

Isaac

Among the great people of the Bible and the Qur'an, the name of Isaac (or Ishâq among Arabs) is certainly well-known. But most of the time, the name simply appears in an expression like "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." We know that Isaac is associated with these two more famous men, but what do you know about Isaac himself besides the fact that he was the son of Abraham and the father of Jacob?

You probably know that he was born in accordance with a promise of God to his father Abraham and his mother Sarah, when they were both very advanced in age. But what good or bad did he do in his life? Can you describe his character, his way of acting or reacting?

SUBJECT TO GOD AND TO HIS FATHER

The first biblical narrative that reveals to us something of Isaac's character is found in Genesis 22, and this is probably the best-known event of his life. We have already talked about it in connection to Abraham and also in connection to Ishmael. It concerns the day when God told Abraham to sacrifice his son. According to the Bible:

"After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he answered. 'Take your son,' He said, 'your only son Isaac, whom you love, go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.' So Abraham got up early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took with him two of his young men and his son Isaac. He split wood for a burnt offering and set out to go to the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there to worship; then we'll come back to you.' Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac. In his hand he took the fire and the sacrificial knife, and the two of them walked on together. Then Isaac spoke to his father Abraham and said, 'My father.' And he replied, 'Here I am, my son.' Isaac said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' Abraham answered, 'God Himself will

provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' Then the two of them walked on together.

When they arrived at the place that God had told him about, Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood. He bound his son Isaac and placed him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the Angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' He replied, 'Here I am.' Then He said, 'Do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from Me.'" (Genesis 22:1-12).

We have already considered the story from the point of view of Abraham, but it is useful to look closer at this son who almost died. Some think that he was already between 16 and 25 years old. The Bible does not mention his age, but we see that he was old enough to carry the wood while climbing the slopes of a mountain which was apparently too steep for the donkey. He was surely strong enough and quick enough to not be trapped by an old man of more than a hundred years—his father Abraham. He must have understood that it would be himself who would be offered. Obviously, this young man voluntarily submitted to his father who tried to obey God's command. So we see in this young man a faith and submission that amaze us. This is exactly what stands out from the version of this event presented in the Qur'an.

In Surah 37 – *Saffat*, from aya 100, Abraham said, "Lord, grant me a righteous son." Allah answers in the first person plural:

"We gave him the good news that he would have a patient, forbearing son. And when he reached the age when he could work with him, he [Abraham] said, 'O my son, I have seen in a dream that I am sacrificing you. So tell me what you think of it!' He replied, 'O my father, do as you are commanded; and God willing, you will find me steadfast.' When they had both submitted to God, and he had laid his son down on his face, We called out to him, 'Abraham, you have fulfilled the dream.' It is thus indeed that We reward those who do good—that surely was a manifest trial

—We ransomed him with a great sacrifice, and left him thus to be succeeded by a group [of followers] among later generations: ‘Peace and salutation to Abraham!’ That is how We recompense the righteous: truly, he was one of Our faithful servants. We gave Abraham the good news of Isaac—a prophet and a righteous man—and blessed him and Isaac too”

As you see, Abraham’s son is as remarkable as his father in this story, being so ready to accept the will of the Creator.

We have already remarked in this series of lessons that when Muslims observe the feast of Tabaski, they commemorate the sacrifice, not of Isaac but of Ishmael. But have you noticed that the Qur’an does not specify the name of the young man at the beginning of the account? The name of Isaac doesn’t appear until verse 112 and we don’t really know if verse 101 refers to him or the older son, Ishmael. It is successors to Muhammad who specify in their comments that the narrative concerns Ishmael and who introduce his name in certain translations. It is true that the majority of current commentators make Ishmael the son who was offered for sacrifice, but certain Muslim commentators in times past used to speak of Isaac instead.

According to Surah 11 – *Houd*, God had promised the birth of Jacob at the same time that He promised the birth of Isaac. It is sometimes argued that God would not order the sacrifice of Isaac whose offspring had already been announced. But according to Genesis 16:10 and 17:20, God had also announced in advance the posterity of Ishmael. If one is willing to admit it, neither the Qur’an nor Muhammad contradict the Bible on this point. It was Muhammad’s successors who apparently gave an interpretation of the Koranic text which puts it in conflict with the Torah.

