been suggested.[9]

This study also treats the transmission of material between Judaism and Islam. The particular means employed here for arriving at a meaningful response to the problem centers on the role of the exegetical renditions of the legend within the particular contexts in which they are found. What purposes do the Jewish responses serve for Jews? What purposes do the Islamic renditions serve for Muslims? The intertextual meaning of the legend becomes clearer when the role of specific motifs found in both Jewish and Islamic renditions can be determined. In some cases, for example, a motif found in both Jewish and Islamic sources can be determined to respond in classic exegetical fashion to a biblical text. This is of particular interest, especially when keeping in mind that the Islamic treatment of the legend is assumed not to be commenting upon sacred scripture.[10] One may therefore postulate two broad outlines for the genesis of such a motif. It may have developed within a religiously Bible-centered environment and subsequently passed on to a non-Bible-centered Islamic one. Or it could have evolved within an Islamic environment which was responding to the Bible as well as the Qur'an as scripture (though perhaps deeming the former less sacred or accurate than the latter). The second possibility is generally regarded as unlikely, despite the fact that the earliest period of Islam contains evidence suggesting that the Bible was indeed taken quite seriously.[11]

Three results may be envisioned if narrative exegetical responses to issues raised by biblical readings were brought into an Islamic context presuming no biblical subtext. First, a response (in the form of a motif in the narrative) might retain its intended exegetical meaning even in an Islamic context because of close scriptural, theological or religio-cultural parallels which would continue to render its meaning relevant. Second, it could be re-interpreted in an Islamic context in such a way as to provide new meaning. Third, the exegesis may simply become meaningless and disappear, or remain without exegetical meaning in an exceptional case where it serves a necessary narrative function. The question must therefore be asked as to

[9] See W. Ahrends, *Muhammad als Religionsstifter* (Leipzig, 1935); Richard Bell, *The Origins of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London, 1926); Charles Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (New York, 1933); Erwin Rosenthal, *Judaism and Islam* (London, 1961); Abraham Katsh, *Judaism in Islam: Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and its Commentaries* (New York, 1954); John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1977); Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany: SUNY, 1990).

[10] Although considered to have been derived from a divine source, Islam views the Bible as inaccurate or distorted revelation which cannot be relied upon as sacred Scripture (see Franz Buhl, 'Taḥrīf', in EI1 4:618-19).

[11] Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri II: Qur'anic Commentary and Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967), pp. 7-11; M. Kister, 'Ḥaddithū 'an banī Isrā'īla walā ḥaraja: A Study of an Early Tradition', *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1972), pp. 215-39; Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*.

what benefit or purpose such motifs provide which would allow for their continued existence within the Islamic world. If they do not explain Scripture, what do they do? Irrelevant material, it is generally assumed, would not be retained.[12]

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As is true of the Jewish exegetical material, so too the content and style of the Islamic exegetical narratives suggest that they relate most directly to the Genesis 12 version of the legend. Most of the Islamic tellings that provide a specific locus for the tale set it in Egypt, and most that identify Abraham's and Sarah's adversary name him as Pharaoh.[13] The many Islamic renditions of the legend may be reduced to two slightly different versions.[14]

The composite Islamic Version A begins with a comment regarding the exceptional virtue of Sarah, who was honoured by God for never disobeying her husband.[15] The tale is generally set in Egypt, where the ruler is identified as a tyrannical Pharaoh or king who is told of Sarah's stunning beauty. When Abraham is asked who Sarah is, he replies that she is his sister, for, as the narrative itself explains, he feared that were he to claim her as his wife, he would be killed and she taken from him forcibly. Abraham is then told to adorn her and send her to the tyrant. He returns to Sarah, explains the situation to her, and asks her not to refute his word to the tyrant for she is indeed his sister in religion. When she is in the tyrant's chamber, the tyrant reaches out to touch her with his hand, which is immediately withered to his chest. Shocked by the sudden transformation, he begs her to pray to God to release his hand, promising not to harm her. She does so on the condition that he is being honest. The tyrant is immediately healed, and then gives Hagar to Sarah. In some renditions God

[12] Firestone, *Journeys*, pp. 15–18, 158.

[13] Only a few of the two dozen references to the legend provide a geographical locus. Most of these set the location in Egypt and name the antagonist as Pharaoh. The only other specific location designated by the texts is Jordan, found in two sources: Ibn Qutayba 1:32, and al-Kisa'i 141–2. The antagonist in the latter is named King Zadok (*malik ṣadūq*).

[14] Virtually all the Islamic tellings occur as full narrative renderings of the legend. Some of the Jewish tellings such as *Sefer Hayashar* and *Tanḥuma* likewise unfold in a completely narrative format, but others (*Bereshit Rabba*, *Yalqut Shim'oni*, *Midrash Hagadol*) provide their narrative responses in a more linear fashion in relation to the order of the Genesis verses.

[15] This version is found with slight variation among the sources: Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabir*, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dar al Sadir lil-tiba'a wal-nashir, 1970), vol. 1, pp. 48–9; al-Qummi, *Tafsīr al-Qummi*, 2 vols. (Najaf, 1966), 1:332–3; al-Tabari, *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wal-mulūk*, edited by M. J. De Goeje as *Annales* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), vol. 1, pp. 267–8; al-Tha'labi, *'Arā'is al-majālis* (Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi, 1954), pp. 79–80; Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kāmil fī al-ta'rīkh* (Beirut: Dar Sadir lil-tiba'a wal-nashir, 1965), pp. 100–1; Mujir al-Din, *al-Uns al-jalīl bita'rīkh al-quds wal-khalīl*, 2 vols. (Amman: Maktabat al-muhtasab, 1973), vol. 1, p. 34. See also Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-ma'ārif* (Cairo: Dar al-ma'arif, nd) p. 32; and al-Kisa'i, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, edited by Isaac Eisenberg as *Vita Prophetarum* (Leiden: Brill, 1922), p. 141.

allows Abraham to see the entire episode between Sarah and the tyrant in order to give Abraham peace of mind.

