

Abraham in Narrative Worldviews: Reflections on doing Comparative Theology through Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Turkey

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The term *Abrahamic* is commonly used for one circle of interfaith dialogue. However, the extent to which Abraham is common ground between Christians and Muslims is debatable. Engaging this issue properly requires a *comparative theological* examination of the primary Abraham texts in the Bible and the Qur'an along with their respective appropriation by Christians and Muslims. In this essay I offer a selective Christian reading of the Genesis Abraham narrative in conversation with a Muslim reading of the qur'anic Abraham narratives.¹ The hermeneutical approach I utilize in examining the biblical text is commonly referred to as "theological interpretation of the Bible."² It is a Christian canonical approach which focuses on the text as we have it and regards the NT writings as continuing and complementing the Hebrew Scriptures to form one Bible.³ The Muslim reading represented here is a cumulative one assembled from my own study of the Qur'an⁴ and from extended interviews with senior Turkish imams regarding their appropriation of Abraham.⁵

After summarizing the primary Abraham stories in Genesis and the Qur'an, I offer an approach to comparing such narratives and develop it with five specific comparisons.⁶ This approach can help bring to light specific comparative theological issues which should be engaged by biblical interpreters in Islamic

¹ This material is further developed in my George Bristow, *Sharing Abraham?: Narrative Worldview, Biblical and Qur'anic Interpretation and Comparative Theology in Turkey* (Cambridge, Mass: Doorlight Academic, 2017).

² On this approach see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Introduction," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 24.

³ See Craig G. Bartholomew, *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, The Scripture and Hermeneutics Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). In my dissertation, I argue that the NT references to Abraham form an integral part of a *unified set of convictions* about what Israel's God had newly done through Jesus Christ. Bristow, "Abraham in Narrative Worldviews," 149-55.

⁴ This included widely received Muslim exegesis as found in running notes of English and Turkish interpretations (*meal*) of the Qur'an.

⁵ Bristow, 77-79.

⁶ Quotations of the Qur'an are taken from M. A. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Kindle Edition. Quotations of the Bible are taken from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2007).

contexts. Study of partially overlapping stories which articulate differing worldviews has obliged me as a Christian to wrestle with Muslim readings which subvert biblical emphases and to consider how my own interpretation may need to change or be clarified. This has also sharpened biblical insights for Christian witness which might lie dormant in other contexts.⁷

The Genesis Abraham narrative

The overall structure of Genesis is created by a ten-fold use of the heading formula *'elleh tôledôt* – “these are the generations of X.”⁸ The Abraham narrative (11:27 – 25:11) is thus marked out by the headings “these are the generations of Terah” (Gen 11:27) and “these are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham’s son” (Gen 25:12). It comprises a continuous story in which the primary characters are God, Abraham, Lot, Abraham’s wives Sarah and Hagar, and his sons Ishmael and Isaac.⁹ The main part of this narrative is framed with genealogical material relating to Terah’s descendants in Haran (Gen 11:27-32 and 22:20-24) and structured as a chiasm in which each major segment corresponds quite clearly with another.¹⁰ God’s call of Abraham (12:1-9) corresponds to his command to offer Isaac (22:1-19). Sarah and Abraham’s encounter with Pharaoh in Egypt in chapter 12:10-20 is balanced by their later encounters with Abimelech in chapters 20-21. Abraham’s initial separation from Lot and intervention to rescue him in connection with Sodom in chapters 13-14 correspond to Abraham’s later intercession for the

⁷ Tennent argues for a “more engaged, mission-focused theology informed by global realities” including Muslim perspectives. Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 49.

⁸ The ten formulaic phrases (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1, 9; 37:2) are best understood as superscriptions to what follows, meaning something like “this is the account of the line of...” and introducing material concerning what becomes of the named ancestor’s descendants. See Matthew A. Thomas, *These Are the Generations: Identity, Covenant, and the Toledot Formula*, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies (New York: T & T Clark International, 2010), 37-47. Also Jason S DeRouchie, “The Blessing-Commission, the Promised Offspring, and the *Toledot* Structure of Genesis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56, no. 2 (2013): 22-29.

⁹ For arguments in support of the unity of the narrative as we have it see T. D. Alexander, *Abraham in the Negev: A Source-Critical Investigation of Genesis 20:1-22:19* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 1997), 102-10.

