

## Encounter with the Sacred

### One God

Islamic monotheism has always stood in continuity with the sacred history of prophethood. From the beginning, the One God sent mankind Prophets and messengers entrusted with the message, the reminder of His presence, of His commands, of His love and of His hope. From Adam, the first Prophet, to Muhammad the last Messenger, Muslim tradition recognises and identifies with the whole cycle of prophethood, ranging from the most famous Messengers (Abraham, Noah, Moses, Jesus, etc.) to the lesser known, as well as others who remain unknown to us. The One has forever been accompanying mankind, His creation, from its beginning to its end: this is the very meaning of *tawhîd* (the Oneness of God) and of the Quranic formula which refers to mankind's destiny as well as to that of each individual: *"To God we belong and to Him is our return."*<sup>[i]</sup>

Of all Messengers, the most important figure in the last Prophet's lineage is undoubtedly Abraham. This is indeed due to many reasons. But from the outset, the Quran points to this particular link with Abraham through the insistent and continuous expression of pure monotheism, of human conscience's adhesion to the divine project, of the heart's accession to His recognition and to His peace through self-giving. This is the meaning of the word "Islam", too often translated quickly by the mere idea of submission but which also contains the twofold meaning of "peace" and "wholehearted self-giving". Thus, the Muslim is the human being who, throughout history - and even before the last Revelation - has wished to attain God's Peace through the wholehearted gift of himself to the Being. In this sense, Abraham was the deep and exemplary expression of the "Muslim":

*"He [God] has chosen you, and has imposed no difficulties on you in religion. It is the religion of your father Abraham. He has named you Muslims, both before and in this [Revelation]; that the Messenger may be a witness for you [the new Muslim community], and you be witnesses for mankind..."*<sup>[ii]</sup>

Along with this recognition of the One, the figure of Abraham stands out most particularly among the line of prophets leading up to the Messenger of Islam for several other essential reasons. The Book of Genesis,<sup>[iii]</sup> like the Quran, relates the story of Abraham's servant Hagar, who gave birth to his first child Ishmael in his old age. Sarah, Abraham's first wife who had in turn given birth to Isaac, asked her husband to send away his servant and her child.

### A lineage, a place

Abraham took Hagar and Ishmael away to a valley in the Arabian Peninsula called Bacca, identified to present-day Mecca by Islamic tradition. The latter, like Genesis, relates the questionings, suffering and prayers of Abraham and Hagar, compelled to experience exile and separation. In both traditions, this trial is presented and experienced with the certainty and intimate comfort that the parents and child carry out a command from God, who will protect and bless Abraham's descendants born of his spouse Hagar. To Abraham's invocations about his son, God answers in Genesis: *"As for Ish'mael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him... and I will make him a great nation."*<sup>[iv]</sup> Then further on, when Hagar is helpless without food and water: *"And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation.'"*<sup>[v]</sup> As for the Quran, it relates Abraham's prayer: *"O my Lord! I have made some of my offspring to dwell in a valley without cultivation, by Thy Sacred House; in order, O our Lord, that they may establish regular Prayer: so fill the hearts of some among men with love towards them, and feed them with fruits: so that they may give thanks. O our Lord! Truly Thou dost know what we conceal and what we reveal: for nothing whatever is hidden from God, whether on earth or*

*in heaven. Praise be to God, Who hath granted unto me in old age Ishmael and Isaac: for truly my Lord is He, the Hearer of Prayer!”*[\[vi\]](#)

On a purely factual level, Prophet Muhammad is a descendant of Ishmael’s children and is therefore part of that “great nation” announced by the Scriptures. Abraham is hence his “father” in the primary sense, and Islamic tradition understands that the blessings of this father’s prayers extend to his descendant the last Prophet as well as to the place where he left Hagar and Ishmael, where, a few years later, he was to undergo the terrible trial of his son’s sacrifice, and where he was finally to raise with him God’s Sacred House (the *Ka`ba*). Quranic revelation recounts:

*“And remember that Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain commands, which he fulfilled. [God] said: ‘I will make thee a guide to the people.’ [Abraham] said: ‘And also from my offspring?’ [God] said: ‘But My Promise is not within the reach of evil-doers.’ Remember We made the House a place of assembly for men and a place of safety. And take the Station of Abraham as a place of prayer. And We covenanted with Abraham and Ishmael, that they should sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or use it as a retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves [therein in prayer].’ And remember Abraham said: ‘My Lord, make this a City of Peace, and feed its people with fruits, - such of them as believe in God and the Last Day.”*[\[vii\]](#)

This is the millenary teaching of Islamic tradition: there is a God and a line of Prophets whose central figure is Abraham, the archetype of the “Muslim”, the blood father of this lineage of Ishmael leading up to Muhammad, who sanctified this sacred place in the former Bacca valley, henceforth called Mecca, by building God’s House (*bayt Allah*) with Abraham’s and Ishmael’s own hands. And this is precisely where the last of God’s Messengers to mankind was born: Muhammad ibn `Abdullah, bearing the message reminding men of the One, of the Prophets and of the Sacred House. A God, a Place, a Prophet.

### **The trial of faith: doubt and trust**

Of course, those simple facts alone illustrate the remarkable bond linking Muhammad’s life to Abraham’s. Yet it is the spiritual filiation which even more clearly reveals the exceptional nature of this bond. The whole Abrahamic experience unveils the essential dimension of faith in the One. Abraham, who is already very old and has only recently been blessed with a child, must undergo the trial of separation and abandonment which will take his wife and child very close to distress and death. His faith is “trust in God”: he hears God’s command - as does his wife Hagar - and he answers it despite the trial and suffering, never ceasing to invoke God and rely on Him. Hagar questioned Abraham about the reasons of such behaviour and finding it was command she willingly submitted to it : she asked then trusted and then accepted and by doing so she traced the steps of the profound “active acceptance” of God’s will : to question with one’s mind, to understand with one’s intelligence and to submit with one’s heart. In the course of those trials, beyond his human grief and through the latter’s very nature, Abraham entertains and develops a relationship with God based on faithfulness, reconciliation, peace and trust. God tries him but is always speaking to him, inspiring him and strewing his path with signs which appease and reassure him.

Several years after this abandonment in the desert, Abraham was to experience another trial, since God asked him to sacrifice his first-born, Ishmael.[\[viii\]](#) This is how the Quran recounts the story: *“So We gave him [Abraham] the good news of a forbearing son. Then, when [the son] reached the age of work with him, he said: ‘O my son! I have seen in a dream 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 of the steadfast.’ So when they had both submitted [to God], and he had laid him prostrate on his forehead, We called out to him: ‘O Abraham! Thou hast already fulfilled the dream!’ - thus indeed do we reward those who do right. For this was a clear trial.’ And we ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice. And we left for him among generations [to come] in later times: peace and salutation to Abraham!”*[\[ix\]](#)

The trial is a terrible one: for the sake of his love and faith in God, Abraham must sacrifice his son, master and overcome his father's love. The trial of faith is here expressed in this tension between the two loves. Abraham confides in Ishmael and it is his own son, the object of sacrifice, who comforts and accompanies him like a sign and a confirmation when he whispers to him: *"O my father! Do as thou art commanded: thou will find me, if God so wills, one of the steadfast."* As was the case a few years earlier with his wife Hagar, he finds in others signs which enable him to face the trial. Such signs, expressing the presence of the divine at the heart of the trial, have an essential role in the experience of faith and shape the mode of being with oneself and with God. When God causes His messenger to undergo a terrible trial and at the same time associates the latter with signs of His presence and support (the confirming words of his wife or child, a vision, a dream, an inspiration, etc.), He educates his faith and drives him into a twofold attitude: Abraham doubts himself and his own strength and faith, while, at the same time, the signs prevent him from doubting of God. The trial of faith, associated with signs of the presence of the divine, thus teaches humility and recognition of the Creator. Abraham undergoes the trial and is tempted by deep doubt about himself, his faith and the truth of what he hears and understands. The inspirations and confirmations of his wife and of his son (whom he loves but sacrifices in the name of divine love) enable him not to doubt about God, His presence and His goodness. Doubt "about himself" is thus allied to deep "trust in Him".