In one rendition of this version, the tale takes place as Abraham and Sarah are leaving the kingdom of Nimrod. Abraham hides Sarah in a box in order to protect her from Nimrod and his servants as he tries to leave the kingdom, and willingly offers to pay any sum in order to prevent anyone from opening the box. It is nevertheless forced open and Sarah's dazzling beauty revealed. The tyrant then attempts to approach her and the story ensues as told above.[16]

The composite Version B begins with an introduction by the purported source of the legend, Abu Hurayra,[17] who states that Abraham told only three lies. The first can be found in Qur'an 37:89,[18] the second in Qur'an 21:63,[19] and the third in Abraham's statement to the tyrant when he told him that Sarah was his sister. Abu Hurayra thereupon begins relating the story. The tyrant of a town through which Abraham passes is told that Abraham is with a beautiful woman. When Abraham is asked who she is, he replies that she is his sister. Abraham then tells Sarah not to contradict him, for they are indeed the only believers on earth. When Sarah is brought before the tyrant, she begins to pray, affirming to God that she is a true believer and that she has remained ever chaste to all but her husband. She prays to God to prevent the infidel from touching her. When the tyrant reaches out to her, he is stricken with a seizure. He tells Sarah to pray to God to release him and promises not to do it again. After she fulfils his request, he approaches her again and is again stricken. This occurs three or more times. Foiled in his desire, the tyrant calls his chamberlains and exclaims that he was sent a devil rather than a human. He then gives her Hagar. Sarah returns to Abraham who has been praying all this time. She tells him that God foiled the plot of the infidel and also gave her Hagar.

Six motifs occurring in both the Jewish and Islamic renditions merit closer examination and will be treated in order of their appearance in the

[16] Al-Qummi 1:332–3.

[17] In some renderings, Abu Hurayra relates the legend directly from the Prophet Muhammad himself. Abu Hurayra was a famous and highly respected companion of the Prophet Muhammad who is noted for the great number of traditions in the Hadith given in his name. This version appears to be more popular than Version A, occurring somewhat more often in the sample of sources: Ibn Sa'd, pp. 49–50; Ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1969) 2:403; al-Bukharī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (Lahore, 1979) 3:230 f., 4:368, 9:67; al-Tabari, *Annales* 1:268–71; Ibn Kathir, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (Beirut, 1982) 2:214–17.

[18] This is a qur'anic rendering of the legend of Abraham destroying his father's idols. In this telling, Abraham claims he is sick (*qāla innī saqīm*). People then leave him by himself, whereupon he speaks disparagingly to the idols and then strikes them.

[19] In this qur'anic rendering of the same legend, Abraham had already destroyed the idols. When asked if he was the culprit, he responds, 'No. Their biggest one here did it!' (*qāla bal fa'alahu kabīruhum hādha*).

narrative. The first is the issue of Sarah's relationship with Abraham and whether Abraham lied when he claimed her as his sister. The others include the motif of Sarah in the box, Sarah's prayers, how the tyrant was smitten when he approached Sarah, how Abraham knew at all times what was occurring between Sarah and the tyrant, and the acquisition of Hagar.

Abraham's Claim that Sarah was his Sister

The first motif at issue is Abraham's act of referring to Sarah as sister. The problematic aspect of Abraham's behaviour was noted as early as the book of Genesis itself. Genesis 20:12 functions as an apologetic to the version of Genesis 12 with the words, 'She is truly my sister: my father's daughter though not my mother's; and she has become my wife.' But the problem of Abraham's act took on an additional dimension with the biblical prohibition against marrying one's half-sister found in Leviticus 18:9, 11.[20] The question of the integrity of Abraham's claim that Sarah was his sister came to be replaced in Jewish sources by the issue of whether theirs was an acceptable relationship according to Jewish law.

The Palestinian Targum to Gen. 11:29 solves the kinship problem by placing Sarah as Abraham's niece, the daughter of his brother Haran: 'And Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and the name of Nahor's wife being Milkah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milkah and Yiskah—she is Sarai.' The Babylonian Talmud also equates Sarah with Yiskah, lending support in a folk-philology based on the Hebrew root *s-k-h*.[21] The eleventh-century Jewish commentator Rashi supports this solution to the problem of Abraham and Sarah's consanguinity with the observation that 'children of children are also referred to as children'.[22] The daughter of Abraham's brother would therefore still be considered his father Terah's daughter, as claimed in Genesis 20:12.

This interpretation is rejected by the Palestinian Targum on Genesis 20:12, which places Sarah as Abraham's first cousin: 'But she is truly my sister: my father's *brother's* daughter though not of my mother's family; and she has become my wife.'[23] The suggestion that Sarah is Abraham's cousin may have been a response to the chronological problem associated with her being his niece. According to the biblical chronology, if Sarah was the daughter of Abraham's brother Haran, then Haran would have had to be

[20] Cf. II Sam. 13:10–13.
[21] Megillah 14a; Sanhedrin 69b.
[22] Rashi s.v. Gen. 20:12.
[23] PT s.v. Gen. 20:12.