¹⁰ Rachel Yudkowsky, “Chaos or Chiasm?: The Structure of Abraham’s Life,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2007): 110-11. Also Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 263. The “doublets” often taken as evidence of multiple sources have clear purpose within a careful structure, according to Devora Steinmetz, *From Father to Son: Kinship, Conflict, and Continuity in Genesis*, 1st ed., Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 63ff.

righteous in Sodom and Lot's rescue in chapters 18-19. God's promise and covenant with Abraham in chapter 15 is balanced by a renewal of the promise and the covenant of circumcision in chapter 17.¹¹ The birth of Ishmael in chapter 16 is at the centre of the composition. This "fall like" episode¹² is the "pivot point" following which the story is complicated by rivalry.¹³ This analysis supports the view of Grüneberg that the central theme of the overall narrative is the problematic fulfilment of God's promise of offspring to Abraham, crucial for the related promises of land and all-nations blessing.¹⁴

The qur'anic Abraham narratives

Four distinct Abraham stories are repeated in various forms in the Qur'an. In Story 1, which is found in eight different surahs, Abraham declares his allegiance to the one creator God and rejects the idolatry of his father and kinsfolk.¹⁵ He disputes with them and warns them about worshipping worthless statues. In some of the accounts, Abraham is cast into a fire by his antagonists but is miraculously protected by God. This story has no correspondence with Genesis, but does resemble some non-canonical Jewish narratives of Abraham's early life (particularly *Jubilees*).¹⁶

In Story 2, found in five surahs, Abraham welcomes messengers with a meal, which they do not eat.¹⁷ After allaying Abraham's concern about this odd

¹¹ Some argue that chapters 15-16 balance 17:1-18:15, e.g. K.S. Hong, "An Exegetical Reading of the Abraham Narrative in Genesis: Semantic, Textuality and Theology" (University of Pretoria, 2007), 247. I see chapter 16 as a single central section, in agreement with Alexander, *Abraham in the Negev: A Source-Critical Investigation of Genesis 20:1-22:19*: 105. The unity of chapter 18 is shown as the Lord appears in 18:1 and departs in 18:33.

¹² Ronning presents a series of parallels with Genesis 3 showing that Gen 16:1-6 is indeed about a "Fall." John L. Ronning, "The Curse on the Serpent (Genesis 3:15) in Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics" (PhD Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1997), 193-97. For example, the clause "listened to the voice" is used in only these two texts (16:2; 3:17). Sarah "took... and gave..." to her husband (16:3), as Eve did (3:6).

¹³ David Klinghoffer, *The Discovery of God: Abraham and the Birth of Monotheism*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2003), Kindle Location 2685-86.

¹⁴ Keith N. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in Its Narrative Context*, vol. 332, Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 9-10. See also Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 1: 262.

¹⁵ Qur'an 6:74-87; 19:41-50; 21:51-73; 26:69-102; 29:16-27; 37:83-100; 43:26-28; 60:4-7.

¹⁶ See Shari L. Lowin, *The Making of a Forefather: Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegetical Narratives*, Islamic History and Civilization (Leiden: Brill, 2006). I consider the correspondences with *Jubilees* in Bristow, 96-9, 183-5.

¹⁷ Qur'an 11:69-83; 15:51-77; 29:31-32; 37:99-113; 51:24-37.

behaviour, they announce the birth of a special son, causing both the prophet and his wife some consternation. The angels confirm God's purpose of blessing and announce that their main mission is to bring judgment on the people of Lot. In two versions the visitation account is followed directly by the destruction of Lot's people (Q 11:77-83; 15:61-77), corresponding roughly to the biblical narrative where Gen 18 recounts the visitation and Gen 19 recounts the destruction of Sodom.

In Story 3, found in four surahs, Abraham and Ishmael build the Kaaba at Mecca.¹⁸ God appoints the House as "a blessed place; a source of guidance," commanding Abraham and Ishmael to purify it for pilgrimage rites. While raising the foundations they pray for the surrounding land to be fruitful and for their offspring to be preserved from idolatry and enabled to keep the "holy rites." Abraham also prays for God to send a Messenger to the people of Mecca and asks for forgiveness on the Day of Judgment. This story has no overlap with the canonical biblical narrative.¹⁹

Story 4 is told in only one surah.²⁰ In answer to Abraham's prayer, God announces the birth of a "patient son," usually understood to be Ishmael.²¹ When Abraham recounts a dream in which he is sacrificing his son, the boy states his willingness to obey. Father and son are found "surrendered" to God, ready to go through with the sacrifice. At the last moment God affirms that the prophet has passed the test, "ransoms" the boy with a "mighty sacrifice" and rewards Abraham

¹⁸ Qur'an 2:124-141; 3:95-97; 14:35-41; 22:26-33.

¹⁹ Firestone shows some limited parallels between Islamic and later Jewish sources regarding Abraham visiting Ishmael after his expulsion. Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 76-79, 210. But the Jewish sources do not recount the construction of a sanctuary. On the origin of that belief see G. R. Hawting, "The Religion of Abraham and Islam," in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites : Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham*, ed. Martin Goodman, Geurt Hendrik van Kooten, and J. van Ruiten (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2010), 495-97. He finds that Jewish traditions of Abraham and Ishmael are not suggestive of this tradition. Witztum argues that "this scene reflects post-biblical traditions concerning Genesis 22," including qur'anic commentaries, rabbinic sources and Syriac homilies. Joseph Witztum, "The Foundations of the House (Q 2: 127)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72, no. 01 (2009): Abstract.

²⁰ Qur'an 37:83-113.

