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Reading Genesis in the Context of Islam: Windows on the Texts

Reading Genesis in the context of Islam matters. It matters first because God is covenanted to all of His creation (Genesis 9v12-17, 12v1-3) and, today, at least one in five of the human beings whose creation Genesis describes can be identified as 'Muslim'. If God loves His world, and if Christians are called to live to His glory and to witness to His Gospel within that world, then it is essential that they take full account of all human beings in their reading of the Bible. In particular, Genesis is the book that announces the Gospel of God's blessing to all peoples (12v1-3 cf. Gal 3v8), and is so foundational to the biblical world view that it can be expected to be foundational to an understanding of a world that contains so many Muslims. Second, it matters because Genesis offers important resources for helping Muslims to understand why the world, including themselves, needs the Gospel. The Qur'an and Islamic tradition refer frequently to events in Genesis, which makes Genesis a fruitful starting point both for discussion between Muslims and Christians and for developing an understanding of the similarities and differences of the two faiths. Third, it matters because reading in different contexts can contribute to our understanding of the riches of Scripture. While faithful reading of Genesis in the context of Islam is likely to produce results that are entirely continuous with other readings by the Christian community, it is also likely to produce fresh insights because it looks at the text from different perspectives.

But what does it mean to read Genesis in the context of Islam? The major question for any contextualised reading is how one relates the world in front of the text (i.e. the context in question) to the text. While the meaning of a text can be seen as situated in authorial intention (the world behind the text) or as in the text itself (the world of the text), it is the world in front of the text that often determines not only how the text is perceived but also the questions which are brought to it.[1] In the case of Islam, there is the complication that the world in front of the text includes another text that interacts with the Bible - the Qur'an - and Genesis is arguably the biblical book that finds most parallels in the Qur'an. As part of the world in front of Genesis, the Qur'an brings with it its own interpretive worlds, of, behind, and in front of its text. The 'world behind' the Qur'an includes Genesis and its use in seventh century Arabia, not least by the Jewish communities with which Muhammad was in touch.

This paper will negotiate the complexity by applying to Genesis three

dimensions that might be taken into account in any reading of the Bible in Islamic contexts. First, the history of both Christian and Muslim readings of Genesis indicates much that can be learnt, both positively and negatively, to help us understand our current concerns. Second, the textual study of the Qur'an alongside the Bible sheds light on both texts. Third, experiences and questions from Islamic contexts can provide fresh perspectives on Genesis. I will not attempt to include the whole of Genesis, but to consider examples that will open some windows onto both the riches of Genesis and Islamic thinking. The metaphor of 'windows' is chosen because windows not only let light into a house, but are also the places through which people look into a house and from which its inhabitants view the outside world.

1. HISTORICAL WINDOWS

We note first that 21st-century people are not the first ones to be reading the Bible in the context of Islam. On the one hand, the "world in front of the text" in which Christians have been reading Genesis has included Islam for nearly 1400 years. On the other hand, since the Qur'an has much explicit reference to the Bible, and since Muslims have been relating to Jews and to Christians since the time of Muhammad, Muslims have also been reading and referring to Genesis throughout that time.

1.1. Christian readings: using Genesis as a window through which to look at the world of Islam

In many contexts, Christians have searched the world of the biblical text for reflections of their encounters with Islam in the world in front of the text. In recent centuries, there has been some focus on using material from Genesis in order to explain the gospel to Muslims; here, however, I want to introduce some of the questions raised by mediaeval contexts that are remarkably parallel to current questions. The mediaeval discussions often appear inadequate as we look back from the 21st-century: the historical material can help us to see where the merging of the two horizons of the worlds of and in front of the text has produced inappropriate one-to-one correlations between something in the Bible and something in the reader's world, and thence to ask where we are making similar mistakes today.

1.1.1. Reading in the Eastern Christian world – apocalyptic, Ishmael

The earliest Christian writings about Islam[2] sought to understand how the Arab conquests could fit into a Christian worldview, which meant trying to understand them in terms of a biblical framework of history. At the time, Christianity was firmly wedded to politics in the Byzantine Empire, and also in the areas where Monophysite and Nestorian christologies prevailed. The Byzantine Empire was seen by its inhabitants as quite literally the kingdom of Christ on earth, so conquest by non-Christians was a real theological problem.

One solution to the problem was to see the conquests in apocalyptic terms. The earliest major extant example is the late seventh century "Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius"[3]. It locates the Islamic conquests in the last period of total human history, and its telling of that history is rooted in Genesis 1 to 11, with its background of sin and

violence, and the rise of the various kingdoms of Nimrod, Japheth, Ham and Shem. To the 21st century reader, the analysis of Genesis 10 might appear quaint. It reflects a tradition of interpretation, but for our purposes, it is more important to note that it also reflects an analysis of the kingdoms of the time (the then world in front of the text) that makes one-to-one correlations between them and the kingdoms of Daniel and Revelation -- including the identification of the Byzantine Empire with the kingdom of Christ.

This apocalypse and numerous other early Christian writings about Islam refer to another aspect of Genesis: The Arabs had long been seen as descendants of Ishmael, so Christians discussed the possibility of God sending a prophet to those descendants. For example, John of Damascus, in his discussion of Islam as 'heresy', called the Muslims "Hagarites"[4]. This might refer to the Muslims' description of themselves as those who had made hijra, but probably reflects the Christian perception that they were descendants of Hagar. As today, this took those Christians back to Genesis as well as to Galatians, and people noted both the positive and the negative implications. However, on the whole, this identification of Muslims with the Ishmaelites enabled Christians to see them as fellow worshippers of the one God, even though the Islamic understanding of that God was limited.

1.1.2. Reading in the Western Christian world -- crusade sermons

When we move to the west and the Middle Ages, we can find Genesis used in sermons that were calling people to fight against Muslims in the Crusades. These sermons are essentially calls to take up the cross and leave one's homeland in order to fight for the holy land. They are full of biblical quotations and allusions.

Christoph T. Maier's collection of model sermons (Crusade propaganda and ideology: model sermons for the preaching of the cross, Cambridge University Press, 2000) indicates three main uses of Genesis:

1. Genesis 3 is used in presenting the fall which necessitates the redemption through the cross of Christ which may be attained through crusading (p 111).
2. An important theme in the sermons is the power of the sign of the cross, that sign being worn by every crusader in the form of a piece of cloth sewn onto his clothes. The cross is seen in Jacob's staff which enabled him to cross the Jordan (Gen 32v10, p 107) and in Jacob's ladder which accessed God's help (Gen 27v12, p 109),
3. It was necessary for Crusaders to leave their country and to persevere through difficulty. Examples from Genesis used to encourage them include Abraham's journey from his homeland (Gen 12, p 137), Jacob's work for Rachel (29v20, p 115) and Noah's building of the Ark (Gen 6, p 115). There is also a whole sermon based on Genesis 49v21: "Naphtali is a deer let loose, who speaks beautifully" (p 153-9). It is said that "Naphtali" means "enlargement", and the Crusader is to have his heart enlarged with the love of Christ and so, like the deer, to be loosed from his home. His crusading will be speaking beautifully of Christ, and he will receive blessing as did Naphtali from Jacob.

Again, some of these readings are likely to appear quaint to the 21st-century reader, in that they uses a mediaeval strategy of mining the Old Testament for illustrative metaphors. However, the more serious problem is that of equating the sign of the cross with the sign worn by the Crusaders: the merging of the particular world in front of the text with the world of the text in an inappropriate way.

Such historical readings of Genesis raise acute questions for today's world, in which, as already observed, Christians continue to ask how Islam as a whole can be viewed within a Christian worldview, how they should regard the possibility of Christian rule, how the biblical material about Ishmael might relate to present-day Muslims, and what it might mean to live by the cross in Islamic contexts.[5] Are our readings of Genesis any more faithful to the Bible as a whole than were those of our predecessors? And are we missing aspects of Genesis in our focus on these particular questions? I want to suggest that taking full account of the other "windows" explored below in this paper will help us towards faithful reading.