six years old when having his first child![24] Either solution to the kinship problem is acceptable according to the Jewish view of marriageable consanguinity. The latter view is less prevalent but is more in keeping with the Islamic kinship laws found in Qur'an 4:23, which specifically forbade marriage between uncle and niece.[25] These comments demonstrate the concern of the Jewish exegetes with the consanguinity of Abraham and Sarah. They are trying to reconcile the claims of the narrative with the legal requirement of Leviticus 18. In the process of working out their kinship, however, they also provide an explanation for Abraham's claim that Sarah was his sister. If Terah's granddaughter Sarah, as well as his son Abraham, could be considered his children, then they could honestly claim each other as siblings as well.[26] Rashi pointed out that Abraham claimed his first cousin Lot as his brother in Gen. 13:8.[27] He could do the same regarding Sarah. Nevertheless, for some midrashic renditions of the legend (following the Genesis 20 version), fear of death at the hands of Pharaoh or Abimelekh was reason enough to explain Abraham's act.[28]

Islamic exegesis must also reconcile the claims of the narrative with the legal requirements of marriageable consanguinity set forth in Scripture—in this case, Qur'an 4:23. The Islamic sources do this, however, in a different context from the legend treated here.[29] The Islamic renditions of our legend therefore ignore Abraham and Sarah's biological relationship and concentrate only on the issue of the lie. They appear to take greater pains than the Jewish sources to explain Abraham's ploy in terms that would not detract from his image and role as religious leader. The most obvious expression of the Islamic concern may be observed in the proem placed in the mouth of Abu Hurayra:[30] 'Abraham lied only three times. Two of them were for God, and one for his wife: "Lo! I am sick!" (Q. 37:89); and "But their leader

[24] According to the biblical chronology, Abraham was ten years older than Sarah and two years older than Haran. If Haran was Sarah's father, he would be eight years old at her birth. But Yiskah/Sarah is the younger sister of Milkah, who would have been born some two years earlier according to the calculations of the rabbis (*Bereshit Rabbah* (henceforth *BR*) 38:14; BT *Sanhedrin* 69b).

[25] See Firestone, 'Some Notes on the Problem of Sarah's Identity in Islamic Exegetical Tradition and Wahb's Meaning of Torah (*tawrāt*)', *Muslim World* 80 (1990), pp. 65–71.

[26] Cf. E. A. Speiser, 'The Wife-Sister Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives', in Alexander Altmann (ed.), *Biblical and Other Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1963), pp. 15–28.

[27] 'Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are brothers."' (*ki anashim aḥim anaḥnu*).

[28] *Sefer HaYashar* (henceforth *Yashar*), pp. 40, 53, 72; *MHG* 12:12, 13; 20:12, 13; cf. the unique mystical response to the problem in *Zohar Vayera* 111b–112a (see also *Lekh-lekha* 81b–82a; *Toldot* 140b).

[29] The Islamic sources attempt to identify Sarah earlier on in the Abraham cycle, as Abraham leaves the land of Nimrod on his way to Syria (al-Sha'm, the term used in most medieval Arabic texts to refer to the area known in the West as the Land of Israel or the Holy Land).

[30] Or, less often, the Prophet Muhammad.

has done it!' (Q. 21:63); and his statement to the tyrant regarding his wife, "She is my sister".'[31] This opening comment is a regular feature of Version B attributed to Abu Hurayra and appears over a dozen times in our sample.[32]

Abraham's first two lies, both of which are qur'anic quotations, were 'for God' in that they were told in order to prove the illogic of ascribing divinity to idols—therefore promoting monotheism. The third lie is less easily justified, but the Islamic renditions regularly suggest one of two reasons for his act. One explanation hearkens back to the biblical renditions of the story where Abraham feared that the tyrant would kill him if he referred to her as his wife. This appears to be a minority view, however, and occurs in only four out of sixteen explanations.[33] Although it parallels the biblical justification for the lie found in the Genesis 12 rendition, it can nevertheless ignore the kinship problem made so clear by Abraham's statement in Genesis 20:12 that Sarah was truly his half-sister because, as an Islamic response, it need not reconcile the problems presented by the biblical text. This exegesis nevertheless continues to implicate Abraham in the lie with his statement that Sarah was his sister because it had already been made clear from an earlier portion of the Islamic renditions of the Abraham cycle that she was not.[34]

The more popular Islamic explanation notes that Abraham and Sarah are the only believers (Muslims) on earth. As fellow Muslims, they are indeed siblings in a religious sense, despite the fact that they are in no way biologically related. In a slightly different rendering of this approach, Abraham explains either to Sarah or to the tyrant that she is indeed his religious sister (*ukhtī fī Allāh*/*fī al-dīn*/*fī al-islām*). As in the former Islamic response, this can also ignore Abraham's kinship claim of Genesis 20:12, yet unlike the former explanation it solves both the kinship problem and the purported lie at the same time. As 'religious siblings', Abraham could technically refer to Sarah as his sister without lying. A proof text for this understanding may be found in the Qur'an itself, where co-religionists are referred to as 'brothers in religion' (Q. 9:11: *ikhwānukum fī al-dīn*).[35]

Sarah in the Box

The motif of placing Sarah in a box is found only once in the sample of Islamic sources but is a familiar motif in the midrash. The exegetical nature

[31] Ibn Sa'd 49–50; Ibn Hanbal 2:403; al-Bukhari 4:368; al-Tabari, *Annales* 268–71; Ibn al-Athir 101; Ibn Kathir 214–17. For the qur'anic contexts of the two verses cited here, see notes 18 and 19 above.

[32] Al-Tabari provides five different reports to this effect in his *History*. Many are repeated in his *Commentary* (23:71).

[33] Some renditions provide both explanations.

[34] See note 29 above.