²¹ See the essays in this volume by Martin O'Kane and Nazir Nasirudin.

with posterity who will “bless” him. This story shares common ground with Genesis 22 and has frequently been compared with it.²²

Notice that direct overlap with Genesis is limited to the second and fourth qur’anic stories and that very little of the biblical Abraham narrative is referred to in the Qur’an (only Gen 18-19 and 22). In order to meaningfully compare these largely non-overlapping narratives, my approach develops the relationship between *narrative* and *worldview*, where narrative both shapes and shows worldview. It also builds on the relationship of the Genesis Abraham story to the larger biblical narrative in which it is found and the relationship of the qur’anic Abraham episodes to the prophet stories patterns to which they belong.²³

A common Christian worldview which arises from the overarching biblical narrative has four main elements: *Creation*, *Fall (corruption)*, *Redemption* and *Consummation*.²⁴ The first three elements are directly related to the Genesis narrative: Creation (Gen 1-2), corruption or Fall (Gen 3-11), salvation history or Redemption (Gen 12 and following), while the fourth element looks toward the promised new creation or Consummation of the narrative. Likewise, a representative qur’anic worldview, while less frequently summarized in this way, may fairly be presented in three principles or elements: *Tawhid (divine unity)*, *Prophethood*, and *Afterlife*.²⁵ These are articulated in various ways in qur’anic

²² For example, Norman Calder, “From Midrash to Scripture: The Sacrifice of Abraham in Early Islamic Tradition,” *Le Muséon: Revue d'études orientales* 101, no. 3-4 (1988). Also Shari L. Lowin, “Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegesis,” *Religion Compass* 5, no. 6 (2011): 227-28.

²³ I develop these concepts in chapter 3, Bristow, 25-51.

²⁴ Some studies present only three elements of a Christian worldview in relation to the biblical narrative: *Creation*, *Fall* and *Redemption*. For example, Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 12. Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 32. Others add *Consummation* as I do, e.g. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), Kindle Location 456. While the sequence is important in biblical perspective, these are also on-going, simultaneous realities; the effects of creation, corruption and redemption continue until the new creation. On the ancient “Rule of Faith” as a succinct narrative worldview, see Paul M. Blowers, “The Regula Fidei and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith,” *Pro Ecclesia* 6, no. 2 (1997): 202.

²⁵ Murata and Chittick identify these as “the three principles” of the Islamic vision. Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, Visions of Reality (New York: Paragon House, 1994), 43. Sarwar discusses the foundations of Islamic faith as *Tawhid*, *Risalah* and *Akhirah*. Ghulam Sarwar, *Islam, Beliefs and Teachings*, 3rd ed. (London: Muslim Educational Trust, 1984), 18-40. See also Abdullah and Junaid Nadvi, “Understanding the Principles of Islamic World-View,” *The Dialogue* VI, no. 3 (2011): 271. Justice is often a fourth element in Turkish summaries. E.g. Ian S. Markham and Suendam Birinci Pirim, *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought and Writings* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 24.

prophet stories, where Abraham holds a prime place as one of the five great prophets (*Ulul'azm Anbiya*). I juxtapose these elements in three pairs to facilitate comparison of their narrative worldviews:

Creation-Fall – Tawhid (divine unity)

Redemption – Prophethood (prophetic guidance)

Consummation – Afterlife

In each of these narrative worldview element pairings, there is significant dissonance despite common issues. In the *Creation-Fall – Tawhid* pairing, the biblical and qur'anic concepts of God and Creation have a good deal in common, as the Creator God sustains all things and provides for his creatures. Nevertheless dissonance arises as biblical depictions of God's immanence in creation do not harmonize with the incomparability and transcendence of God in Tawhid perspective. The biblical story of humanity's beginning, which connects Adam genealogically with the particular history of Abraham-Israel, differs from the qur'anic narratives which identify Adam as the first of many prophets. The narratives of evil differ as the Bible presents universal effects of Adam's sin while the Qur'an shows Adam's sin as limited in effect only to himself.

In the *Redemption – Prophethood* pairing, biblical narration of the acts of God differ significantly from qur'anic stories of the prophets of God. The biblical story focuses on the story of one people among all the others, while the qur'anic stories focus on prophet-rejecting peoples. The biblical narrative shows God coming to redeem fallen mankind while the qur'anic narrative shows God reminding forgetful humanity through prophets.

In the *Consummation – Afterlife* pairing, despite common Christian and Muslim appeal to “the Day” for exhortation, the biblical “return of God” theme differs from the qur'anic theme of the soul's “return to God.” Christian belief in the resurrection is primarily grounded in the resurrection of Jesus, as the culmination of biblical narrative and fulfilment of biblical promises. Muslim belief in the resurrection is argued from God's sovereign power as Creator.

Analysing Abraham narratives in light of these narrative worldview polarities is useful because in both the Bible and the Qur'an the stories are virtually inseparable from the larger narratives or patterns of which they are a part. The Genesis Abraham narrative is integrally related to the primordial narrative which precedes it (Gen 1:1 – 11:26) and to the patriarchal narratives which follow it (Gen 25:12 –

50:26).²⁶ These in turn are part of the ongoing biblical narrative, which both shapes and articulates the Christian worldview. Similarly, the qur’anic Abraham stories are inseparable from the stories of other prophets which form a consistent pattern of narratives including that of the prophet Muhammad. These fragmentary clips are not arranged consecutively as in the Bible, but together articulate a consistent notion of prophethood and illustrate the qur’anic call to heed the final prophet, like “sermon illustrations.”