1.2. Muslim readings: seeing Genesis through the window of Islam

It is not only Christians who have been reading Genesis in the context of Islam for the last 14 centuries: Muslims have also been reading Genesis, and seeing their "world in front of the text" reflected in its pages. In the early days, much material from Genesis came over into Islamic tradition and Qur'anic commentary via Jewish and Christian converts to Islam, and some writers refer explicitly to the fact that their material comes from the Bible[6]. As time went on, fewer and fewer Muslims seem to have actually read the Bible, except to criticise it. However, a few have read it for other purposes, and some still do so.

In each case, Muslims are reading Genesis on the basis of the Qur'anic view of the previous scriptures. That is, Genesis is part of the Taurat that God gave to Moses. The original Taurat was, according to the Qur'an, an Islamic book of the same kind as the Qur'an, but it has become distorted. From the early times, there has been disagreement as to whether the distortion has been through the wrong interpretations of Jews and Christians, or whether the actual text has been corrupted: most Muslims today believe the latter.

Thus, Muslims seldom approach Genesis as a Jewish or Christian text, or read Genesis in order to understand Jewish or Christian thinking. Instead, they read Genesis as an Islamic text, albeit one that might not exist in its pristine state. It is not only that they see the world of Islam in the text of Genesis: they also assume that the world behind the Genesis text was an Islamic world. In Islamic thinking, Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob and Joseph were all prophets of Islam, so that they and their followers practised something similar to present day Islam. Further, these prophets, and others including Jesus, are seen as forerunners of Muhammad, and some are believed to have predicted his coming.

1.2.1. Reading Genesis as an Islamic text

Some Muslims see the extant text of Genesis as sufficiently reliable to

be useful for Islamic reading. For example, it is relevant to the discussion of Christian readings above, that Muslims as well as Christians have seen Islam in the Ishmaelites[7]. However, Muslim views can be rather different from Christian ones! One of the earliest extant Islamic polemics against Christianity was written by Ali At-Tabari (c.855)[8], a convert from Christianity. He does not appear to question the text of Genesis, but he does criticise Christian interpretations of it and uses his own, Islamic, reading as part of his argument that the Bible predicts the coming of Muhammad. The specific argument from Genesis is that God's blessings on Ishmael in 21v13, 17v20 and 16v10-12 apply to the Arabs. He sees Ishmael as included in the blessings for Abraham's offspring in 15v4-5 and 22v16-18, parallels the angelic message to Hagar in Genesis 21 with the angelic message to Mary in Luke 2, argues for a positive interpretation of Ishmael as a 'wild ass of a man' (16v12), adds the idea that the 'prophet like Moses from among Israel's brethren' (Deut 18v18) is from their brother Ishmaelites, and concludes that the blessings coming to Ishmael are even greater than those for Isaac. All this lays a foundation for finding many other Old Testament references to Muhammad, especially in Psalms and Isaiah.[9]

Serious modern Islamic commentary on Genesis is scarce, but it does exist. The prime example is Sir Sayyed Ahmad Khan's The Mahomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible, published on his own press in Ghazeepore in 1862. The first volume comprises a lengthy introduction not only to Genesis but also to the whole Bible which argues over against 19th century European criticism that the Bible is largely reliable, and that Muslims can and should read it. The second volume is a commentary on Genesis 1-11, which is mainly concerned in presenting parallels to Genesis from Qur'anic material and other Islamic traditions. The overall effect is to establish common ground between the Bible and the Qur'an, and to break down traditional polarisations between Islamic and Christian thought.

Today, there is a small but, I think, increasing number of Muslims who, while not seeing Genesis as the pristine Word of God, recognise its usefulness in interpreting Qur'anic stories that refer to Genesis characters. On the Indian subcontinent, there is a strand of thinking associated with Aligarh, the university founded by Sir Sayyed Ahmad Khan. This sees the Bible as an important resource for the study and interpretation of the Qur'an. An important current scholar exploring such themes is Mustansir Mir, whose writing about the Qur'an often introduces comparisons with the Bible[10].

The usefulness of reading between the Bible and Qur'an is also recognised by the participants in what is known as "scriptural reasoning", a practice whereby groups of Christians, Muslims and Jews study parallel passages from their respective texts[11]. Here, reading in the context of Islam includes reading with Muslims and taking into consideration their personal reactions to the Bible, a practice that can be particularly relevant to Genesis, since it has so many qur'anic parallels. The inter-textual 'windows' explored below are of great interest when opened in this way.

1.2.2. Polemic and critique

Serious study of Genesis alongside the Qur'an indicates that there are not only significant similarities, such as those noted by Sayyed Ahmad Khan, but also, as we will see below, significant differences. Hence the majority of Muslims today see the Genesis text itself as corrupted, and there is a long history of Muslim readings of Genesis for polemical purposes. As the following examples show, the Bible may be critiqued because of perceived errors and contradictions, because of its different theology, because of the way that Christians have interpreted it, or because it expresses ideas regarded as immoral.

Example 1: Finding Contradictions and Anthropomorphisms

Much of the foundation of Islamic polemic against the Bible can be found in the writings of Ibn Hazm (994-1064)[12]. His Kitab al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa' wa al-Nihal scours Genesis for apparent contradictions, such as Sarah's being an attractive woman at the age of 90, or Abraham's marrying his sister, when such marriages were forbidden in Levitical law. He is also scathing about the many anthropomorphisms in Genesis. He takes particular exception to the story of Abraham's three visitors in Genesis 18, discussing in detail Christian Trinitarian interpretation of the passage as well as the ideas that angels could eat and that God could appear.

More recently, the systematic biblical critique of M.R. Kairanvi's, which summarises his famous debate with C.G. Pfander in 1854[13], added criticism from 19th-century biblical scholarship to the tradition of searching out contradictions and errors. This approach continues to influence current polemics relating to Genesis.

Example 2: Adam and Eve -- the fall and the gender challenge

The Genesis Adam and Eve story is regularly critiqued by Muslims for two reasons:

- Theologically, the story is the centre of the Christian doctrine of the Fall. In the Qur'anic version[14], Adam and Eve are not deliberately disobedient: rather, they are deceived by Satan into thinking that eating from the forbidden tree is right and good. God then reminds them of his prohibition, whereupon they repent and are forgiven before being sent to earth from the garden (which is in paradise). It is not the human beings but Satan who is fallen, and it is the external temptation from him rather than the internal whispering of our own hearts that is our greatest threat[15].
- Practically, Muslim writers often point out how the accounts of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 have been used to oppress women. In contrast, there is no separation of the roles of the man and the woman in the Qur'an versions. In fact, the presence of Eve is often only indicated by dual verbs. The argument is, then, that it is Christianity and not Islam that sees women as dangerous temptresses and the cause of human sin.

Example 3: Lot, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: Scandalous tales

"Is it not shocking when the Bible speaks of

- deceit and lies attributed to Abraham
- cheating and treachery to Isaac and Jacob
- incest to Lot?"[16]

The belief of many Muslims that the prophets are infallible makes the sinfulness of all these people unthinkable. It is not unusual to find Muslim polemicists insisting that attributing lies and incest to such characters as Abraham and Lot implies either slander of the prophets or that God approves such activity, and concluding that the original text of Genesis has been lost.

Criticism of such aspects of Genesis is, then, based in Islamic views of the characters involved, which are, in turn, rooted in the references to them in the Qur'an. It is but one aspect of the phenomenon noted at the beginning of this section: that Muslims tend to read the Bible through the window of Islam. A major implication of this for Christian readings of Genesis in Islamic contexts is that we need to take full consideration of Muslims' views in our attempts to see where the biblical text reflects those contexts. Otherwise, we run the danger of looking for our own perceptions of Muslims and of Islam rather than for Muslims and Islam as they actually are. We turn now to some of the qur'anic material which is so foundational to Islam.