[35] This is not cited by the sources.

of the motif is clear in *Bereshit Rabbah* (40:5), where it is connected to Genesis 12:14: 'When Abram entered Egypt ...'. Just prior to this verse in the Genesis 12 rendition, Abraham had discussed the issue of the wife-sister ruse with Sarah (vv. 11–13) and had asked her to pose as his sister in order to protect him. But the following verse has, 'When Abram entered Egypt ...'. *BR* asks, 'But where was Sarah?' The biblical text refers to Abraham alone as he crossed over into Egypt, but Sarah obviously had to have accompanied him. *BR*'s answer is, 'He put her in a box and locked her in it.' The reason Abraham was mentioned alone was because Sarah was not visible. Abraham was smuggling Sarah through the border of Egypt in a box.

> When [Abraham] came to the customs-house [with Sarah in the box], they said to him, 'Pay the custom tax!' He replied, 'I will pay.' They said, 'You are carrying utensils?' 'I will pay [the customs] for utensils.' But they said, 'Maybe you are carrying gold?' He replied, 'I'll pay for gold.' They continued, 'You are carrying silk!' 'I'll pay for silk.' They said, 'You are carrying jewels!' 'I'll pay for jewels.' They concluded, 'You must open it and show us what is inside.' When he opened it, all of the Land of Egypt glistened with her beauty.[36]

The sequence of Sarah hidden in the box is not a regular part of the Islamic legend, and only one of two dozen references includes it. The source is the early tenth-century Shi'ite commentator al-Qummi, who includes it in his depiction of Abraham when he left the land of Nimrod for Palestine.[37]

> Nimrod made a proclamation throughout the land to forbid Abraham from living in any settled areas. [As] Abraham passed by Nimrod's governors, any of them could take a tenth of his possessions. Sarah, at this time, was with Abraham [hidden] in a box. [One of Nimrod's men] took a tenth of Abraham's possessions and then came to the box. He said, 'You must open it!' Abraham said, 'Reckon whatever you desire [of its contents] and take a tenth.' But he said, 'You must open it!' Abraham opened it, and when he saw Sarah, he was overcome with her beauty. He asked, 'Who is this woman with you?' He answered, 'She is my sister', having in mind his sister in religion. So he commanded his soldiers to take the box to him ....[38]

The exegetical nature of the Jewish renditions is clear from the context of the narrative sequence of Sarah in the box. It is made explicit in most Jewish renditions by connecting the sequence with Gen. 12:14 and calling attention to the issue of Abraham appearing to have entered Egypt without Sarah. In the one Islamic rendition of the sequence, however, the exegetical nature of the story is totally absent. Its context in Abraham's departure from the land

[36] See also *Tanhuma Lekh-lekha* 5; *Yashar* 40 1; *Yalqut* 256; *MHG* 12:14; *Zohar Lekh-lekha* 82a.

[37] 1:332–3.

[38] Compare with *Yashar* 41, where a tenth of the contents of the box was required for Pharaoh.

of the east prevents any association with the verse at issue in the biblical version.

Sarah Prays to God

The motif of Sarah's prayer occurs in most of the Jewish and Islamic tellings of the story. In *Bereshit Rabbah*, the motif serves to explain Gen. 12:17, 'The Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues *on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram*' (*'al dvar saray eshet avram*).[39] The Midrash plays with the meaning of *'al dvar saray*, which can also mean 'because of the word of Sarai'. Pharaoh's affliction, therefore, was brought about through the power of Sarah's word. The 'word' of Sarah was her prayer:

> All that night Sarah lay prostrate on her face saying: 'Lord of the universe, Abraham went out [from the land promised him] with [Your] assurance, but I went out in faith. Abraham is outside the royal prison (*sirah*) while I am inside!' The Holy One Blessed he He answered, 'Everything that I do, I do for you, and everyone will say, *'al dvar saray eshet avram*' (Gen. 12:17).[40]

Tanḥuma connects Sarah's prayer with that of Abraham, who prayed for God to protect her after noting how 'Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh' (12:15).

> So also Sarah cried out, saying, 'Sovereign of the world, I only knew what Abraham told me of your commandment of going forth (*lekh-lekha* [i.e. not hearing it directly from God]), but I had faith in Your words. Now I am alone, apart from my father and mother and husband, and this evil one is coming to sport with me. Act for the sake of Your great Name and for the sake of my trust in Your words!' The Holy One Blessed be He replied, 'I promise that no evil will touch you or your husband, as it is written, "No harm befalls the righteous, but the wicked shall have their fill of misfortune" (Prov. 12:21). As for Pharaoh and his house, I shall make of them an example, as it is written, "The Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues because of the word of Sarai, the wife of Abram" (Gen. 12:17).'[41]

Virtually all the Islamic renditions depict Sarah's efficacious prayer as well. She either begins to pray immediately after coming into the presence of the tyrant, or responds to the tyrant's request of her to ask God to heal him after being stricken. The former sequence shows Sarah performing her ablutions according to Islamic custom and then praying, 'O God, You know that I am a believer in You and in Your Apostle. I have been chaste to all but my husband. Do not let this infidel overcome me!'[42]

[39] The identical sequence is placed also in relation to Gen. 20:18: 'on account of Sarah, the wife of Abraham' (*'al dvar sarah eshet avraham*).

[40] *BR* 41:2; 52:13 (cf. *Yalqut* 262).

[41] *Tanḥuma lekh-lekha* 5 (cf. *Yashar* 41).

[42] Ibn Hanbal 2:403; al-Bukhari 3:231, 9:67; Ibn Kathir 216–17.