Comparing the two sets of Abraham narratives within this paired framework often shows what is not narrated as well as what is narrated. Where a story articulates a perspective that has no real corollary in the other narrative, it often elucidates the other worldview. Below I develop five such comparisons, in which what is absent is as significant as what is present.

1. Abraham’s early life and call: Is Abraham a “hero”?

The sparsely recounted family background and call of Abraham in Genesis 11-12 contrasts with the heroic actions of Abraham’s early life narrated in Qur’an Story 1. The qur’anic Abraham recognizes and surrenders himself to the Creator, destroys idols, and endures persecution as the prelude to being sent to the chosen land. Genesis on the other hand sums up Abraham’s early life in a few notes about Sarah’s barrenness and his family’s move from Ur to Haran (11:27-32). Although Abraham later refers to God as “the Lord, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth” (14:22) and as “the Judge of all the earth” (18:25), we read nothing of him coming to know the Creator or disputing with idolaters. In the narrative Abraham is simply *called* to be the father of God’s new people (12:1-3). God’s call and promises are not occasioned by Abraham’s piety. Rather, grounds for boasting are significant by their absence. It is just this unmerited “gift” or “election of grace” that is highlighted by the NT reading of Genesis (Rom 4:4-5; 9:11).

The Qur’an on the other hand, tells how Abraham deduces the reality of God from the evidence of creation and boldly confronts his idolatrous kinfolk: “My people, I disown all that you worship beside God. I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who created the heavens and the earth” (6:78-84). His explicit rejection of idolatry is paradigmatic for the qur’anic worldview. Islam is

²⁶ The Abraham narrative fits into the overall structure of Genesis created by a ten-fold use of the heading formula *’ēlleh tôledôt* – “these are the generations of X.” As Janzen notes, the repeated word *toledot* captures the theme of blessing and generation which tie together the creation narratives and the patriarchal birth narratives. J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12-50*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3.

“the religion of *Abraham, the upright, who did not worship any god besides God*” (2:136). He is widely understood to be the prime exemplar of sound *philosophical reasoning*, the precursor of all true monotheistic philosopher-theologians. For some of my Turkish interviewees this Abrahamic quality is at the heart of Islam as a religion of reason.

In the Bible, prophets such as Moses and Elijah do confront idolatrous tyrants, but this is not Abraham’s role in Genesis.²⁷ However, in the Muslim worldview this is central to Abraham’s identity, and for my Turkish contacts the absence of this story in Genesis narrative was quite disturbing. In general the biblical Abraham is less heroic than the qur’anic prophet. The Qur’an presents Abraham as a model of perfect righteousness, a paragon of every virtue: “Abraham was truly an example: devoutly obedient to God and true in faith. He was not an idolater” (16:120; cf. 53:37). While his virtue is primarily identified as freedom from idolatry, the qur’anic Abraham also passes every test (Q2:124).²⁸

However, in line with its perspective on all human beings as sinful and in need of redemption, the NT differs substantially from both Judaism and Islam on this point, declaring that all human beings are sinners, including Abraham and David (Rom 4:1-10).²⁹ Genesis may support the NT reading both by the general absence of heroics in the narrative and by the presence of questionable behaviour in Abraham’s story. In Genesis, Abraham’s weaknesses (lying about his wife) and his

²⁷ As noted above, the qur’anic Abraham’s early life story is similar to that found in non-canonical Jewish exegetical narratives. I argue that the NT explicitly rejects such “Jewish myths” and identify seven ways in which the Abraham narrative is used in light of the coming of Jesus. Bristow, 99-105.

²⁸ A Turkish commentary entitles 2:124 “no appointing without testing.” Bayraktar Bayraklı, *Yeni Bir Anlayışın Işığında Kur'an Tefsiri (Qur'an Tafsir in the Light of a New Understanding)*, 21 vols., vol. 2 (Istanbul: Bayraklı Yayınları, 2003), 213. Yet there is no consensus among Muslim interpreters as to the content of this testing. Some cite various ritual tests. Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 152. Others point to a series of tests: when God called him to leave his people, when Nimrod cast him into the fire, when the angels visited him, when he was commanded to offer his son, and finally when Allah called him to surrender himself (2:131). Ahmed Kalkan, *Kavram Tefsiri*, 11 vols., vol. 4, Kavram Tefsiri, 2089.

²⁹ Watson argues that Paul is in dissenting dialogue with readings of the OT found in 1 Maccabees, Jubilees, Philo and Josephus: “All of them are concerned to present Abraham as an exemplary figure or role model for human conduct in relation to God.” Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 268. On Abraham as a model of perfect righteousness in the “Embellished Bible” of Second Temple Judaism, see G. Walter Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians: Epistolary and Rhetorical Contexts*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 187-88.