2. INTER-TEXTUAL WINDOWS

We have noted that the Qur'an is part of the Islamic world in front of the biblical text: an obvious way of reading Genesis in the context of Islam is, then, to consider the Genesis stories alongside parallel Qur'anic stories[17]. This raises many questions about the relationship between the two texts: should we treat them as independent windows on the same stories, or as windows on different stories? Or should we treat the Qur'anic versions like the Islamic readings of Genesis explored above, as Islamic views of the Genesis text? A fruitful way into these questions is through Jewish treatments of Genesis that can be seen as "the world between the texts" of the Bible and the Qur'an.

2.1. Parallel stories

First, we consider what the Qur'an has to say about the Genesis characters[18]. This is a useful exercise in its own right, since putting the world of the Genesis text alongside the world of the Qur'anic text can be seen as developing a dialogue between those two textual worlds. This is a very fruitful way of seeing the similarities and differences between biblical and Qur'anic thinking. On the one hand, it helps us to see how the Qur'an is dealing with the biblical story. On the other hand, it can send us back to Genesis with new eyes.[19] There are many Qur'anic parallels to Genesis: here, we will consider only the Cain and Abel story, as it is short and instructive, and the Abraham story, since the idea that Islam and Christianity are both 'Abrahamic religions' is the current popular successor to the idea that they are cousins through Ishmael.

2.1.1. Example 1: Cain and Abel

The Qur'an generally refers to biblical stories rather than telling them in their own right, and in most cases stories are referred to in a number of different places, which can make reading them alongside the Genesis stories a complex activity. The Cain and Abel story is a straightforward place to start, since it is referred to only once in the Qur'an:

> [Prophet], tell them the truth about the story of Adam's two sons: each

> of them offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one and not the other. One said, 'I will kill you,' but the other said, 'God only accepts the sacrifice of those who are mindful of Him. If you raise your hand to kill me, I will not raise mine to kill you. I fear God, the Lord of all worlds, and I would rather you were burdened with my sins as well as yours and became an inhabitant of the Fire: such is the evildoers' reward.' But his soul prompted him to kill his brother: he killed him and became one of the losers. God sent a raven to scratch up the ground and show him how to cover his brother's corpse and he said, 'Woe is me! Could I not have been like this raven and covered up my brother's body?' He became remorseful. On account of [his deed], We decreed to the Children of Israel that if anyone kills a person—unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land—it is as if he kills all mankind, while if any saves a life it is as if he saves the lives of all mankind. Our messengers came to them with clear signs, but many of them continued to commit excesses in the land. (Surah 5: 27-32)[20]

We begin by asking what the Qur'an is doing with the Genesis story. The passage above indicates first that it is giving either the true version or the true interpretation of the story: as we shall see, it is quite common to find the Qur'an settling interpretative questions. Second, it is using the story as an introduction to legislation: v 32 is frequently used in Islamic discussions of murder and of other crimes which, according to classical lawyers, require the death penalty. Third, the wider context of Surah 5 indicates how the story is being used in the context of the early Muslim community in Medina. The surah is here dealing with some of the opposition which Muhammad received from the Jews: in fact, some of the commentators tell us that the specific context was a plot against the life of Muhammad[21]. The story, then, both encourages believers and warns unbelievers, and it is not surprising to find the murderer as brother being understood as picturing the Jews and the Christians, while the innocent brother pictures the Muslims.

It is evident, then, that Genesis and the Qur'an present Cain and Abel for different purposes and in different contexts. Whilst Muslim tradition names the 'sons of Adam' and commentary sees this as a paradigmatic crime, the story needs no particular context in order to fulfil its Qur'anic functions. Similarly, whilst the New Testament uses it to illustrate a call to brotherly love (1 John 3v12) and Christian tradition has used it to picture Jewish rejection of Jesus as Messiah, Genesis uses it as part of its primeval history. Without its context within human genealogy, it loses its biblical function within the account of creation, fall and redemption, it can retain its moral lessons, but it loses much of its anthropological and theological significance.

This becomes evident as we go on to consider the content of the story, and note both the similarities and differences between this passage and Genesis 4. In both Genesis and the Qur'an, the story stands as a paradigm study of human violence. Both emphasise that murder is wrong, that jealousy is wrong, and that jealousy can lead to

murder, even amongst siblings. Both stories indicate God's judgement of the murderer. However, there are different characterisations and emphases. Most obviously, while the Qur'anic story is of the two brothers, the main actors in the Genesis version are Cain and God. The Qur'an has Abel addressing his brother: The Bible has Abel saying nothing (until his blood cries from the ground), and a lengthy conversation between God and Cain.

Thus, while the stories indicate some important agreements about right, wrong, and the value of human life, they also indicate some very important differences between qur'anic and biblical worldviews. In particular, while the qur'anic story effectively divides humanity into the innocent Abel and the wicked Cain, the Genesis story will not permit such a division. It is about God's dealing with sinful Cain, in mercy as well as in judgement, and opens the way for the many two-brother-accounts that in different ways subvert the simple expectations implied by the Qur'anic version, most notably in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. Reading the two versions together, then, highlights the question that so dominates the early chapters of Genesis: "How does God deal with the emergence of wickedness within His good world?"

This is, rather than Pseudo-Methodius' method of asking how the descendants of Noah and the nations of Genesis 10 relate to current kingdoms, is a key to how Genesis 1-11 can best be used in laying the basis for considering how Islamic conquest should be viewed within a biblical worldview: the story of Cain and Abel marks the beginning of religiously based violence (it was, after all, an argument over a sacrifice), and of God's dealings with it. We will take up the power questions again in section 3.1 below.

2.1.2. Example 2: The binding of Isaac

While the Qur'an refers to Abraham in numerous places, it is notable that it shares very few of the incidents recorded in Genesis. Rather, the Qur'an focuses on Abraham's early life – his coming to monotheistic faith, his challenge to the idolatry of his father and his people, and his trial by fire by the wicked King Nimrod - and on his establishment with Ishmael of worship at the Ka'abah in Mecca[22]. The only two narratives concerning him that Qur'an and Bible have in common[23] are those of the angelic visitors, which we will discuss in the next section, and of the sacrifice of Abraham's son, which we explore here. Like Cain and Abel, this story is dealt with only once in the Qur'an:

> He (Abraham) said, 'I will go to my Lord: He is sure to guide me. Lord, grant me a righteous son,' so We gave him the good news that he would have a patient son. When the boy was old enough to work with his father, Abraham said, 'My son, I have seen myself sacrificing you in a dream. What do you think?' He said, '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 the side of his face, We called out to him, 'Abraham, you have fulfilled the dream.' This is how We reward those who do good—it was a test to prove [their true characters]—We ransomed his son with a momentous sacrifice, and We let him be praised by succeeding generations: 'Peace be upon Abraham!' This is how We

> reward those who do good: truly he was one of Our faithful servants. (Surah 37:99-111)

This passage is situated in Surah 37, which sets out the eternal consequences of obeying and disobeying God. It is illustrated by a series of stories of prophets on whom the sura calls down God's blessings. Two incidents in the Abraham story are chosen -- the first is that of his challenging his father's and his people's belief in idols, with a reference to his consequent trial by fire. The second is this brief account of the sacrifice of his son.

The Bible reader will note immediately that the Qur'anic version is much shorter than the account in Genesis 22, and that Genesis' long build-up to the birth of Isaac is summarised in just one verse. The Qur'an has none of the details of God's speaking to Abraham, replacing them with Abraham's telling his son that he had a dream. Where Genesis leaves us wondering what Isaac thought of it all, the Qur'an tells of his willing cooperation. Genesis also leaves us guessing the son's age: the Qur'an informs us of it. In short, the Qur'an's brief account adds details that are missing from Genesis.