But let us get on with our study of the patriarch Isaac.

HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE

In Genesis 24, we find that after the death of his wife Sarah, Abraham wanted to find a wife for Isaac. He did not want to give his son a pagan wife from the land of Canaan where he lived. He engaged the oldest of his servants to return to his relatives in upper Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) to find a suitable

wife for his son Isaac. Guided by the hand of God, the servant found the one that God had apparently designated for Isaac. She was named Rebecca. After a very long journey, the caravan of Abraham’s servant returned with the young woman. The Bible says:

“In the early evening Isaac went out to walk in the field, and looking up he saw camels coming. Rebecca looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she got down from her camel and asked the servant, ‘Who is that man in the field coming to meet us?’ The servant answered, ‘It is my master.’ So she took her veil and covered herself. Then the servant told Isaac everything he had done. And Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah and took Rebecca to be his wife. Isaac loved her, and he was comforted after his mother’s death.” (Genesis 24:63-67)

This small glimpse already shows us Isaac as a sensitive man, still regretting the loss of his mother four years after her death. The text shows us a spiritual man who finds time to be alone and meditate. It also shows us a man who would be a devoted husband. Isaac loved Rebecca, and she was the only woman he loved throughout his life. His father Abraham had had as wives Hagar and later Keturah. Isaac’s sons each had four wives. But Isaac was married to only one, and he remained faithful to her all his life—and this despite the fact that Rebecca was barren through the first twenty years of their marriage!

MAN OF PEACE

The following chapter gives us another view of Isaac’s character, and what we see there agrees well with what we have already observed about him:

“Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in that year he reaped a hundred times what was sown. The Lord blessed him, and the man became rich and kept getting richer until he was very wealthy. He had flocks of sheep, herds of cattle, and many slaves, and the Philistines were envious of him. The Philistines stopped up all the wells that his father’s slaves had dug in the days of his father Abraham, filling them with dirt. And Abimelech said to Isaac, ‘Leave us, for you are much too powerful for us.’ So Isaac left there, camped in the Valley of Gerar, and lived there. Isaac reopened the water wells that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and

that the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died. He gave them the same names his father had given them. Then Isaac's slaves dug in the valley and found a well of spring water there. But the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen and said, 'The water is ours!' So he named the well Esek [Quarrel] because they quarreled with him. Then they dug another well and quarreled over that one also, so he named it Sitnah [Hostility]. He moved from there and dug another, and they did not quarrel over it. He named it Rehoboth [Open Spaces] and said, 'For now the Lord has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land.'" (Genesis 26:12-22)

We easily understand that in an arid land, nothing is more precious than water, so it can become a subject of conflict. When we are in the right in a quarrel and when we also know ourselves to be stronger than our adversary, it is difficult to allow ourselves to be victims of injustice. The text clearly says that the neighbors of Isaac considered him to be very strong—he would have been able to have his way. He would have been able to use intimidation or strength to enforce his rights to the water from the wells which his servants had dug. But Isaac was a man of peace—a man who preferred to withdraw peacefully rather than resort to violence. He put his fate in God's hands, knowing that evil men could not prevent God from blessing him.

In this situation, Isaac demonstrated the attitude and behavior that Jesus and his apostles taught Christians. Listen to the words of the apostle Peter:

"For it brings favor if, mindful of God's will, someone endures grief from suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if you sin and are punished, and you endure it? But when you do what is good and suffer, if you endure it, this brings favor with God. For you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in His steps. He did not commit sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth; when He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He was suffering, He did not threaten but entrusted Himself to the One who judges justly." (1 Peter 2:19-23)

CONCLUSION

Isaac was not like Jesus, a man without sin. Time does not permit us to examine passages in which

faults in his character can be seen. But altogether, this is a man worth imitating. In fact, in a world where everyone wants to save his own skin, we should think about a young man who was not willing to kill but was willing to allow himself to be killed if this was the will of God. In a world where women are treated like objects simply for the pleasure of men... in a world where women and men prefer sexual freedom and easy divorce... it is refreshing to think about a man who loved one woman his whole life. And in a world where everyone is ready to do anything to protect their personal interests, we need to learn to model the behavior of a man who knew how to bear injustice and put judgment in God's hands.