

THE TRIUMPH OF FAITH OR VOW: A REVIEW OF PROPHET IBRĀHĪM'S STORY OF SACRIFICE

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Abstract

Prophet Ibrāhīm is generally venerated as a symbol of monotheism and a break from pagan idolatry. While he is recognized as a hero of faith in Christianity, he is equally revered as father of faith in Islam. Quite a good number of incidences in his life is used to justify this unique position of him as a sage. Part of his life experience is his childless marriage for years, and when eventually he had one, he had a dream to slaughter and sacrifice him for Allah. This dream was to be actualised by him, as he took his only child out of the town and attempted to slaughter him for Allah. While Ibrāhīm's faith is commendable, the command to slaughter his son generates some rhetorical questions, namely: why was he asked to slaughter his only son for Allah? Was it to test his *Imān* (faith) or a fulfilment of his vow to slaughter his son to Allah if given one? The objective of this study, therefore, is to explore the accounts of scholars on Prophet Ibrāhīm with a view to finding out the reasons for commanding him to sacrifice his only son and the implications of this on the personality of Prophet Ibrāhīm in particular and Islam in general.

Keywords: Faith, Vow, Sacrifice, Ibrāhīm, Ismā'il

Introduction

Prophet Ibrāhīm is one of the highly venerated prophets of Allah. His story is well captured in the Qur'ān and the Bible. About fourteen chapters of the Book of Genesis narrate his life and death,¹ though it is believed that the detailed narration of his story in the Bible still lacks some

vital life encounters of the patriarch.² The Qur'ān 2 verse 258 traces the time of Ibrāhīm to the Babylonian ruler, Namrud b. Kan'an. His father is known in the Qur'ān as Azar.³ Although the Qur'ān refers to the father of Ibrāhīm as Azar, the name Tareh is believed to be his name by some scholars and genealogists like Ibn ^cAbbās.⁴ This might be due to the fact that the Holy Bible refers to Ibrāhīm's father as Tarekh. To balance the equation however, Ibn Jareer submitted that the father had two names, one a nickname and the other his proper name. He, therefore, suggested that his father was nicknamed Azar after an idol he worshipped.⁵

It should be noted that Ibrāhīm did not become a friend of Allah on a platter of gold. He embarked on serious search for Allah to be certain of his faith, contemplating on the dominion of the heavens and the earth. The ephemera nature of the moon, stars, and sun made him to conclude that those celestial bodies deserved not to be worshipped.⁶ By the time Ibrāhīm was in serious search for his creator, his people were swimming in the big ocean of idol worship. The people of Heran were worshipping stars and idols, while the Chaldeans were worshipping the seven stars.⁷ The isolation of Ibrāhīm from idol worshipping as well as his insistence to guide his people aright landed him in big trouble. He started his preaching from his father and his immediate family. The father glued himself to worshipping idols and even threatened to stone his son if he continued calling him to monotheism.⁸ Only Lūt, his nephew believed and accepted his preaching.⁹

The travail of Ibrāhīm and his experience in life were highly remarkable and historic. His religious and marital life was full of ups and downs, and at every point, he demonstrated high sense of commitment, faith and spirituality.¹⁰ Opeloye, submits that the Qur'ān gives the title *'Ulul 'azmi* to a class of prophets and that Ibrāhīm is one of this class of prophets.¹¹ However, the faith of Ibrāhīm in respect of his attempt to slaughter his son for God is overshadowed by another virtue, namely fulfilment of promise. The question of whether or not he actually vowed to Allah to slaughter the child for Him if given one is a form of controversy. The history of sacrificing a child for Allah equally posed another controversial submission of who among his children was to be sacrificed – Ismā'īl or Ishāq. The Bible considers Isaac (Ishāq) as the son he was commanded to slaughter for sacrifice. This, however, has been reasonably and logically criticized, as the Bible itself agrees that Abraham was to sacrifice his first son and Ishmael as the Bible has it, was the first son of Abraham. In fact, the Qur'ān's narration of the story of sacrifice is followed

by a glad tidings relating to Ishāq and that clearly shows that Ishāq was not the child meant for slaughtering.¹² While the issue of whether it was Ishāq or Ismā'īl that was to be slaughtered should not generate much controversy, as it has been settled by the Qur'ān, the question of why was Ibrāhīm asked to slaughter his son remained unsolved. This humble attempt is intended to find an answer to this question.

