

7. Abraham and Ishmael in Mecca

In the cult of Mecca we observe the pre-eminent position of Ishmael and the absence of Isaac. The running of the pilgrims between the hills of al-Şafā and al-Marwa (*sa'y*) is explained as an actualization of Hagar's desperate search for water to quench the thirst of Ishmael. There are different versions of the story of how Ishmael was saved by the water from the well of Zamzam: either the angel Gabriel made the water flow, or Ishmael himself thrust his foot or finger into the sand and a spring arose. Hagar then rushed forward and hurriedly scooped the moisture into her jug.¹⁶³ This association of Hagar and Ishmael with water is fully in line with biblical accounts. Its particular importance for the Meccan cult might reflect a deep Canaanite culture stratum carefully concealed by an Israelite legend.¹⁶⁴

Once established in Mecca, Ishmael received several visits from his father Abraham and finally he helped him build the Ka'ba (Kor. 2: 121). After the de-

parture of his father, Ishmael remained in Mecca and was finally buried with his mother in a special place close to the Ka'ba called Hijr.¹⁶⁵ It is difficult to perceive the original Canaanite cult-mythology behind the Islamic stories derived from biblical sources. The only pre-Islamic deity of the Ka'ba with his own statue was Hubāl. Some authors consider him to have been the original "Lord of this House" mentioned in the Koran (106: 3).¹⁶⁶ On account of a painting of Abraham representing the patriarch as holding the divinatory arrows normally associated with the god, it is sometimes supposed that Abraham was an Islamic cover-name for Hubāl.¹⁶⁷ In spite of this tradition, it is more likely that the god of the Ka'ba was originally associated with the more specific figure of Ishmael.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, Hubāl's characteristics as a primordial god and specifically his identification as either a moon deity or a deity akin to Saturn, suggest a connection with the netherworld.¹⁶⁹ Although Abraham, on the basis of earlier Israelite influences and biblical loans, is given greater emphasis in the Koran, Ishmael would appear to have been more firmly rooted in the pre-Islamic cult-drama of the Ka'ba.

The cult-dramatic performance of Mecca most important to this analysis is the great pilgrimage (*ḥājj*) which Muslim authorities unanimously refer back to a set of pre-Islamic ceremonies with minor adaptations. What then were the main features and the original ideas attached to the pre-Islamic *ḥājj*? The pilgrims first put on a white dress in two pieces without seams and thus entered a state of ritual purity (*iḥrām*). They accomplished the most significant performances in the form of a great procession leading like the movement of the sun from Mount 'Arafat in the east to Mina, five kilometres before Mecca in the west. Changing from the moment of *wuqūf* "waiting" to *ifāda* "running", they moved hastily in the evening from 'Arafat towards Mecca. At Muzdalifa they slept on the ground without any comforts. They saw on their right the fire of Ẓuzāḥ and at day break they rushed in a second *ifāda* towards Mina. Here they lapidated the Great Satan with stones which they had picked up at Muzdalifa. Once they had changed their clothes and left the state of *iḥrām*, they individually proceeded to perform the sacrifice in commemoration of Abraham and Isaac or Ishmael.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ Wensinck, "Ka'ba", EI¹, II, 585; Firestone, *Journeys*, 70, 86, 89. Crone and Cook connect the Hijr with Hagar (*Hagarism*, 23)

¹⁶⁶ Wellhausen, *Reste*, 75, 221; Winckler, *Arabisch-Semitisch*, 83. Some authors also refer the Koranic expression *al-bayt al-'atiq* 22: 29, 33) to Hubāl (cf. Fahd, *Panthéon*, 102).

¹⁶⁷ Wellhausen, *Reste*, 75; Winckler, *Arabisch-Semitisch*, 110.

¹⁶⁸ Fahd contrasts the universalistic aspects of Allah with the particularism of Hubāl (*Panthéon*, 96).

¹⁶⁹ Winckler, *Arabisch-Semitisch*, 83; Nielsen, "Religion", 226. Cf. Fahd, *Panthéon*, 102-103.

¹⁷⁰ Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Pèlerinage*, 235-276; Wensinck, "Ḥādjdj", EI¹, II, 199-201; Daum, *Religion*, 119-124.

According to the most likely explanation, these ancient moments of a pre-Israelite cult-drama corresponded to the re-enactments of the return of the main Meccan god to his temple. On his way back to the town the god had to confront his divine foe, later associated with Satan. In the course of the procession the pilgrims attempted to join their god and identify with him by adopting the same movements: first they waited for him, then they rushed forward with him and finally they won a great victory together with him. The most unpleasant performance took place on the last night when the deity was about to leave the netherworld: then the pilgrims were prepared to suffer at Muzdalifa for the sake of their god the discomfort of a short night in the wilderness. The next morning the pilgrims ran forward to take part in Mina in the decisive combat for the support of their god. By pronouncing continuously in loud voices *labbayka* – “at your service” or “we assist you”,¹⁷¹ they expressed their deep emotional identification with the god’s efforts to overcome his enemy. The defeat of the divine foe was re-enacted by the stoning of Satan. Once the victory was achieved, the pilgrims had fulfilled their task and they could quit the state of *iḥrām*. From then on the cult-cry *labbayka* gave way to the invocation *Allāhu akbar* “God is greater”. With the help of his faithful people, the god had vanquished his enemy and could again return to the Ka’ba. Henceforth he became once more the “greater God”, the one who had shown that he was stronger than his foe.¹⁷²

Who were the two opposing deities of this pre-Islamic and pre-Israelite cult-drama? The prominence of Ishmael in the Ka’ba and the former importance of Hubāl suggest that we are dealing here with the combat between the leading god of the netherworld rushing towards his temple, and the leading god of the upperworld trying to obstruct his movements. Such a reconstruction amounts to a shift of the resurrection pattern from the dying and rising god to the primordial deity: the leading god of the netherworld, most likely Hubāl, confronted and fought the thunder-god Ƙuzah.¹⁷³ In the end he vanquished Ƙuzah by stoning him or his alter ego Satan, the sun-demon.¹⁷⁴ Under the premise of Israelite monotheism and of early Islam, this sequence of ritual performances was reinterpreted in terms of the biblical sacrifice of Isaac. The uncertainty of the Muslim authorities as to

¹⁷¹ Wensinck, “Talbiya”, EI¹, IV, 640; Fahd, “Talbiya”, EI², X, 160-161.

¹⁷² Cf. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Pèlerinage*, 181-184; Wensinck, “Ḥādjdj”, EI¹, II, 196-201.

¹⁷³ A similar inversion of the resurrection pattern in favour of the leading deity of the netherworld can be observed in the case of Amōta (= Mōt), the state-god of the Yoruba town of Ila (cf. Pemberton/Afọlayan, *Kingship*, 191-196).

¹⁷⁴ Earlier interpreters identified the involved deities in a similar way but neglected the cult-dramatic aspect of the pilgrimage (Wellhausen, *Reste*, 79-84; Wensinck, “Ḥādjdj”, EI¹, II, 199-201;

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the identity of the intended victim – Isaac or Ishmael – and their interpretation of the act of stoning as Abraham's refusal to be distracted from his mission,¹⁷⁵ clearly show that we are facing here an adaptation of the biblical legend from the ancient Meccan cult-drama. Nevertheless, the details of the successive rituals are clear enough to allow us to perceive the original polytheistic meaning of the Meccan pilgrimage under the overlay of later explanations. In particular they show that Abraham's sacrifice of his son has to be seen in the context of the antagonism between the two hostile deities which elsewhere in the Canaanite-Israelite world was reinterpreted in terms of conflictual relations between the two sons of Abraham.