The more common depiction is of Sarah responding to the tyrant's terrified request to pray to God to release him. As soon as she prays, he is released from his seizure or his withered hand is healed.[43] Again, one notes that the exegesis on the biblical verse has no direct meaning in an Islamic context, even though her prayer serves a similar function in both religious systems by demonstrating the efficacy of the prayers of the righteous.[44]

How the Tyrant was Smitten as he Approached Sarah

Like the motif of Sarah's prayer, the smiting of the tyrant is also connected in the Jewish renditions to Genesis 12:17 (or 20:18). *'Al dvar saray eshet avram* was understood here to mean 'whenever Sarai Abram's wife gave the word'.

> Rabbi Levi said: All that night an angel would stand [there] with a rod in his hand. He told her, 'If you say "strike" I will strike, and if you say "desist" I will desist.'[45]

The Islamic renditions do not mention the intercession of an angel. God is named in some renditions as the one inflicting the punishment, although most decline to name specifically the immediate source of the tyrant's affliction. The nature of Sarah's act of praying on behalf of the tyrant in the Islamic renditions (see above) directly parallels her act of directing the blows of the angel in the Jewish renditions. Sarah's prayer in the Islamic renditions thus represents a parallel to the Jewish response to Genesis 12:17 where her words are understood to direct the angel. The direct response to the biblical text in the Jewish renditions, however, is irrelevant in Islamic sources, which appear not to relate directly to the words of the Bible.

Abraham Knew What Occurred between Sarah and the Tyrant

This motif occurs infrequently in the Jewish renditions and can be found only in relation to the biblical account in Genesis 20. Here, Abraham's knowledge of what happened between Sarah and Abimelekh is a response to Genesis 20:7: 'Therefore, restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet'. The Jewish narrative exegesis provides Abimelekh's response to God's warning

[43] Ibn Sa'd 48–50; al-Bukhari 4:368; al-Tabari, *Annales* 267–9; al-Tha'labi 80; Ibn al-Athir 101; Ibn Kathir 2:214–17.

[44] One late attempt to provide an Islamic scriptural source for the motif is provided by Ibn Kathir (218), who adds the following comments after the sequence: 'While she was with the king, Abraham was praying to God, asking that He keep [the tyrant] from his wife and that He prevent the evil that would be committed to her. She did the same thing, for when the enemy of God desired to take her, she performed her ablutions and prayed .... For this reason God said, "Seek [God's] help with patience and prayer"' (Qur'an 2:45).

[45] *BR* 41:2. Cf. *Tanḥuma, lekh-lekha* 5; *PRE* 62a; *Yashar* 41–2, 53; *Yalqut* 262; *MHG* 20:3–5 (some renditions depict an angel appearing to Abimelekh and the people of Gerar in response to Genesis 20:18). Cf. *Zohar lekh-lekha* 82a.

in 20:3[46] when he says, '"Who will calm him down and reassure him that I did not touch her?" [God said], "... for he is a prophet."'[47] Abraham's prophetic powers allowed him to know at all times what was taking place between Sarah and Abimelekh.[48]

The Islamic sources in our sample do not provide the text of the traditions that contain this motif, but two mention that some traditions include it. 'According to some of the traditions, God raised the veil that was between Abraham and Sarah so that he could see her from the time she went away from him to the time she rejoined him, as a sign of respect for her and as a salve for the heart of Abraham.'[49] This response may reflect an older exegesis to Genesis 20:7 which still exists in the Midrash. The direct connection with the biblical verse was lost as the tradition came into an Islamic context and a new explanation arose: God protects his prophets or believers.

The Acquisition of Hagar

The Jewish sources are virtually unanimous in depicting Hagar as Pharaoh's daughter. Genesis 16:1 mentions briefly that Sarai 'had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar'. The extension of the verse in the Palestinian Targum depicts Sarah having 'an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar, the daughter of Pharaoh whom he gave to him [Abraham] as a servant when he took her [Sarah] but was stricken by the word of God'. *Bereshit Rabbah* extends the exegesis still further:

> Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai said: Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh. When Pharaoh saw the great deeds that were performed on Sarah's behalf in his house, he took his daughter and gave her to him saying, 'Better that my daughter be a handmaid in this house than a noblewoman in another house', as it is written 'but she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar': 'This is your reward' (*ha agrikh*).[50]

The Islamic renditions do not identify Hagar as the daughter of Pharaoh. In some renditions she is identified as a Copt or an Egyptian,[51] but most identify her specifically as a slave.[52] In only one telling is she considered to have any royal status, and that is as the daughter of the king of Jordan, who

[46] Or 20:7. The order of conversation is irrelevant to the Midrash, which pays little attention to chronology.

[47] *BR* 52:8; *Yalqut* 406–7.

[48] Or to know if Abimelekh was telling the truth.

[49] Al-Tha'labi 80 (cf. Ibn Kathir 218; Mujir al-Din 34).

[50] An Aramaic word-play on the name Hagar (*BR* 45:1). In some renditions, Hagar is the daughter of the union of Pharaoh and one of his concubines (*PRE* 61a–b; *Yashar* 42; cf. *Yashar* 44, *Yalqut tehilim* 750; *MHG* 12:16).

[51] Ibn Sa'd 50; Ibn Qutayba 32; al-Tabari, *Annales* 268; al-Tha'labi 80.

[52] *Jāriya* (al-Tabari 268; al-Qummi 1:333; al-Tha'labi 80, who has Sarah proclaim to Abraham: *kafā Allāh kayd al-fājir wa'akhdamani hājar*).

gives his beautiful daughter to Sarah. This rendition continues with a prophecy given to Abraham by the angel Gabriel, who announces that Abraham will have a son through Hagar 'through which would appear a prophet by the name of Muhammad, the seal of the prophets'.[53]

The Jewish renditions generally have Hagar given directly to Abraham as in Genesis 12:16 where Abraham is given 'male and female slaves',[54] though she is occasionally given to Sarah.[55] The Islamic tellings regularly have the tyrant giving Hagar directly to Sarah as recompense for his evil intentions, again clearly not relating directly to the Genesis verse.