Prophet Ibrāhīm as a Paragon of Faith

To express Prophet Ibrāhīm on the template of ethnicity is like pinning down sun to a particular village alone. The Qur'ān plainly declares that he was not a Jew and neither could he be regarded as a Christian. He was, however, the champion of monotheism who was upright and bowed his will to Allah.¹³ The Qur'ān also describes him as a nation (*Ummah*) on his own,¹⁴ which implies that whoever is subscribed to monotheism has his root in the monotheistic foundation of Ibrāhīm. This is further confirmed by the following verse of the Qur'ān:

وَقَالُوا كُونُوا هُودًا أَوْ نَصَارَى تَهْتَدُوا قُلْ بَلْ مِلَّةَ
إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ

They say, "Be Jews or Christians [so] you will be guided." Say, "Rather, [we follow] the religion of Abraham, inclining toward truth, and he was not of the polytheists" (Q2: 135).

After discovering Allah, Ibrāhīm decided to preach and spread monotheism among his people. He started with his father and politely he asked his father why he decided to worship lifeless idols who could not hear, see or protect him. The father was furious with his submission, and so declared "Do you reject my gods, O Abraham? If you stop not this, I will indeed stone you. So get away from me safely before I punish you" (Q19:43-48). The reaction of the father notwithstanding, Ibrāhīm went ahead inviting his people to the true worship of Allah. His people were adamant on the basis that, that was how they met their forefathers doing. This scenario is aptly documented in the Qur'ān thus:

Recite to them the story of Abraham. When he said to his father and his people. "What do you worship?" They said: "We worship idols, and to them we are ever devoted." He said: "Do they hear you when you call on them or do they

benefit you or do they harm you?" They said: "Nay but we found our father doing so." He said: "Do you observe that which you been worshipping, You and your ancient fathers? Verily! They are enemies to me, save the Lord of the universe; Who has created me and it is He Who guides me and it is He Who feeds me and gives me to drink. And when I am ill, it is He who cures me; and Who will cause me to die and then will bring me to life again and Who I hope will forgive me my faults on the Day of Resurrection" (Q26:69-82).

Despite the threat of his father and the hostility of his people, Ibrāhīm decided to teach his people a lesson perhaps they would be able to understand his message better. When his people were out for a great celebration on the other bank of the river which would be attended by all the people, he entered their temple with a sharp axe, smashed all the false gods worshipped by the people except only one on whose neck he hung the axe. When the people returned, they were shocked to see their gods smashed to pieces, and they did not think twice before they knew it was Ibrāhīm who did the act. They quickly arrested and interrogated him on the matter. To show their stupidity, he replied that the biggest of the idols did the act and asked his people to ask the biggest one why he did the act. They answered Ibrāhīm, "Indeed you (Ibrāhīm) know well that these idols speak not?" Ibrāhīm quickly said: "Do you then worship besides Allah, things that can neither profit you nor harm you? Fie upon you, and upon that which you worship besides Allah! Have you then no sense?" (Q21:59-67). They thereafter concluded to burn him into ashes. They dug a deep pit, filled it with firewood and ignited it and cast Ibrāhīm into the fire. What transpired after this was aptly explained by some exegetes. Ibn Kathīr reported that:

The angel Gabriel came near Abraham's head and asked him: "O Abraham do you wish for anything?" Abraham replied: "Nothing from you." The catapult was shot and Abraham was cast into the fire. But his descent into the blaze was as descent on steps in a cool garden. The flames were still there, but they did not burn for Allah the Almighty had issued His command: "*O fire! Be you coolness and safety for Abraham.*" (Ch 21:69 Qur'ān). The fire submitted to the will of Allah, becoming cool and safe for Abraham. It only burned his

bonds, and he sat in the midst of the fire as if he were sitting in a garden. He glorified and praised Allah the Almighty, with a heart that contained only his love for Allah. There was not any vacant space therein for fear, awe, or worry. It was filled with love only.¹⁵

The Qur'ānic narration of how Prophet Ibrāhīm escaped from the fire with ferocious flames without burning even a hair in him was miraculous and so a way through which Allah saved His messenger.¹⁶ The miracle, therefore, posed some questions such as why did the fire refuse to burn him and what did Ibrāhīm do to make the fire unharmed to him? To this, Yusuf cites Qutb to have ruled that the miracle should not be probed as no human sense can comprehend it, as the same God that ordered the fire "to burn" could also issue another order and say "be cold and peaceful."¹⁷

If the above scene had been an experience of Ibrāhīm, that he was not even ready to listen to an Angel to come to his aid in that critical period, then one can say that Ibrāhīm was an epitome of faith who would not feel distracted by anything. Indeed, he could not be too desperate in matter of having a son to the point of vowing to Allah before he could be given one.