What, then, is the Qur'an doing with the story? It is answering some of the questions that the Genesis reader might ask, and in doing so using it to present Abraham and his son as examples of obedience. Indeed, it is this obedience that is the focus of the yearly commemoration of this sacrifice in 'Id Al-Adhar during the Hajj. In the context of this surah, which is encouraging obedience to God and indicating why the prophets were blessed, the story is presented as a test for Abraham, and his passing the test as the basis for the blessing that he and his offspring received from God.

What might this context do to our reading of Genesis 22? I want to suggest three things:

First, it can alert us to the importance of the story. In our contemporary world, the binding of Isaac is often seen as problematic. 'Is God being depicted as an abusive father?', people ask. The fact that it is one of only a very few of the incidents in Abraham's life that are actually common to Genesis and the Qur'an can send us back to Genesis asking why this particular story was chosen and why it is so important within Genesis. It can be seen as the climax of the Abraham story, which echoes and fulfils Genesis 12[24].

Second, while Christian readers are likely to focus on God's merciful provision of the sacrifice, the Qur'anic emphasis can remind us of the balancing notion of testing and of the development of full submission to God. While the New Testament focuses on the unconditional blessings promised to Abraham and received by his faith, Genesis 22v15-18 adds the balancing notion that those blessings were confirmed because of his obedience.

Third, which son was it? The Qur'anic version does not name the son, and it is well known that Muslims argue that this was Ishmael. It is interesting here that Jewish discussion[25] suggests that Abraham rather hoped that it would be Ishmael -- that verse 2 represents the discussion in which Abraham successively says, "I have two sons. They are both the only son of their mothers. I love them both." God finally makes it

explicit, "Isaac". In the Qur'anic version, it doesn't really matter which son it was, since the focus is the exemplary obedience, but in Islamic thinking it does matter, as it establishes a link with Ishmael and therefore with the Arabs and the Hajj. In Genesis, it also matters, because this story is not only about Abraham's obedience but also about the establishment of Israel. Indeed, some Jewish commentators see this story as crucial not only in the physical succession of the patriarchs but also in establishing the whole nature of Israel as God's holy people.[26]

In reading not only Genesis but also the rest of the Bible in the context of Islam, we cannot underestimate the importance of a right understanding of Israel, not least because her very existence is so contentious today. In biblical thinking, Israel is not incidental but fundamental to God's dealings with the world. It was important that God chose not only the father of Israel but also her mother.

2. 2 Jewish bridges

This reading of parallel texts raises the obvious questions of the origins of the Qur'anic material, and of how the Qur'an is using Genesis. It is well known that the Qur'an seldom actually quotes the Bible, and often reflects midrash[27]. This can be seen as evidence of the orality of Muhammad's reception of biblical material, a view which is, of course, unacceptable to most Muslims. Rather than entering this discussion, I want to handle reference to midrashic material as implying that the Qur'an is entering into Jewish -- and, perhaps, Christian -- discussion of a text. We might describe the Jewish bridges as "the world between the texts" of Genesis and the Qur'an.

2.2.1. Qur'anic solutions to Genesis/ Jewish questions

There are places where the Qur'anic choice of Jewish material can be seen as solving a problem that Jews see in the text, or even as taking sides in a Jewish-Christian argument. We return here to our two examples of Cain and Abel and Abraham.

Cain and Abel

One of the characteristics of rabbinic discussion is to ask how much of the Mosaic Law was known before the times of Moses, and to read back into Genesis questions concerning that law. The midrash[28] raises two questions of legal interest that the Qur'an can be seen as answering.

First, how did Abel's body get buried?

The early Genesis Rabbah reflects on why the word translated 'blood' in Gen 4v10 is plural. One suggestion is that the blood was spattered across the ground, and that it was crying out because the body had not been buried. (XXII: 9). The later Midrash Tanchuma picks up the question, and very probably represents the discussion that was going on at the time of Muhammad[29].

Two main options are offered: first, that Cain dug a hole and buried him, perhaps after seeing clean animals burying the corpse of a dead animal; and, second, that Adam and Eve buried him after seeing a raven scratch the ground and bury a dead raven. Such an interpretation offers an origin for laws about the burial of bodies. The qur'anic solution is that Cain did the burying, and that God showed him how to do it through a raven (Surah 5:31).

Second, is this murder or manslaughter?

The presenting problem in the text is that Cain is not given the death sentence that would be appropriate for murder, but only a sentence of exile, that would be more appropriate for manslaughter. Again, Genesis Rabbah introduces the question: "Cain's judgement shall not be as the judgement of other murderers. Cain slew, but had none from whom to learn (the enormity of his crime), but henceforth, all who slay shall be slain." (XXII: 12). That is, this very first murder can be handled as manslaughter because there was no precedent by which Cain could have known exactly what he was doing. Indeed, the midrash discusses his difficulty in discovering a way of killing his brother when he knew so little about death: had he, perhaps, watched his father killing an animal for food? (XXII: 8). The later Midrash Tanchuma asks whether he can have known that his actions would result in his brother's death.

The qur'anic solution to this question is quite simple: Cain states his deliberate intention of killing his brother, so this is murder. The Qur'an follows the story with a direct citation of the Midrash Tanchuma's conclusion to its discussion: "if anyone kills a person—unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land—it is as if he kills all mankind, while if any saves a life it is as if he saves the lives of all mankind."[30]

Abraham

The reader might wonder about the origins of the stories of Abraham's early life recounted in Surah 37 and mentioned above. Similar stories are told in the Midrash on Genesis 11v28, since the rabbis both asked how Abraham came to an understanding of the one God and why it is mentioned that his brother died before his father in 'Ur' which can mean, in Hebrew, 'a fire'. It appears to be these Jewish interpretations to which the Qur'an refers not only in Surah 37, but frequently elsewhere.[31]

For the purposes of this paper, I want to focus not on these stories but on the Qur'anic treatment of the binding of Isaac explored above.[32] We might first ask why this particular story is included in the Qur'an as one of only two incidents in Abraham's life that are clearly common to the Qur'an and Genesis. The answer might be in its importance in Jewish thought, and thus is the thought of the Jews with whom Muhammad was interacting. We have already noted that it is seen as foundational to the very existence of Israel; and Genesis 22 is the only passage of Genesis that is included in regular morning prayers. It is also one of the readings set for *Rosh Hashanah* -- New Year -- the significance of the reading being seen in the following prayer:

> "Remember unto us, O Lord our God, the covenant and the loving-kindness and the oath which Thou swore unto Abraham our father on Mount Moriah; and consider the binding with which Abraham our father bound his son Isaac on the altar, how he suppressed his compassion in order to perform Thy will with a perfect heart. So may Thy compassion overbear Thine anger against us; in Thy great goodness may Thy great wrath turn aside from Thy people, Thy city, and Thine inheritance."[33]

It is not difficult to see the parallels here with the Islamic commemoration of Abraham's sacrifice during the annual *hajj.* We might speculate on how observation of Jewish prayers and rituals might have fed into the Qur'anic and subsequent Islamic treatments of the story. However, for our reading of Genesis, it is more interesting to note how this prayer links the covenant blessings with Abraham's obedience, as does the Qur'an. If we then turn to *Genesis Rabbah*, we find that the obedience of Isaac, the nature of the incident as a test, and the obedience as the source of blessing are all concerns of the rabbis. The discussion of the chapter starts with reflection on the relationship between Isaac and Ishmael: a conversation is presented that is essentially a competition about who is most dedicated to God, the crux being that Isaac is willing to lay down life if God requires it[34]. The implication is that Isaac will be the one who receives the greater blessing.

In both of the above examples, we see that the Qur'an has similar concerns to the rabbis, not least in its interest in legal questions and in the identity of the believing community. Christians reading Genesis from a New Testament perspective tend to focus on different issues, such as the nature of acceptable sacrifice and God's gracious dealings with sinners; but the rabbinic and qur'anic questions are also valid questions to bring to the Genesis text. The inter-textual windows can, then, alert Christian readers to neglected aspects of the text, to the different ways in which they can be interpreted, and to the ways in which later writings – whether Midrash/Talmud, New Testament or Qur'an - affect current readings.