*

We have noted how each of the six major motifs occurring in both the Jewish and Islamic renditions of the legend serve in the Jewish sources to react exegetically to issues raised by the biblical text. Their exegetical role explains their occurrence in the Jewish sources, where they fill in the lacunae of the biblical legends and explain difficult or problematic issues. The role and purpose of the motifs in the Islamic renditions must be sought elsewhere, however, for they nowhere serve as direct exegesis on the Bible, which is neither cited nor referred to in the Islamic sources as they have come down to us. Neither do they comment upon the Qur'an, which does not refer to this legend in any way. Moreover, aside from the single comment of Ibn Kathir noted above, the Muslim exegetes felt no need to insert qur'anic citations into the legend. We shall therefore return to the six motifs discussed earlier in order to learn more about their roles in an Islamic context.

The issue of Abraham's lie is quite significant in the Islamic renditions of the legend. Indeed, most tellings begin with the proem in which are enumerated the three occasions of Abraham lying. The first two occasions are found in the Qur'an, where Abraham lies twice for the sake of God. The third is our story in which he lies for the sake of his wife (*ithnatayn fī Allāh wa wāḥida fī imra'tih*).[56] As noted above, both of the lies attributed to Abraham in the Qur'an (21:63 and 37:89) refer to the legend of Abraham breaking his father's idols, a popular legend also in post-biblical Jewish

[53] Al-Kisa'i 141. Abu Hurayra is cited many times as adding in reference to Hagar, 'This is your mother O children of the water of Heaven (*banū mā' al-samā'*).' This term is one of nobility applied to the pre-Islamic Arab Lakhmid kings because of the nobility of their descent, and was a title given to the Arabs generally because they dwelt in the desert. The waters of the sacred Zamzam well in Mecca have also been referred to as *mā' al-samā'*.

[54] *BR* 45:1; *Yashar* 44; *MHG* 12:16; *Yalqut Tehilim* 750. The *MHG* reference uses the *plene* spelling of *shefahot* in the biblical text to support the view that Abraham did not receive many female slaves, but only Hagar.

[55] *PRE* 61b; *Yashar* 42.

[56] Ibn Sa'd 1:49; al-Tabari, *Commentary* 23:71; etc. In some renditions, even the third case is considered for the sake of God (al-Tabari, *Commentary* 17:41).

narrative but not a part of the Bible.[57] Abraham's lies in the qur'anic portrayals of the legend serve a pedagogic function. The first in Q. 21:63 calls his people's attention to the absurdity of idols being considered transcendent or living beings. The second serves as a ruse which will allow Abraham to be alone with the idols so that he can destroy them and bring their weakness to the attention of his people. Exegesis up to the period of al-Tabari in the early tenth century does not find Abraham's actions depicted in the Qur'an to be particularly problematic. Al-Tabari himself writes:

> It is not inconceivable that God would allow Abraham (*khalīlahu*) to do that as a rebuke to his people and a remonstration against idolatry. He makes them know their error and the evil of their view. [A parallel case may be found in the story of Joseph where] Joseph calls out to his brothers, 'O you in the caravan, you are obviously thieves!' (Qur'an 12:70), even though they did not steal anything.[58]

The first two lies are therefore justified because of their function in demonstrating the inanity of idol worship. The third case, however, is potentially problematic because Abraham appears to be lying merely in order to protect himself. If no higher moral lesson can be learned from his action, a lie merely for personal gain presents a serious problem for a prophet of God, particularly as the Islamic doctrine of the immutability of the prophets became more widespread during and after the ninth century.[59] The third lie is therefore justified as a statement of their spiritual relationship. As the only Muslims on earth, Abraham and Sarah could indeed be considered spiritual siblings.

The issue of the lie is such an integral part of the legend that it could not be eliminated from the Islamic renditions, despite its problematic role in casting aspersions on Abraham's status as God's prophet. Indeed, most renditions of the Islamic legend opened with Abu Hurayra's comment about Abraham's three lies. The Qur'an provided a precedent for his act, and even his third lie on Sarah's behalf could be said to serve a pedagogic function of calling attention to the great super-tribal family of Muslims in the Islamic Nation (*'umma*). All Muslims, the homilist could point out, are religious brethren (*ikhwān fī al-dīn*).

The motif of Sarah in the box, which, it was noted above, served as direct exegesis on a problematic aspect of a biblical verse, provides no benefit

[57] Cf. *BR* 38:13; *The Chronicles of Yerahmeel* 74–5; *Seder Eliyahu Rabah* 5:27–8; *Yashar* 29–30; *Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu* (Jellinek, *Beit HaMidrash Heder A*, in *Otzar Midrashim* (New York: Eisenstein, 1915), pp. 2–6).

[58] *Commentary* 17:41. This refers to Joseph accusing his brothers of stealing the cup which he had deposited with their belongings.

[59] See I. Goldziher, '*Iṣma*', in EI1 2:543; Moshe Zucker, 'The Problem of *'iṣma*'—Prophetic Immunity to Sin and Error in Islamic and Jewish Literatures' (in Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 35 (1966), pp. 149–73; W. Madelung, '*Iṣma*', in EI2 182–5.

beyond entertainment to an Islamic telling of the story. And indeed, it appears in only one Islamic rendition. Only the unique telling of al-Qummi includes the motif, and it places the entire episode in a context which is totally at odds with the biblical, post-biblical Jewish, and other Islamic renditions of the legend.[60]

Sarah's prayer, on the other hand, does provide an important lesson even outside its early context as biblical exegesis. The lesson in an Islamic context is that God will protect the true believer from harm, even if the threat comes from a figure of power—even, one might surmise, if the threat comes from a powerful arm of government.[61] Sarah, the true believer, has her prayer answered. Her and Abraham's piety ensures the efficacy of prayer for the pious.