“fall” in taking Sarah’s maid Hagar are part of the larger narrative of the fall and failure of even the chosen, believing line.³⁰

Biblical interpretation in Islamic contexts will benefit from awareness that the Muslim perspective on Abraham is significantly shaped by a story which is not found in the Genesis account.

2. Who visits Abraham?

A second area of dissonance is the proximity or immanence of God within creation and within the different storylines. This issue can be compared directly in the visitation episode recounted in Genesis and in Qur’an Story 2. In Genesis 18, the Lord³¹ visits Abraham shortly after a previous appearance in 17:1-22.³² Though Abraham sees “three men standing in front of him,” it seems that one of these is (or represents) the Lord himself, and that the other two are angels.³³ So in Genesis God comes with two angels to visit Abraham and Sarah; in the Qur’an angels visit them. In Genesis God eats along with the angels; in the Qur’an even the angels do not partake. In Genesis God negotiates personally with Abraham before departing; in the Qur’an Abraham’s pleas are simply dismissed.

The surrounding biblical narrative reveals God entering time and space as the chief protagonist, and appearing to Abraham in several scenes (Gen 12:7; 15:1-21; 17:1-22; 18:1-33) as well as to his descendants Isaac (26:2-5, 24-25) and Jacob (28:11-22; 31:3-13; 32:24-30; 35:1-3, 9-13). While the mode of appearance varies, God himself is described as palpably present, speaking, coming and going, participating in symbolic covenant-making actions, visiting at table, standing and

³⁰ E.g. Noah’s drunkenness, Lot’s incest with his daughters after reluctantly leaving Sodom; Isaac lying about his wife; Jacob deceiving his father to steal his brother’s birthright; Jacob’s sons selling Joseph into slavery and lying to their father to cover up, Levi and Simeon’s violence, Reuben’s incest with his father’s concubine and Judah’s with his daughter-in-law whom he thought to be a prostitute.

³¹ Throughout the chapter it is יהוה (the LORD: Yhvh) who appears and converses with Abraham (18:1, 13, 14, 17, 19, 20, 22, 26, 33). Abraham addresses him as אֲדֹנָי (the Lord: ‘ădônây) in 18:27, 31, 32.

³² This is seen in the parallel descriptions of God’s coming and going in 17:21-22 and 18:10, 14, 22. Likewise in chapter 21, God’s “returning to” Sarah is described as a “visitation” (21:1).

³³ The “men” who go on toward Sodom while Abraham remains standing before the Lord (18:22) are apparently the “two angels” who arrive in Sodom in the evening (19:1; called “men” in 19:10). Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 51. While rabbinic readings often separate the visit of the Lord from that of the angels, the earliest Christian commentators generally saw the Lord as one of the three visitors. Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling, “Abraham’s Angels: Jewish and Christian Exegesis of Genesis 18–19,” in *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, ed. Grypeou and Spurling (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 186, 96.

talking. Later in the biblical narrative God comes to “dwell among” Abraham’s offspring in the Exodus tabernacle. In my reading, this phenomenon is compatible with the NT picture of Abraham’s God coming among humanity in the incarnation. In John’s gospel Jesus, who is the eternal Word become flesh, says, “before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).³⁴ In the Christian worldview God condescends to come among human beings, appearing visibly within his creation. Many narratives contain such scenes, including the Abraham accounts. The transcendent God becomes immanent within creation not only in universal omnipresence, but in concrete, localized reality.³⁵

My Muslim interlocutors found these details of the biblical story incompatible with their Tawhid view of God’s transcendence and utter uniqueness. For them, God interacts with humanity through angel-mediated speech to prophets and through the “signs” of creation and judgment. He does not reveal himself, but only his will. God speaks with Abraham but does not appear to him.

This Genesis Abraham story articulates worldview where God condescends to appear visibly and to come near. The qur’anic story articulates a worldview in which the Creator is beyond such condescension. In fact, the Qur’an articulates open opposition to the Christian worldview on this point.³⁶

3. Promised blessing or prophetic guidance?

My next two comparisons highlight issues in the *Redemption – Prophethood* worldview pairing. In the Bible, God makes promises and comes to redeem, beginning with Abraham. The similarity of God’s words to Abraham in Gen 15:7 and Israel in Exod 20:2 – “I am the LORD who brought you out” – suggest that Abraham was redeemed, as Israel was. In Isaiah, God identifies himself as “the LORD, who redeemed Abraham...” (Isa 29:22). In the Bible, *Redemption* corresponds to *fallen* humanity’s need for *deliverance*, and Abraham’s key role is to receive and believe God’s covenant promises. In the Qur’an God sends prophets with guidance, who call their hearers to submit to the Creator and heed God’s

³⁴ The tabernacle/temple language of John 1:14-18 and 2:16-22 alludes to God’s “tabernacling” among Israel, implying that Jesus is not only the temple but also the God who meets his people there. Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards : Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness*, 82-86.