3. CONTEXTUAL WINDOWS

We now turn from the inter-textual "windows" to some of the more obvious considerations in any contextual reading of Scripture. First, how does the culture of the particular context relate to those in and behind the text? Second, what questions does the world in front of the text raise for our Bible reading, and how should we look for answers to those questions?

3.1. Cultural windows

It is tempting in any given context to see aspects of the context directly reflected in the world of Scripture. The key question is how one might correctly identify parallels between the world of the text and the world in front of the text. I want to suggest here that there is an important prior step: identifying parallels between the world in front of the text in the world behind the text. If we can see how the world of the text is dealing with a particular aspect of the world behind the text, that will help us to see how it might speak into a parallel in our own world. For example, it is only as we reflect on how Genesis 1-2 deals with the creation stories of the time that we can determine how it relates to the various accounts of the origins of the world and humankind of our day. At the same time, identification of the right parallels can illuminate what is going on in the world of the text not only at a cognitive but also at an affective level.

Islamic contexts can be particularly rich here, since there are aspects of Islamic cultures that are much closer to the world behind the Genesis text than are Western cultures.[35] Obvious examples include family structures

and attitudes to honour. These are relevant to most of the Genesis narratives: we will explore briefly just a few examples.

3.1.1. Jacob's family

Muslims are often better able to identify with the dynamics of this polygamous family than are westerners. There is, of course, vast variation amongst Muslim families, and it is notoriously difficult to distinguish between cultural and religious practices. However, it is probably fair to say that almost every aspect of Genesis 27-32 that seems strange to westerners echoes a current practice somewhere in the Muslim world:

- Seeking a spouse amongst cousins in the parents' home area is common amongst Indian sub-continental Muslims in the UK.
- Ensuring that the elder sister is married before the younger is normal in many Muslim societies.
- The traditional practice of the bride and groom only glimpsing one another in a mirror during the wedding ceremony (and, perhaps, never having seen one another previously) can still be found.
- Polygamy may be decreasing, but it is still normal and well within the stipulations of Islamic law.
- Concubinage is also permissible within classical Islamic law, so Muslims can agree that the children of Zilpah and Bilhah, (as of Hagar) were legitimate.

One must beware of making too close an equation between ancient near eastern and modern Muslim cultures, but these various similarities can make reading Genesis with Muslims very fruitful. Muslim women can be particularly moved by the first reference to God in these chapters - God saw that Leah was unloved, and opened her womb (29v31).

3.1.2. Patriarchy and honour

Traditional Islamic societies are, like many other traditional societies, patriarchal. They also have a strong emphasis on honour – of the individual, of the community, of Islam and of the family. In the case of the latter, a key way of retaining honour is ensuring the sexual purity of female family members. The worlds of and behind Genesis share these aspects of culture, and the combination of patriarchy, honour and the importance of female chastity are keys to the understanding of several of the Genesis stories that can seem strange to the Western reader:

- Why did the sons of Jacob react so violently to the rape of their sister, Dinah (Genesis 34)? They were not only furious about the dishonouring of their sister: they were also defending their own honour and the honour of their father and of their family.
- How do we understand the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38)? Genesis makes a contrast between the Canaanite woman and the Jewish man, so going against the prevailing patriarchy as well as against any idea of Jewish superiority. In the first half of the chapter, while Judah's sons are wicked, Tamar is innocent, yet Judah dishonours her by sending her back to her father's house and then refusing to marry her to his third son. Then, while Judah's extra-marital sexual activity is seen by his society as normal, Tamar's is seen by that same society as so dishonouring of Judah's family that, even though she has been sent away from that family to her

father's house, she is sentenced to death. This ill-treated woman then regains her honour by challenging Judah's honour, and, where God had executed a death sentence on her wicked husbands, He establishes her position not only in the family but also in sacred history by giving her not one but two sons.
- In chapter 39, Genesis moves to contrasting case in the honour dynamics between Joseph and Potiphar's family. It reverses again the power balance between Jew and non-Jew and between male and female, and the initially powerless person who is dishonoured by the powerful person again turns out to be the one who will ensure the continuity of God's people.

In each of the above cases, observation of an Islamic culture can help the reader to see the implications of the Genesis stories. On the one hand, Genesis recognises these aspects of culture as part of the human norm: on the other hand, it also recognises how culture can be abused and subverts cultural expectations, such as patriarchal power and emphasis on female rather than male chastity. As noted in the Cain and Abel story, it will not divide the world into 'good' and 'bad' categories: it lets us know that a woman can be the powerful abuser as well as the weak victim, and that both Jews and non-Jews can be righteous or sinful.

3.2. Questions raised by Islamic contexts

How should we regard the world of Islam from a biblical perspective? We come at last to the more immediate questions raised by the "world in front of the text" in Islamic contexts. As observed in section 1.1 above, Christians have been taking such questions to the Bible since the rise of Islam, but sometimes with results that appal the 21st century reader. It is the thesis of this paper that one way of avoiding wrong readings is to take into account the various 'windows' so far explored, so that we can better understand both Muslims and ourselves through our studies of the world of Islam, the world behind the biblical text, the world of the biblical text and our mutual histories.

One of the most important things that emerge through such study is that the underlying questions are not only about our texts, but about how we interpret them and put them into practice. There is huge variety here, in the range of Jewish as well as Christian biblical interpretation as well as in Muslim qur'anic interpretation. Further, both historical and cultural considerations indicate that difficulties encountered are at least as much due to our common humanity as to our religious differences. I want to suggest that this is the most fruitful hermeneutic key to a faithful reading of Genesis in the context of Islam: Genesis is about the nature of human beings, and about God's interaction with His chosen sinners: if we treat our questions about Islam as questions about fellow human beings, we can find pointers in Genesis for the whole of our Bible reading in this context.

3.2.1. Land, people and power[36]

Islam, as Mahmoud Ayoub points out, is not a religion of violence but a religion of power[37]. It is because Islam has, from the beginning, been linked with political rule that it has a great deal to say about violence, and has

a place for its use. It is also because of this political link that Islam raises unique social and political tensions for non-Muslims. Just as the earliest Christian writings about Islam indicate more concern about its politics than its theology, so post '9.11' Christians are at least as likely to be asking about terrorism, economics and politics as they are about how to share their faith with Muslims.

The world behind the Genesis text was also a world in which religions were linked with political power. Typically, peoples had a variety of gods, at least one of which was a major deity linked to their particular ethnic group and having a home (temple) in their territory. The king's wars were seen as the god's wars, and the king was often the god's representative. Thus there was a close link between religion and people, power and territory. That is, for the Genesis writer, links between religion and power were the normal state of the world.

We can then see that Genesis challenges this normality from beginning to end. The most obvious analysis is in the Babel narrative, which expresses the danger that such links are to humanity and God's determination to limit their effects. However, the ground-work is done in Genesis 1-10: [38]

- The creation narratives undermine the whole idea of deities giving power to particular peoples by establishing the fact that there is only one God who is the god of all nations.
- That God gives people a place to live in, and delegates power to them.
- But they abuse their power: they want to be in control, and take even the forbidden fruit of the land for themselves.
- The Cain and Abel story is not only about murder following the fall but also about violence following a religious disagreement; and it results in Cain's exile from his homeland.
- The Noah story is about God's response to violence and corruption, specifically mentioning abuse of power. That response is essentially to remove and then restore the land.
- The Table of Nations (Genesis 10) sets out the providential ordering of peoples and territories under God.

In sum, Genesis 1-11 paints a picture of a world in which people by their very nature have power and need land, but in which the desire for power and land has gone wrong.