The smiting of the tyrant represents an important feature of entertainment for Islam as it does for Judaism, and that in itself may have assured the popularity of the legend in both religious civilizations. The depiction of a powerful tyrant with his hand withering before his eyes or braying like a camel each time he is stricken with a seizure after approaching Sarah is a funny sight to imagine.[62] It might have been particularly effective among the pious who resented the power of the religiously derelict political elite. This sequence further reinforces Sarah's and Abraham's power as true believers, and therefore the appeal of the legend in a context of Islamic piety.

That Abraham knew what was happening all the while Sarah was in the tyrant's chamber is not cited directly but only referred to in our sample of Islamic renditions. The motif supports the theme of the triumph of the pious over the powerful, but seems to have largely fallen out of the Islamic tellings of the legend.

The final motif is the acquisition of Hagar. It represents the most significant of the series because it accounts for the origins of Hagar, who in Arab genealogy is nothing less than the matriarch of the Northern Arabs and progenitor of the last and greatest of God's prophets, Muhammad.[63] This legend therefore serves as a foundation story for Arabian genealogy and, by extension, for the very origins of Islam under Abraham and its

[60] Al-Qummi was a Shi'ite scholar who followed a clearly particularist Shi'ite approach to his exegesis. Shi'ites have been associated with borrowing more freely from Jewish legends than Sunnis, which may explain the single occurrence of this motif in his work (see Uri Rubin, 'Prophets and Progenitors in Early Shi'a Tradition', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1971), pp. 51, 55.

[61] This could be understood as an allusion even to Islamic government. That the tyrant is an unbeliever does not detract from this interpretation, for caliphal governments were not always considered to be properly Islamic at all.

[62] For the braying tyrant, see Ibn Hanbal 2:403; al-Bukhari 3:231, 9:67; Ibn Kathir, 2:216.

[63] Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1955), p. 3; G. Rentz, 'Djazirat al-'Arab: Ethnography', in EI2 1:543–6; Rene Dagorn, *La geste d'Ismaël d'après l'onomastique et la tradition arabes* (Paris: Champion, 1981).

resurgence under his offspring Muhammad.[64] Abraham's origins in a faraway land and his status as uncompromising monotheist are made clear from the Qur'an, but Hagar is nowhere mentioned in Islamic Scripture. This legend provides her origin and sets the scene for her separation from Abraham's family in Syria and subsequent establishment at the sacred shrine of Mecca.[65]

The problem with the Islamic renditions of the legend, however, lies in Hagar's status. She is a slave (*jāriya*), or is made to serve Sarah in that status.[66] In most Islamic renditions of the legend, Sarah returns to Abraham after her ordeal and announces that Hagar has been given to her to serve her (*akhdamanī hājar*). Only one Islamic telling ascribes an exceptional status to Hagar, who in this case appears as the daughter of a King Zadok of Jordan.[67] What is puzzling about all this is that the Jewish renditions of the legend invariably consider her to be the daughter of the powerful Pharaoh of Egypt, although her status is lessened somewhat by the statement that she was born of one of Pharaoh's concubines. In the Jewish view, which tends in other cases to denigrate the status of Hagar and her son Ishmael, she is portrayed in this legend as being of royal stock. But in the Islamic view in which Hagar and her son represent the element of God's people that became arabized to eventuate in the greatest religion and people on earth, she is an unknown slave. Added to this problem is the Islamic school of thought that would have Sarah be the daughter of the king of Haran![68] This dichotomy in the Islamic renditions immediately sets up the status conflict between Abraham's line through Sarah (Jews and Christians) and his line through Hagar (Arab Muslims) at a distinct Islamic disadvantage.

The most likely solution to this puzzle is to posit the source of the legend among Jews or Christians who would have been familiar with the origins of Arab peoples in Hagar through the biblical genealogies. As the legend was passed orally from Jews or Christians to Muslims or pre-Islamic Arabs, Hagar's royal status could easily have been omitted or replaced with that of a lowly slave.[69] The change from royalty to slavery would hardly have been an Islamic phenomenon. It could easily have evolved as a polemical Jewish or Christian response to the great power and growth of Islam upon its conquest of most of the world.

[64] See Qur'an 3:67.

[65] See Firestone, *Journeys*, pp. 61–71.

[66] If she is not named specifically as a slave (*jāriya*), she is given the status of Sarah's servant using the verb *kh-d-m*

[67] Al-Kisa'i 141–2 (cf. Ibn Qutayba 1:32).

[68] Al-Tabari, *Annales* 266; al-Tha'labi 79; al-Kisa'i 141; Ibn Kathir 2:213.

[69] The significance of Hagar's royal status in Jewish sources is clear. By serving as Sarah's maidservant, she made clear to all how great was the status of Sarah and Abraham, who were served by none other than the daughter of Pharaoh. It should be noted here that the name Sarah in Hebrew means 'princess'.

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It is clear that the six major motifs occurring in both Jewish and Islamic renditions of the legend, whilst serving in the Jewish sources as direct commentary to the biblical accounts, lost their status as direct scriptural exegesis in the Islamic renditions but retained their value as conveyors of cultural or religious messages in an Islamic context or, in some cases, were retained because of their entertainment value. The Islamic renditions of the legend also serve as indirect exegesis to the Qur'an. They add information about the qur'anic Abraham that cannot be found in Islamic revelation by filling out the qur'anic depictions with traditional lore, even if that lore evolved out of exegesis to biblical scripture.