³⁵ On the philosophical and theological issues related to this position see K. Scott Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

³⁶ For a thorough Muslim rejection of these biblical depictions see Zulfiqar Ali Shah, *Anthropomorphic Depictions of God: The Concept of God in Judaic, Christian and Islamic Traditions: Representing the Unrepresentable* (Herndon, Va.: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2010).

signs. *Prophethood* corresponds to *forgetful* humanity's need for *guidance*. Here Abraham is a model prophet.

In Genesis God's primary word to Abraham is a *promise*: "I will make of you a great nation... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:1-3; cf. 18:18; 22:18).³⁷ God confirms his promise by making covenants (Gen 15, 17) and by swearing an oath (22). In the NT Abraham is called "he who had the promises" (Heb 7:6 cf. 6:13-17). Abraham era is the ground-breaking stage in the Creator's enterprise to bring blessing to all nations through a particular dynasty, progressively unfolded throughout the biblical canon. The Abrahamic promise is at the heart of the biblical narrative of human history and is both universal in scope and particular in means.

According to the NT, Jesus' coming culminates this divine enterprise to bless all the nations. God has "raised up" Jesus precisely in fulfilment of his promise (Acts 3:13-26; cf. 13:32-34). That the "blessing of Abraham" has now come through the work of Jesus and the giving of the Spirit is the "gospel of God." God's giving of his Son (not sparing him, as foreshadowed in the Aqedah), the resurrection of the dead and the promised Spirit being poured out on the nations are all Abrahamic "gospel" themes (Rom 4:16-25; 8:32; Gal 3).

My Turkish interviewees found nothing here they could accept as common ground. As Ismail al-Faruqi argues, the biblical concept of covenantal promise is fundamentally incompatible with the Muslim worldview: "The covenant is a perfectly ethical notion if only all it purports to say is the truth that if man obeys God and does the good, he would be blessed... This transformation of the covenant into "the Promise" is the other side of the racialization of election."³⁸

In the Qur'an God gives Abraham a warning about idolatry and clear *guidance* about the right way of faith and submission. While this rightly-guided "way" is common to all the prophets, it is identified particularly as the "religion" or "creed" of Abraham (2:130; cf. 3:83-85, 95; 12:38; 16:123; 22:78; 42:13). The Qur'an asks, "Who could be better in religion than those who direct themselves wholly to God, do good, and follow the religion of Abraham, who was true in faith? God took Abraham for a friend" (4:125).

³⁷ Searle notes the big difference between "a mere expression of intention and a promise." John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 70.

³⁸ Ismail R. al Faruqi, "A Comparison of the Islamic and Christian Approaches to Hebrew Scripture," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 31, no. 4 (1963): 287-88.

As an example, consider the *star motif* in the Abraham stories. In Genesis 15:5, God takes Abraham outside and tells him to number the stars, promising, “So shall your offspring be.” The stars signify the innumerable offspring God promises to give the childless man married to an aging, barren woman. In the Qur’an, however, Abraham observes a star and says, “This is my Lord.” But when it sets, he rejects such “things that set” as deity, saying, “I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who created the heavens and the earth” (6:75-79). The stars guide Abraham to monotheism and allegiance to the Creator.³⁹

Comparison of these narratives of God’s revelation to Abraham reveals a strong emphasis on promise in the Bible and on guidance in the Qur’an. While promise and guidance are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories, the Bible’s Abrahamic promise fulfilled in Jesus finds no corollary in the qur’anic Abraham. Interpreters of the Bible in Islamic contexts will need to grapple with the implications and trajectory of this repeated promise.

4. The location and purpose of God’s house

In Genesis the Abrahamic promise includes a particular land which God will show him. As the story unfolds God tells Abraham that he and his descendants will inherit the territory where they live as migrants (12:7; 13:14-17). The mysterious king-priest Melchizedek blesses Abraham outside the city of Salem (14:17-20), which is identified in biblical tradition with Jerusalem.⁴⁰ The Lord reinforces the land promise with solemn covenants (15; 17). He leads Abraham to a hilltop in the region of Moriah (22), which the Chronicler identifies with the Temple mount outside Jerusalem (2 Chr 3:1). Abraham names this site, where God spares Isaac, “the Lord will provide,” and we learn of a future-oriented saying: “on the mount of the Lord it will be provided.” The NT associates the Temple with Jesus’ body (John 2:19-22) and sees this event in Abraham’s life as foreshadowing God’s “not sparing” his own Son as he became the supreme offering to take away the sin of the world (Rom 8:32; John 1:19; 3:16; Heb 10:10-14).⁴¹ Jerusalem becomes the staging point for God’s mission of blessing to the whole world, as promised in the Scriptures (Luke 24:46-49). In the Christian worldview narrative, deliverance from

³⁹ In Jewish para-biblical literature as well, Abraham is led to knowledge of the one God by observing the heavenly bodies (*Jub.* 12:17-18; Philo, *Abr.* 69-71; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.167-168).