The patriarchal narratives that comprise the remainder of Genesis then begin with God's calling of Abraham from a land of power (probably the exact place depicted in the Babel story) towards a land that will not be owned for several centuries, and finish with his descendants taking refuge in a land in which they will become slaves. Interestingly, Genesis has very little to say about the religions of the peoples surrounding the patriarchs[39], but it has a great deal about how the patriarchs interacted with rulers. Particularly interesting studies are Abraham's relationships with the various kings, and Joseph's rise to and use of power.

Genesis, then, offers a basis for the study of the interactions between religion, worldly power and the one true God in the rest of the Bible. The questions about how Islamic rule might re-

late to the various kingdoms pictured in biblical apocalyptic will continue to be asked, but understanding the power dynamics between human beings in the present is arguably more urgent than discerning the details of what God will do in the future. The above reading of Genesis is, I suggest, a fruitful way into the power questions raised by Islam, and might prevent 21st century Christians from making some of the more obvious mistakes of our ancestors.

3.2.2. Joseph: reconciliation, forgiveness, blessing

Genesis might help us to understand some of the current tensions between Muslims and Christians and Jews and the West from a biblical perspective, but how should we then respond to them? It is at least arguable that the most important Christian contribution must have to do with reconciliation and therefore with forgiveness[40]. Here again, Genesis, with its accounts of human division and reconciliation, offers resources, particularly in the story of Joseph. Genesis' story of the wrongs done to him by both his family, his employer and his fellow prisoner and of the gracious way in which God led him to forgiveness and to seeing God's good hand in everything is shared by the Qur'an (Surah 12), which makes it all the more relevant[41].

In recent times in Britain, Kenneth Cragg has written a book exploring the potential of the biblical and Qur'anic Joseph stories in the context of Middle Eastern tensions[42]. In a very different context, a Muslim chaplain to one of the British prisons received a national award for his use of the stories of Joseph in his work[43]. He finds that it helps non-Muslim as well as Muslim prisoners to think through their situation and find new hope.

Might the agreement that Muslims and Christians are cousins through Isaac and Ishmael assist reconciliation where there has been a history of mistrust and injustice? And is the idea that we are cousins valid? The questions about how far the Arabs and the Muslims can be identified as the descendents of Ishmael, about what the blessings to Ishmael mean and about how they relate to the blessings to Isaac, will continue to be asked. Joseph found ways to reconciliation both with the brothers who sold him into slavery and with the foreign regime that imprisoned him unjustly. In both Genesis and the Qur'an, the focus is on God's sovereignty throughout, and Genesis emphasises that, through all the vicissitudes that befell him, God was making Joseph a blessing both to his family and to the Egyptians – and to all the lands about[44].

Perhaps the key to reconciliation is not the question of who inherits Ishmael's blessings, but of God's concern to use His people to bless all other peoples. This concern of God, expressed in 12v1-3, is one of the keys to any reading of Genesis, not least to Paul's reading of it in Galatians 3. While Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were sometimes a blessing to others and sometimes not, Joseph shows us how God carries out His purposes of blessing despite the less noble purposes of His people. How, then, can Christians be willing channels of God's blessing to Muslims? Our final section views a possible way forward through our 'windows on Genesis'.

4. BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER: HOSPITALITY

Perhaps the most urgent question arising in the world in front of the text is how better relationships between Christians and Muslims can be achieved. One attempt at developing such relationships is the movement to view Christianity and Islam, together with Judaism, as 'Abrahamic faiths': that is, establishing common ground in a figure who is seen as the father of all three faiths, but who predates Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. However, this notion is not without its difficulties, not least that Abraham is very differently regarded in the different faiths[45]. As already noted, while the Qur'an has much on Abraham, it focuses on events before his Genesis 12v1-3 call that are not in the Bible, and on his links with Mecca, that are also not in the Bible. Scripturally, there is more disagreement than agreement on Abraham.

I want to close this paper by suggesting that the two Abrahamic incidents that Genesis and the Qur'an do share can offer resources for relationship without obscuring difference. The story of the sacrifice of the son explored above indicates a theological basis: agreement about the importance of obedience to the one creator God, and of offering ourselves and what is most precious to us to Him. From these points of agreement, we can discuss our different ideas about what that God is like, what He requires of us, how He has acted in His world, and how we can relate to Him.

The other common story is that of Abraham's three visitors recorded in Genesis 18 and referred to in Surahs 11, 15 and 51. The story begins:

> To Abraham Our messengers brought good news. They said, 'Peace.' He answered, 'Peace,' and without delay he brought in a roasted calf. When he saw that their hands did not reach towards the meal, he found this strange and became afraid of them. (Surah 11: 69-70)
>
> Tell them too about Abraham's guests: when they came to him and said, 'Peace,' he said, 'We are afraid of you.' (Surah 15: 51-2)
>
> [Muhammad], have you heard the story of the honoured guests of Abraham? They went in to see him and said, 'Peace.' 'Peace,' he said, [adding to himself] 'These people are strangers.' He turned quickly to his household, brought out a fat calf, and placed it before them. 'Will you not eat?' he said, beginning to be afraid of them, but they said, 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him good news of a son who would be gifted with knowledge. (Surah 51: 24-28)

The qur'anic references all focus on the story as a prelude to the visit to Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, with only brief mentions of the announcement of Isaac's birth and Abraham's discussion with God. Genesis has very different emphases: it shares the qur'anic concerns about judgement, but focuses on the birth of Isaac and presents Abraham's discussion as bold debate. Thus this story, too, opens up windows for theological discussion. However, here, I want to look at another dimension: at the hospitality depicted in the opening scene of the story. I propose this idea of hospitality as a key response to the question of relationship raised

in the 'world in front of the text'. We shall now look at the text of Genesis 18v1-8 through our other 'windows', in reverse order:

Cultural windows:
Hospitality is one of the virtues required of Muslims. A book of children's stories[46] tells of how a stranger visited the Medina, and Muhammad asked the believers who would entertain him. Eventually, one poor man volunteered. His wife cooked and called the two men in to dine in a darkened room. The visitor ate and left, never realising that there was no food on his hosts' plates. They had only pretended to eat, and they and their children had gone hungry. Muhammad commended this man and affirmed that he would get special blessing from God.

Offering appropriate hospitality and responding to Muslim hospitality can be difficult concepts for westerners. In particular, where Westerners honour people by inviting them to their homes, non-western cultures place more emphasis on the honour given to the host by the guest's visit. It is the host's responsibility to receive and feed the guest, and the guest further honours the host by accepting his or her food. The biblical treatment of hospitality, not least in Genesis, is much closer to non-western and to most Muslim cultures. There are many relevant stories, including the patriarch's sojourns amongst foreigners, but probably the most important is this account of hospitality offered to the angelic strangers by Abraham.

Inter-textual windows:
Who were the visitors? Genesis Rabbah begins its discussion of Genesis 18 by asking how God 'appeared' to Abraham, and asserts that this was an appearance of the Shakinah[47]. There is no question but that this is the presence of God: the discussion is about why it happened and what it meant. Later discussion[48] asks more technical questions, and how the presence of God relates to the Angels. Is this a vision, followed by the visit of the angels, followed by another vision or other non-corporeal revelation? Maybe even the angels are just a vision! Is it simply that God is present everywhere, and that, after being circumcised, Abraham was able to perceive Him in a new way? Is there some inexplicable mystery here? But Genesis Rabbah[49] has no problem with the idea that Abraham saw both the shekinah and three angels, and names the angels as Michael, Raphael and Gabriel.

Angels eating? Genesis Rabbah recognises the problem of incorporeal angels eating, and suggests that the angels told Abraham that they would not eat or drink, but that they permitted him to prepare food in anticipation of the son to be born to him and pretended to eat in order to honour his hospitality by permitting him to prepare food for them. Later discussion[50] asks two further questions:

- Why are they sometimes referred to in the plural and sometimes in the singular (v3, 10, 19v21-2)? Did Abraham address one as the leader of the three? Was it that only one of them spoke to Abraham?
- How could angels eat (v8)? Did they only appear to be eating so that Abraham would not be disappointed in his hospitality, was there an invisible fire from heaven that consumed the food, or was it not the angels but the members of Abraham's family that ate the food?