The fact that the qur'anic Abraham cycle is supplemented with traditional Islamic literature based even indirectly on the Bible again raises the issue of the role of the Bible in Islam. Despite the distance we have established between the Islamic renditions of the legend and their direct exegetical connection to biblical scripture, the very existence of the legend in its Islamic context suggests an exegetical role *vis-à-vis* the Bible. Muslims during the first few centuries of Islam were not ignorant of the Genesis legends. Jewish and Christian converts in each generation, as well as Muslims of long standing, could have noted the similarities between the Islamic renditions of the legends and their biblical or post-biblical counterparts.

The presence of the wife–sister legend in Islamic texts is therefore not an accident, and the phenomenon is certainly not unique to the legend discussed here. The Muslims did not purge their literature of those stories that related to the Bible but not directly to qur'anic texts. The reason for this is simply that much of the Qur'an itself, with its dozens of references or allusions to biblical characters without providing full citations or explanations, assumes a biblical subtext.[70] The qur'anic revelation appears to have assumed a general knowledge of biblical lore among its audience and therefore refers to characters, scenes or motifs of biblical stories without feeling the need to supply their contents in full. In order to search the meaning of the many qur'anic allusions, therefore, many early Muslim exegetes felt obliged to become at least generally familiar with both the biblical and post-biblical presentations of the legends available to them. As mentioned above, some of the best-known early Muslim seekers unself-consciously learned traditional lore from Jews. Much of the traditional literature with close parallels to Jewish and Christian lore found in the classic Islamic literature was most likely acquired through this process. Other material entered the Arabian Peninsula along with Jews and Christians long before the birth of Muhammad and evolved into hybrid

[70] For a full chart of qur'anic citations of four major biblical figures, see Y. Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran*, pp. 27 f.

forms that were known in the area of Mecca and Medina during his lifetime.[71]

As the early Muslims searched Jewish and Christian lore[72] to find the meaning of the many difficult qur'anic allusions and to bring some of this material into the newly evolving Islamic environment, much of it became shaped by its new Islamic context and became 'Islamized'. As such it no longer functioned exactly as it did in its earlier contexts, but in many cases it continued to respond to the Bible in general terms if not with respect to specific textual issues. Without admitting so openly, therefore, much traditional Islamic lore is indirectly responding to the Bible as qur'anic subtext. In the case of the legend examined here, for example, its meaning cannot be understood completely without learning its exegetical relationship to Genesis. This, in turn, provides the key to its intertextuality and points to the close relationship between some of the traditional lore of Islam and Judaism.

[71] Gordon Newby, *History*, pp. 49–77; Firestone, *Journeys*, pp. 3–10.

[72] The early Muslims incorporated a good deal of indigenous Arabian lore into their compilations as well (see Firestone, *Journeys*, pp. 3–21).

Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan

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(1) *The Problem*

Introducing his new translation and commentary on the text of Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer (PRE), Miguel Pérez Fernández lists no fewer than thirty-nine instances of what he considers as coincidences in small detail between PRE and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch (Ps.-Jon.). The implication that these coincidences may indicate that Ps.-Jon. in some way depends on PRE is strengthened by his citation of three targumic verses which, he alleges, seem to depend on that Midrash.[1] Earlier this century, Gerald Friedländer had also noted the many apparent similarities between the two texts. He had recorded material, which PRE seems to hold in common with ancient Pseudepigrapha like Jubilees and 1 Enoch, in the introduction to his translation of PRE, and he remarked that PRE was, in his opinion, one of Ps.-Jon.'s sources.[2] Friedländer often refers to Ps.-Jon. in his work, but he offers there no sustained discussion or systematic evaluation of such evidence as might have led him to conclude that Ps.-Jon. was dependent on PRE. By contrast, Pérez Fernández has addressed this matter more rigorously, and seems to rule out Friedländer's clear-cut opinion that the Targum used PRE as a source. Accepting that a synoptic reading of the two texts is most important, he denies that either should be seen as dependent upon the other. He is cautious in allowing that PRE may have followed a Palestinian Targum as a guide, but seems less reserved in seeing PRE and Ps.-Jon. as coming from the same *ambiance* and, in some cases, even from the same hand.[3]

Avigdor Shinan's recent comments leave no doubt that the relationship between PRE and Ps.-Jon. is fundamentally important for dating the

[1] See M. Pérez Fernández, *Los Capitulos de Rabbi Eliezer* (Valencia, 1984), pp. 31–36. He also notes (p. 33) M. Ohana, 'La Polémique judéo-islamique d'Ismaël dans Targum Pseudo-Jonathan et dans Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer', *Augustinianum* 15 (1975), pp. 367–387, an essay dealing with Pseudo-Jonathan of Gen. 21:9–21, and which has been influential in promoting the view that the Targum largely depends on Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer. For a critique of some of Ohana's arguments, see most recently C. T. R. Hayward, 'Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Anti-Islamic Polemic', *JSS* 34 (1989), pp. 77–93.

[2] See G. Friedländer, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (London, 1916), Introduction pp. xxi–lii, for parallels between PRE and the Pseudepigrapha, and p. xix for his comments on PRE and Targum Ps.-Jon.

[3] See Pérez Fernández, op. cit., p. 36. His remarks should be read carefully. It is not entirely clear how he envisages the relationship between the two documents, but he appears to deny that the Targum is simply and directly dependent on PRE, or vice versa.

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