Another demonstration of faith by Prophet Ibrāhīm could be appreciated in his argument with a man who became arrogant because Allah had granted him power. The man is believed by some exegetes to be Namrūth, though Yusuf Ali believed that since Allah Himself did not mention the name in the Qur'ān, there is no need for speculation about the name, as this can lead to loss of focus and erosion of real meaning of the needed message while disputing about minor point such as name.¹⁸ Not minding the arrogance of the man, Prophet Ibrāhīm described his Lord as He who gives life and death. The man who wanted to claim equality with the Lord of Ibrāhīm quickly reacted that he could also give life and death and so asked one of his servants to bring two men. To prove his claim, he killed one and spared the other. Ibrāhīm therefore thought of coming up with a superior argument. He then said: "But it is Allah that causes the sun to rise from the East, do you then cause it to rise from the West?" (Q2: 258). The man was thus defeated by this superior argument of Ibrāhīm. This demonstrates that Ibrāhīm was fully armed spiritually and intellectually to confront and argue favourably and positively to defend his faith.

To further substantiate his faith, Prophet Ibrāhīm requested his Lord to show him how He gives life to the dead. Allah therefore instructed him to

carry out an experiment by taking four birds of different species, cut them into pieces, mix them up and drop a portion of them on every hill around him. When this was done, he was asked to call each of the birds by its name and the birds were seen each gathering itself together and running towards him. This experiment further solidified his faith in the power and wisdom of Allah to give life to the dead.¹⁹ This experiment confirms the submission of Bidmus that some experiments involve examining evidence that human intellect and reasoning can discern and use such evidence to facilitate understanding of the target beliefs, concepts and ideas.²⁰

Prophet Ibrāhīm further proved the depth of his faith in Allah by deciding to take his family out of his town when all efforts to call them to monotheism proved abortive. He therefore migrated with his wife to a city called Ur, and then to Palestine. His migration was solely for the sake of Allah. While elucidating this point further, Sayyid Qutb appreciated the extent of faith of Ibrāhīm in the following words:

After he was saved from the fire, he closed that chapter of his life to begin a new phase: *“And Abraham said I will go to my Lord: He is sure to guide me.”* (Verse 99). His words indicate that he was migrating, this in both a mental and physical sense. He was abandoning everything: his father, family, home, people and land, leaving them all behind and going to his Lord, free of all concerns. He thus surrendered himself to his Lord assured that He would give him guidance and care, setting him on the right path. It is a migration from one state to another, abandoning all ties and bonds in favour of one bond that remains pure and strong. His words express complete faith and unqualified surrender.²¹

After Palestine, Ibrāhīm traveled to Egypt, calling people to believe in Allah wherever he traveled. While in Egypt, he faced another trial where a tyrant ruler attempted to snatch Sarah his wife from him. The incidence that followed led to the gift of a slave girl, called Hajar to Sarah by the king and she later became the wife of Ibrāhīm.

It has to be noted that for many years, Ibrāhīm and his wife Sarah remained childless. He did not for once blame his God for his barrenness, as

he knew that Allah was aware of his predicament. He, therefore, prayed fervently for a virtuous son. It was said that he was eighty-six years old without a child. His wife, Sarah however advised him to take their maid as wife probably the family could raise an offspring from that source. The marriage of Hajar with Ibrāhīm was fruitful, as she conceived and eventually gave birth to his first son, Ismā'īl.²²