In sum, Genesis Rabbah explores the theological questions raised by this event, but accepts and retains its ambiguities. It is not surprising in view of our previous discussions that the Qur'an's very brief account does little but answer the Jewish questions[51]. There is no question of God's appearing or of angels eating. The mystery is dissolved. Since this incident has often been seen by Christians as a visitation from God that points towards the incarnation, it can be a useful topic for theological discussion.

However, Genesis 18 is also the key chapter on hospitality in Jewish thinking. According to Genesis Rabbah (XLVII: 10, XLVIII: 9), Abraham has always practised the virtue of hospitality, but, after his circumcision, he wonders whether anyone will come to visit him again. God Himself visits, with His angels, and Abraham and Sarah immediately demonstrate exemplary hospitality. Lot is also exemplary in his protection of his visitors even at the cost of his daughters' honour. The Qur'an retains this dimension of the story.[52]

Not only are Abraham and his family exemplary hosts: the visitors are also exemplary guests. 'Why', ask the rabbis, 'is it a good deed to visit the sick?' The answer is that God visited Abraham when he was recovering from his circumcision. He even finds a way for the angels to eat in order to honour His hosts by eating their food. This dimension is missing from the qur'anic account. The angels do not eat, and this seems to be what causes Abraham's fear: visitors who do not eat one's food are likely to be hostile, and his fear does not subside until the angels reassure him of their errand (11:70, 15:53, 51: 28).

Muslims reading Genesis:

In view of the theological differences mentioned above, it is not surprising that Islamic readings of Genesis 18 have tended to be very critical, both of the implied anthropomorphisms in the text and of Christian Trinitarian interpretations of the visitors[53]. However, this window of hospitality suggests a change of metaphor: having explored how the Islamic context opens windows both into and out of the Genesis text, we might ask whether Genesis can offer a welcoming door through which Muslims can discover the world of the Bible, and a hospitable place in which Muslims and Christians can study together.

- Many of the characters will be familiar to Muslims through their knowledge of the Qur'an and the stories of the prophets. Many are interested in learning more about these characters, and may find the Genesis accounts helpful augmentations of what they already know.
- The Genesis stories explore many of the relational dynamics that are common to all humankind. They do so in a context that reflects a number of aspects of Muslim cultures. They can therefore be an excellent place in which Muslims and Christians can together explore many aspects of the human condition.
- Many of the relationships explored in Genesis reflect fallen human nature: they deal with issues that cause much pain. They can therefore help Christians and Muslims to open their hearts to each other.
- Genesis sets the scene for a biblical history, with its account of creation and fall and of the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants. It can therefore offer a basis on which the Muslim reader who is new to the Bible can begin to make sense of the whole of

the biblical story. Genesis not only provides a familiar context for Muslims, but also raises the questions to which Jesus and his cross will be the biblical answer.

In summary, the book of Genesis offers rich resources for discussions between Muslims and Christians, for developing mutual understanding, and for introducing Muslims to the biblical Gospel of Jesus the Messiah. Further, reading it in the context of Islam introduces Christian readers to dimensions of Jewish and Muslim thought that can take them back to the Genesis text with new questions and fresh understandings that can help them to appreciate the riches of this amazing part of Scripture.

Christians reading Genesis again:
Christian commentary has missed neither Abraham's hospitality nor his guests' gracious acceptance of it[54]: neither has it forgotten the New Testament call to emulate him (Hebrews 13v2). A step-by-step re-reading of this in Islamic context might offer a model for the improvement of relationship so desired in contemporary world:

- Abraham was, according to the Jewish commentary, eagerly looking out for guests.
- He looked up and noticed the men.
- He ran to meet them: his every action is in eager haste.
- He bowed himself in front of them, and offered service to them.
- He recognised their visit as an honour to himself.
- He met every need that he could.
- His whole household got involved in welcoming the guests.
- He gave them the best that he had, and in great abundance.

Can Christians be equally eager and watchful in relation to Muslims? Can we be equally attentive, equally ready to acknowledge, honour and serve them? Can we welcome them into our homes and communities, and share with them what we have?

Christian interpretation has also celebrated the idea of the visitors not only as angelic beings but also as the very presence of God[55]. This, together with the Jewish idea of the Shekinah as an exemplary visitor to the sick, suggests that we might also read this passage as describing God as a paradigm guest. Indeed, we can describe God in Christ as the visitor to His world; and the above reflections on culture can help the Western reader to understand how honouring to humanity is this visit.

Jesus as visitor of the spiritually as well as the physically sick, who accepts their hospitality and enables them to serve Him, is a recurring theme in the New Testament. For example, Mark and Luke introduce His healing ministry with his visit to the home of a sick woman, whom He heals so that she can offer Him hospitality[56]. For example, he visits Zaccheus, the Samaritan woman, Mary and Martha and Lazarus, and received as well as visited many 'tax collectors and sinners' who He Himself describes as sick and in need of a physician[57]. The well known offer of Jesus to 'come in and eat' with any who open the door to His knock is addressed to people who are 'wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked', even though they do not recognise it (Rev 3v15-20).

Being a good guest is, too, at the heart of Jesus' missiological directions to

His disciples (Matt 10v11-15, Luke 5v5-12): they are to go out in need of hospitality, to seek out willing hosts, to go into their houses, to give them the greeting of peace later picked up by Islam, to stay, to eat and to heal the sick. That is to be the context for their Gospel proclamation. Is it too much to suggest that Genesis, with its qur'anic parallels, its explorations of the human condition and its similarities to Islamic cultures, offers both an incentive and an ideal locus for Christians to make themselves welcome guests amongst Muslims as emissaries of the Divine Visitor?

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ENDNOTES

[1] I have explored elsewhere the importance of taking into account the abovementioned three "worlds" (of, behind, and in front of the text) in interpreting the Bible in the context of other faiths in general. See The Bible and Other Faiths, IVP, 2005.

[2] For an overview of these, see R. Hoyland, Seeing Islam as others saw it: a survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam, New Jersey: The Darwin Press, 1997.

[3] English translation available in P.J. Alexander, The Byzantine apocalyptic tradition, University of California Press,1985, pp36-51.

[4] In De Haeresibus, translated by J.W. Voorhis in N.A, Newman (ed), The Early Muslim-Christian Dialogue: a collection of documents from the first three Islamic centuries, Pennsylvania: Interdisciplinary Biblical research Institute, 1993, pp139-44.

[5] See also my Crusade sermons, Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther: what does it mean to 'take up the cross' in the context of Islam? Crowther Centre Monograph No. 14, Oxford: Church Mission Society, 2010.

[6] C. Adang, Muslim writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: from Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm, E.J.Brill, 1996, chapter 4, explores the development of Muslim uses of the Bible.

[7] Passages used include Gen 15v4-5, 16v6-12, 17v20 and 21v13-18. See C. Adang, op.cit., p264.

[8] The Book of Religion and Empire, translated and edited by A. Mingana, in N.A. Newman (ed), The early Christian-Muslim dialogue: a collection of documents from the first three Islamic centuries, Interdisciplinary Biblical Re-

search Institute, 1993, p 547-684.

[9] He sees Muhammad wherever the root hmd is used in the Syriac translation of the Old Testament. Today, some Muslims do the same where the root hmd appears in Hebrew. Particularly popular is Song of Solomon 5v16, where the word usually translated 'altogether lovely' is mehmedim.

[10] For example, M. Mir, 'Dialogue in the Qur'an', in Religion and Literature, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1992, pp. 1-22, 'The Qur'anic story of Joseph: plot, themes and characters', in The Muslim World, Vol 76, No 1, 1984, pp1-15. See also his 2009 lecture on " Reading the Qur'an with the Bible in mind", which can be obtained via http://www.cmcsoxford.org.uk/index.php?pageid=87.