⁴⁰ See Ps 76:2. According to Wenham, “The Genesis Apocryphon (22:13) and Josephus (*Ant.* 1.10.2 [1:180]) also affirm the identity of Salem with Jerusalem.” Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 1: 316.

⁴¹ I develop this understanding of NT references and allusions to Gen 22 and consider some objections to it in Bristow, 91.

the evil which has affected humanity since the fall is provided in and around Jerusalem.

In the Qur'an, Abraham and his son Ishmael construct and dedicate the Kaaba, "a blessed place; a source of guidance for all people" (3:96). This narrative articulates an Abrahamic origin for the cluster of rituals which have continued since Muhammad's day. Aspects of this story are rehearsed regularly by Muslims in prayers and religious rituals. My interviewees understand the sacred site and pilgrimage rites to be thoroughly Abrahamic, recounting a para-qur'anic story of Abraham leaving Hagar and Ishmael there at God's command.⁴² In the Muslim worldview, the guidance needed by human beings in order to please God is delivered in Mecca (and Medina). From there it goes out to the world.

While in Genesis 22 the place where Abraham nearly offers his son is explicitly stated and even emphasized, in the Qur'an the location is unspecified and unimportant (37:83-113). The qur'anic story focuses on Abraham's exemplary submission to God in being willing to offer his son. Nevertheless, this event is recalled in the annual Eid al-Adha festival at the culmination of the pilgrimage to Mecca, and is traditionally associated with that site.

In the Christian perspective, the real importance of the land was *God dwelling* among his people. The temple was where God dwelt among his people; for this reason Israelites prayed there, or in exile prayed toward it. This process begins with the appearances of God to Abraham and his establishment of altars, culminating in his altar on Moriah. Islam makes no claim that God ever dwelt in the Kaaba. The concept of God dwelling in a localized place on earth is incompatible with the divine transcendence which dominates the Muslim worldview.

From a Christian perspective, the transfer from Jerusalem to Mecca is jarring and the identification of a particular centre of worship represents a regression. With the coming of Christ the hour arrived for true worshippers to exalt God without reference to any earthly location (John 1:14-18; 4:20-24). The inheritance promised to Abraham and his offspring now includes "the world" and a heavenly city (Rom 4:13; Heb.11:13-16).⁴³

⁴² The story is found in the Hadith (*Al-Bukhari* 4:583-584), which goes on to quote Qur'an 14:37 as the prayer of Abraham prayer delivered at this time. See the discussion in Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*: 63.

⁴³ See Mark Strom, "From Promised Land to Reconciled Cosmos: Paul's Translation of 'Worldview,' 'Worldstory' and 'Worldperson,'" in *The Gospel and the Land of Promise: Christian Approaches to the Land of the Bible*, ed. P. Church (Eugene, Oreg.: Pickwick Publications, 2011).

In these competing worldviews Abraham is intimately and inseparably connected with two entirely different places, which represent different conceptions of God's ultimate provision for mankind. If biblical interpretation is approached canonically it should come to grips with this issue (Jerusalem), which is so thorny in Muslim-Christian relations.

5. The end of the Abraham story: the feast and the fire

My concluding example compares the biblical notion of the *Consummation* with the qur'anic element of the *Afterlife*. This concerns questions of the ultimate meaning of human history and what happens to a person at death. The biblical focus is on the "*Return of God*," which will launch the consummation of the whole narrative of creation, fall and redemption, and tie up all the loose strands of the story.⁴⁴ The Qur'an focuses rather on the individual soul's "*Return to God*." Abraham warns his idolatrous people: "seek provisions from God, serve Him, and give Him thanks: you will all be *returned to Him*" (29:17).

Consider the biblical concept of an eschatological banquet in relation to two notable Abrahamic table scenes: (1) The meal with the king-priest Melchizedek in Genesis 14, and (2) the meal with the Lord in Genesis 18. In the first scene the king-priest Melchizedek brings out *bread and wine* and blesses Abraham following his victory (14:17-20).⁴⁵ Melchizedek is referred to again in Ps 110, which according to NT usage refers to the risen and enthroned Messiah's victory over his enemies (Ps 110:1, 4; cf. Matt 22:41-45; Heb 10:12-13). The NT relates this Abraham episode to Christ who is the priest "after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 6:20; 7:17). Jesus explains the redemptive significance of his impending death by explaining *the bread and wine* shared in the Last Supper. Through his crucifixion Jesus' body is given and his blood is shed as for the forgiveness of sins. Christians share bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus' priestly self-offering and in anticipation of the eschatological feast: "until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26; cf. 15:23-26). Abraham's meal with Melchizedek can be read as pointing to the Supper and the final feast.

In the qur'anic picture Abraham and the Kaaba are related to the feast of 'Eid at the end of the Sacrifice Holiday. This is not a redemptive sacrifice, but a memorial

⁴⁴ See William J. Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning: Revelation 21-22 and the Old Testament* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001).