Indeed, the trial of faith is never "tragic" in Islamic tradition and in this sense, the story of Abraham, despite many similarities as far as the story of Hagar and Ishmael is concerned, is basically different from the Bible's when it comes to the experience of sacrifice. One can read in Genesis: *"After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Mori'ah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.' (...) And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here am I, my son.' He said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So they went both of them together."*<sup>[x]</sup>

Abraham must sacrifice his son, and here he experiences this trial in absolute solitude. To his son's direct question: "where is the lamb for a burnt offering?", Abraham answers elliptically. He *alone* answers God's call. This difference between the two accounts may seem slight; yet, it has essential consequences on the very perception of faith, of the trial of faith and of the human being's relation to God.

A tragic experience?

This tragic solitude of Man facing the divine underlies the history of Western thought from Greek tragedy (with the central figure of the rebel Prometheus facing the Olympus gods) to existentialist and modern Christian interpretations as exemplified in the works of Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>[xi]</sup> The recurrence of the "tragic trial of solitary faith" theme in Western theology and philosophy has linked this reflection to the question of doubt, revolt, guilt and forgiveness and has thus naturally shaped the discourse on faith, trials and mistakes.<sup>[xii]</sup>

One should nevertheless beware of apparent analogies. Indeed, the Prophets' stories, and in particular Abraham's, are recounted in an apparently similar manner in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. Yet a closer study reveals that the accounts are different and do not always tell the same facts nor teach the same lessons. Hence, someone who enters the universe of Islam and strives to encounter and understand the Islamic "sacred" and its teachings, should be asked to make the intellectual and pedagogical effort of casting away - for as long as this encounter lasts - the

natural links they may have established between the experience of faith, trial, mistake and the tragic dimension of existence.

Quranic revelation tells the stories of the Prophets and all along this narration, it fashions in the Muslim's heart a relationship to the Transcendent which continually insists on the permanence of communication through signs, inspirations and, indeed, the very intimate presence of the One, so beautifully expressed in this verse of the Quran: "*If My servants ask thee concerning Me: I am indeed close [to them]. I respond to the prayer of every suppliant when he calls on Me.*"<sup>[xiii]</sup> All the Messengers have, like Abraham and Muhammad, experienced the trial of faith and all have been, in the same manner, protected from themselves and their own doubts by God, His signs and His word. Their suffering does not mean they made mistakes, nor does it reveal any tragic dimension of existence: it is, more simply, an initiation to humility understood as a necessary stage in the experience of faith.

Because his life expressed the manifested and experienced essence of Islam's message, getting to know Prophet Muhammad is a privileged means of acceding to the spiritual universe of Islam. From his birth to his death, this Messenger's experience - devoid of any human tragic dimension - allies the call of faith, trial among men, humility, and the quest for peace with the One.

***[Excerpt of Tariq Ramadan's forthcoming book on the Sîra, The Prophet's life : Spiritual and Contemporary Teachings]***

---

<sup>[i]</sup> Quran, 2:156.

<sup>[ii]</sup> Quran, 22:78.

<sup>[iii]</sup> Genesis, 15:5 (The holy Bible, Revised Standard version).

<sup>[iv]</sup> Genesis, 17:20.

<sup>[v]</sup> Genesis, 21:17-19.

<sup>[vi]</sup> Quran, 14:37-39.

<sup>[vii]</sup> Quran, 2:124-126.

<sup>[viii]</sup> Isaac in the Biblical tradition.

<sup>[ix]</sup> Quran, 37:101-109.

<sup>[x]</sup> Genesis, 22:1-2 and 6-8.

<sup>[xi]</sup> In particular his analysis of Abraham's experience in his *Fear and Trembling* (1843).

<sup>[xii]</sup> See our analysis of this point in *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2000 (Part Three: *Values and Finalities*).

<sup>[xiii]</sup> Quran, 2:186.