

Muslims Celebrate how God Ransomed Abraham's Son with a Sacrifice

Many Christians are unaware that Muslims have an annual celebration that commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and God's merciful provision of a substitute ram in his place. The celebration is called *Eid-al-Adha* (Feast of Sacrifice). The celebration takes place at the end of the *Hajj* or pilgrimage. Everyone who is financially able purchases an animal to sacrifice. The animal must be killed in accordance with Islamic law in order to be considered *Halal* or permissible. This entails a short prayer of blessing while slitting the animal's throat, giving careful attention to drain all the blood. The meat is then shared with family, friends and the poor. The celebration happens all over the Muslim world but it is certainly not limited to Muslim countries. Here in the United States I have seen goats and even a cow sacrificed to celebrate *Eid*. It is always a treat to see the interaction of my Muslim friends with rural South Carolina farmers negotiating the purchase price of an animal.

Several years ago, I memorized the story of Abraham and Isaac so that I could go to the Mosque and share it with my Muslim friends during this celebration. As I entered the mosque my friends greeted me with excitement, "Eid Mubarik" or "happy Eid!" The atmosphere reminded me of Christmas celebrations. The food was abundant. Everyone had on new clothes. The mood was genuinely joyous. I sat down with a small group of guys I knew fairly well from previous mosque visits. I told them how I had memorized the story concerning Abraham and his son and asked if they would like to hear the story.

Everyone wholeheartedly agreed and so I began: “God told Abraham to go to a mountain and sacrifice his son...” but before I could continue, a young man interrupted, saying, “I have heard this story, it’s about Abraham and his son Ishmael.” Someone else in the group replied, “no, the story is not about Ishmael, it’s about Isaac.” Within seconds people began taking sides. My friends looked to me and said, “Well, which is it?”

Before going to the mosque I had already decided I wasn’t going to make the name of the child a stumbling block for my Muslim friends. I was simply going to refer to him as Abraham’s son. I never expected my Muslim friends to begin arguing among themselves about this issue. I immediately prayed and asked for wisdom, and this is what came out: “The Qur’an doesn’t actually say and not all Muslims agree.” Someone recommended calling the Imam to sort it out for us and another suggested we get the Qur’an and look for ourselves. We chose the latter, and when reading in Surah 37 that the boy is not named, they began laughing and heckling one another.

I continued the story, drawing attention to what I consider to be the most important detail—a point of agreement between the Bible and Qur’an—that Abraham’s son was ransomed by God with a substitute sacrifice. The Qur’an says he was ransomed with a “momentous sacrifice” (37:107). I then went on to explain how in the Genesis account God provided a ram to take the place of Abraham’s son. My next question to Muslim friends was simply this, “Why did God provide a sacrificial lamb in the place of Abraham’s son?” Couldn’t he have just told Abraham, “Stop, don’t do it”?

Though Muslims believe in much of the Old Testament, the sacrificial system is virtually absent. For that reason, our discussion surrounding the role of sacrifice and forgiveness was quite lively. I told them how John the Baptist (Yahya in the Qur’an) called Jesus the “Lamb of God” who takes away the sin of the world and that this was a reference to God’s provision for Abraham. The conversation shifted to whether or not God required sacrifice to forgive sin. The Qur’an says it is not the blood of sacrifices which reach Allah but rather the piety of a man’s heart (22:37). I partially agree with my Muslim friends on this point. God is interested in the heart of the one presenting a sacrifice. He condemns careless and vain sacrifices. He calls them an abomination and a burden that He is weary of bearing (Isaiah 1:10-20). Yet, the author of Hebrews is clear—“without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin” (9:22). May our Muslim friends recognize that just as God ransomed Abraham and his son He has also provided a ransom for us. He has provided us with a momentous sacrifice in Christ, our Passover Lamb, who has been sacrificed for us (1Cor. 5:7). He is a lamb without blemish and capable of washing us white as snow (1Pet.1:19).