[11] See www.scripturalreasoning.org, www.scripturalreasoning.org.uk. http://www.scripturalreasoning.org.uk/abraham_ishmael_and_isaac.pdf is a relevant set of texts used.

[12] See Ghulam Haider Aasi, Muslim Understanding Of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Hazm's Kitab al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa' wa al-Nihal (Adam Publishers, 2004), pp. 92-114 for extracts of Ibn Hazm's major criticisms of the Pentateuch. His arguments are summarised in J.W. Sweetman, Islam and Christian theology, Part 2, vol. I, London: Lutterworth Press, 1955, pp. 178-262.

[13] Translated as Izhar-ul-Haq, The Truth Revealed, tr. M.W. Raazi, London: TaHa, 1989. For the relevant critique on-line, see http://www.islam4all.com/present.htm, http://www.islam4all.com/contradictions1-32.htm, http://www.islam4all.com/errors1-35.htm.

[14] The main Qur'anic accounts are in Surah 2: 30-39 and Surah 7: 11-25.

[15] But note the role of the 'soul' or 'self' (nafs) in the qur'anic Cain and Abel story below. In some Islamic thinking, the nafs is seen as an inner pull towards the non-spiritual, somewhat akin to the Jewish concept of the 'evil inclination'.

[16] A.M.R. Muhajir, Lessons from the stories of the Qur'an, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1965, front cover.

[17] See, for example, J. Kaltner, Ishmael instructs Isaac: an introduction to the Qur'an for Bible readers, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999 and Enquiring of Joseph: getting to know a biblical character through the Qur'an, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2003; J.C. Reeves (ed), Bible and Qur'an: essays in scriptural intertextuality, Leiden: The Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.

[18] Finding out what the Qur'an says is no simpler than finding out what the Bible says: whose reading of the Qur'an will we use? Here, I offer some of my own readings. It is also of great value to focus on the variety of Muslim readings of the text, but there is not space for that in this short paper.

[19] See my 'Qur'anic challenges for Genesis', in Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Vol 75, 1997, pp3-19.

[20] Qur'anic quotations are from M.A.S, Abdel Haleem's The Qur'an: a new translation, Oxford University Press, 2004.

[21] This is held to be the referent of v11 of the surah.

[22] For Abraham's early life, see 2:258-60, 6:74-83, 19:41-50, 21:51-71, 26:70-82, 29:16-25, 60:4-6. For worship at the Ka'abah with Ishmael, see 2:125-32, 3: 96-7.

[23] There are only brief allusions to other aspects of the story, such as his call to leave Ur for Canaan, and the cutting of the covenant. However, the Qur'an also tells the story of Lot as a prophet

to Sodom in some detail in various places (7:80-84, 11:77-83, 15:57-77, 21: 74-5, 26:160-75, 27:54-8, 29:26-35, 37: 133-8, 51:31-7, 54:33-9). Every reference to the angelic visitation of Genesis 18 is told as an introduction to their visit to Lot and the judgement of Sodom and Gommorah.

[24] A helpful analysis of the whole Abraham story and this incident's place in it can be found in P.Borgman, Genesis: the story we haven't heard, IVP, 2001.

[25] Genesis Rabbah, LV: 7.

[26] For a range of Jewish comment, see N. Scherman and M. Zlotowitz, Bereishit: Genesis, a new translation with a commentary anthologised from Talmudic, midrashic and rabbinic sources, vol 1a, Mesorah Publications, 1986, p 780 ff, which begins, 'This section constitutes the very reason for Israel's existence in God's eyes.'.

[27] A.I.Katsch, Judaism in Islam: Biblical and Talmudic backgrounds of the Qur'an and its commentaries, New York: Bloch, 1956 traces Jewish parallels to material in the first two surahs of the Qur'an.

[28] The main source midrash used below is the ancient Genesis Rabbah, which certainly predates Islam. References are to translation by H. Freedman, Midrash Rabbah, The Soncino Press, 3rd ed, 1983, vols 1 and 2.

[29] For a summary of Jewish discussions, see Scherman and Zlotowitz, op.cit., p149.

[30] Tanchuma B.10, cf Surah 5: 32. Tanchuma is here linking the legal statement "if anyone kills a person—unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land—it is as if he kills all mankind, while if any saves a life it is as if he saves the lives of all mankind." of the much earlier Mishnah (Sanhedrin 4:5) with the Cain and Abel story.

[31] See N 22 above.

[32] This passage is becoming a popular place in which to explore the treatments of Abraham by the 'Abrahamic religions'. See, for example, Firestone, R., 'Merit, mimesis and Martyrdom: aspects of Shi'ite meta-historical exegesis on Abraham's sacrifice in the light of Jewish, Christian and Sunni Muslim tradition', Journal of the American Academy of Religion, vol 66 no 1, 1998, pp93-116, and Sherwood, Y., 'Binding-Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the "Sacrifice" of Abraham's Beloved Son', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 72, No. 4, 2004, pp 821-861.

[33] (http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Torah/Genesis/The_Binding_of_Isaac.shtml).

[34] *Genesis Rabbah* chapters 16 & 17.

[35] This observation is not limited to Islamic cultures: many of the aspects of culture discussed below can also be found elsewhere in the non-Western world. There are also important questions about the relationship between Islam and culture, which are beyond the scope of this paper.

[36] See also my The Bible and Other Faiths, IVP, 2003, passim.

[37] Islam: Faith and History, Oxford: One World, 2004, p228.

[38] See also my 'Towards a biblical framework for Christian discipleship in a plural world', in H. Boulter (ed), Pursuing the Friendship of Strangers, Oxford Diocesan Committee for Interfaith Concerns, 2009, pp22-31, for a discussion of Genesis 1-11's analysis of the religious nature of human beings.

[39] See my The Bible and Other Faiths, chapter 5.

[40] M. Volf, Exclusion and Embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness and reconciliation. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, argues in this context of the aftermath of the genocides in former Yugoslavia.

[41] For a comparative study of the biblical and qur'anic Joseph stories, see Kaltner, Inquiring of Joseph: getting to know a biblical character through the Qur'an. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2003.

[42] The Iron in the Soul: Joseph and the Undoing of Violence, London: Melisende, 2009.

[43] Sheikh Mohammed Elsharkawy. See http://lcjb.cjsonline.gov.uk/Hertfordshire/403.html.

[44] 41v57, 45v5-7, 50v20.

[45] R. Harries, N. Solomon, T. Winter, Abraham's children: Jews, Christians and Muslims in conversation, Continuum, 2006, presents views of Abraham in the three faiths.

[46] Love your brother, love your neighbour, K. Murrad, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1982.

[47] Genesis Rabbah (XLVIII: 1-5).

[48] See Scherman and Zlotowitz, op.cit., p625ff.

[49] Genesis Rabbah (XLVIII:9, 11, 14).

[50] Scherman and Zlotowitz, op.cit., p 629ff.

[51] For further analysis, see M. Lodahl, Claiming Abraham: reading the Bible and the Qur'an side-by-side, Brazos Press, 2010, chapter 2.

[52] See Surah 11:77-80 for Lot's hospitality to the angels.

[53] For example, Ibn Kathir (d.1373), commenting on Surah 11:69-70, reports that the Bible says they ate, but it is wrong. Ibn Hazm's critique of Christian interpretations of the passage in terms of the Trinity is summarized in J.W. Sweetman, Islam and Christian Theology, part 2 vol 2, p 207-9.

[54] see, for example, J. Calvin, A Commentary on Genesis, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965 (first published in Latin, 1554), p 469-472, G. Wenham, Genesis 16-50, Word Publishing, 1994, p 62-63.

[55] Perhaps the best-known icon is that of the three angels represented as the Trinity.

[56] Mark 1v29-31, Luke 4v38-39. Matthew records this incident somewhat later in his gospel, 8v14-15.

[57] Luke 19v1-10, John 4v1-26, John 11v1-12v8, Matt 9v10-13.