⁴⁵ There is an unmistakable priestly component in the biblical narrative, which begins with Abraham setting up altars and calling on the name of the Lord, the last of which is the altar on which he prepares to offer Isaac.

of Abraham's exemplary submission in nearly offering of his son. In the Islamic worldview redemption is neither necessary nor possible. The Qur'an rejects both "intercession" and "ransom" in the "Day when no soul will stand in place of another" (2:48; cf. 6:164; 17:15). So Abraham prays, "Our Lord, forgive me, my parents, and the believers on the Day of Reckoning" (14:40-41; cf. 60:4-5).

In the second Genesis scene the Lord himself visits Abraham and along with two angels partakes of a feast at his table. This scene can be correlated with table scenes in the Gospels, especially Luke's account, where the Lord visits and eats with people. In these passages, the true "children of Abraham" are those like Zacchaeus who eagerly welcome the Lord to their tables, as Abraham did (Luke 19:1-10). The Genesis picture also fits the consummation in which the Lord will dwell among the redeemed of "all nations" and the long-awaited feast will be shared (Luke 22:16).⁴⁶ "Many will come from east and west and *recline at table* with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 8:11; cf. 26:29).

In the qur'anic perspective, those who are blessed in the afterlife are "rightly guided," like Abraham: "God chose him and guided him... he is among the righteous in the Hereafter" (16:120-22). Conversely those who will inhabit the Fire are identified as those who are "misguided." Abraham prays: "do not disgrace me on the Day when the Fire is placed in full view of the misguided" (26:88-90).

The prophet Abraham warns his people about the Judgment Day and the Fire (26:90-102; 29:105). *Feasting* is a feature of the qur'anic paradise: "rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, rivers of honey clarified and pure" (47:15; cf. 14:16). God tells Abraham, "As for those who disbelieve, I will grant them enjoyment for a short while and then subject them to *the torment of the Fire*" (2:126).

There is significant similarity between biblical and qur'anic eschatology when seen primarily as the future life of the individual. Both anticipate the resurrection when each person will be judged according to their deeds. Both foresee Paradise for the righteous and an awful Fire for the unrighteous. Jesus describes a rich man in the fire, excluded from the distant banquet where he sees Lazarus with Abraham (Luke 16:22-31). But if we consider eschatology as the consummation of the whole biblical narrative rather than individual destiny in the afterlife, the apparent similarity diminishes greatly.

⁴⁶ This is the time when God will "swallow up death forever" (1 Cor 15:54, alluding to Isa 25:8). This feast is announced again in Isa 55:1-5 in conjunction with the Davidic covenant, which advances the Abrahamic covenant. See Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Nottingham: Apollos - IVP, 2008), 235-36..

In Islamic contexts, Biblical interpretation which considers individual stories in connection with their canonical narrative framework may usefully tease out eschatological trajectories which engage important aspects of the Muslim view of the afterlife.

Concluding reflections

Essays in this volume address questions of reading and interpreting the Bible in Islamic contexts. The methodology for comparing Abraham in narrative worldviews which I have illustrated in this essay brings biblical stories into dialogue with related stories in the Qur'an even when they do not explicitly intersect. When these respective narratives are understood as inseparable from the larger narratives and patterns to which they belong, many details of biblical narratives gain fresh relevance for readers in Islamic contexts. As I read the Bible with this heightened awareness, I discover both harmony and dissonance with the qur'anic worldview in many unexpected places.

By studying the way Turkish Muslims tell and appropriate their Abraham stories I have grown in my understanding and appreciation of their worldview. As Moyaert notes, "Interreligious dialogue is the place where we can listen to the stories of religious others and enter their world."⁴⁷ A confessional approach to comparative theology requires both faithfulness to one's own scriptures and fairness toward those of the other. I tried to achieve this in my dissertation by allowing the Qur'an to speak for itself as interpreted by its Turkish users. However, understanding others and their stories is not the only goal of interreligious dialogue. In both Christian mission and Muslim Da'wa, dialogue may serve the interests of persuasion and/or apologetics. Indeed, if the very "DNA" of these faiths calls for mission/Da'wa, how can deeper encounter avoid it?⁴⁸ As I understand it, biblical interpretation informed throughout by comparative theological insights can help Christians tell their story well, defend their faith and engage Muslim thinking in a persuasive way. As thoughtful Christians in other eras read the Bible with a view to responding to challenges raised by other systems of thought such as Greek philosophy or Judaism, so Christians in Islamic contexts today should read the Bible with awareness of the qur'anic challenge to the biblical worldview. And thoughtful Muslims who consider Christian interpretations of the Bible deserve to have their own perspective carefully engaged. Such Muslim readers may benefit

⁴⁷ Marianne Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Debate between Universalism and Particularism: Searching for a Way out of the Deadlock," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 15, no. 1 (2005): 15.

⁴⁸ Bristow, 20-23.

from consideration of the large stretches of the biblical Abraham narrative which do not overlap their qur'anic Abraham stories and which raise challenges which they might wish to address.

Comparing these particular stories in this way may deepen mutual understanding of the distinct worldviews they articulate and enrich the ongoing work of biblical interpretation, especially as it is increasingly carried out in Islamic contexts.