One of the ways through which Allah tested the faith of Ibrāhīm was when Ismā'īl was still nursing, God commanded him to take Hajar and Ismā'īl to a barren valley of Bakka 700 miles southeast of Hebron. This was indeed a great test, for he and his family had longed for such a time for offspring, and when their eyes were filled with the joy of an heir, the commandment was enacted to take him to not only a distant land, but a barren one for that matter.²³ The biblical version of the story that it was Sarah the first wife of Abraham who out of rage, requested his husband to banish Hagar and her son when she saw Ishmael mocking at Isaac after he was weaned has been intellectually refuted on the basis that it was not easy for Hagar to have carried a young man on her shoulders and take him hundreds of miles until she had reached Paran, and so, Ishmael was a baby by then and not a youth.²⁴ The history of zamzam water gushing out of the feet of the Ismā'īl equally refutes the claim. Upon all, Prophet Ibrāhīm demonstrated a high sense of deep faith in Allah in all the challenges he confronted. He therefore became one of the *'ulul- 'azmi* mentioned in the Qur'ān.²⁵ According to Opeloye:

The *'Ulul 'azmi* among the prophets were Nuh, Ibrāhīm, Musa, 'Isa and Muhammad because they showed a high degree of patience and endurance during their times. Nuh for instance preached tirelessly for over nine hundred years among the unbelieving people until God wiped them away with flood. Ibrāhīm survived different trials by endurance; Musa endured the incessant demands of the children of Israel in the wilderness; 'Isa endured the opposition of the scribes, the Pharisees and the high priest, all of whom agitated for his crucifixion, but God vindicated him; and Muhammad endured the opposition of the Quraysh... The *'Ulul 'azmi* among the prophets are, no doubt, prophets of very high rank.²⁶

Prophet Ibrāhīm and the Question of Vow

Apart from the question of who was actually to be slaughtered, Ismā‘īl or Ishāq, Qur’ānic exegetes have equally dabbled into why the slaughter. According to Az-Zamakhshari, when the Angel came to give Prophet Ibrāhīm the good tidings about a patient child, Ibrāhīm was reported to have reacted: “then he is to be slaughtered for Allah.” So when the boy was given birth to, he grew up to the point of following his father here and there, and running errands for him. Ibrāhīm then saw in a vision that he was asked to slaughter his son. In another narrative, Ibrāhīm saw someone in his vision in the night of *Tarwiyah* (8th Dhul-Hijjah) saying to him: “Allah commands you to slaughter this son of yours.” When he woke up in the morning, he doubted whether the vision was from Allah or Shaytān, hence the day was named *Tarwiyah* day. In the night of that day, he had the same vision asking him to slaughter his only son to Allah; then he knew it was from Allah, hence the day is named *‘Arafah*. He also saw the same vision in the third night and so he decided to carry out the vision, hence the day is named *Nahr* day.²⁷ From this narration, it is apparent that Ibrāhīm did not actually vow that if he should be given a child, he would sacrifice him to God. He could be said to have been carried away by the tidings of a patient child to be given birth to despite his old age, hence he said he is to be slaughtered for Allah. This equally has implication on the faith of Ibrāhīm. It implied that he did not believe what he was told by the angel, and so if it were to be true, he would sacrifice the child to Allah.

The above submission equally tallies with the submission of Al-Baghawi who quoted As-Sa’di to have submitted that when Ibrāhīm supplicated saying: “O Lord, give me a righteous son”, and he was given a pleasant news regarding his request. Reacting to the news, he remarked “then it is for Allah a sacrifice.”²⁸ This statement is somehow ambiguous, as it is not clear whether he meant to make sacrifice to Allah or that it was the proposed son that would be made sacrifice to Allah. According to the narration, when eventually he was given a child and he reached the age where he could assist his father, Ibrāhīm was asked to fulfil his promise. However, Al-Alūsī, cleared the air on this, as he submitted that when the angel gave the glad tidings to Ibrāhīm about a patient boy, Ibrāhīm reacted saying, “he is a sacrifice for Allah.” So when the boy was given birth to, Ibrāhīm was reminded to fulfil his promise.²⁹ This submission indicated that Ibrāhīm was to fulfil his promise and not to demonstrate his faith.

Some other exegetes who kept mute on whether Ibrāhīm vowed to sacrifice his son if given one or not are Ash-Shawkānī³⁰ and At-Tabarī.³¹ Ash-Shawkānī only discussed extensively on who was the object of slaughter, Ishāq or Ismā‘īl. He mentioned some scholars and companions who opined it was Ishāq and those who agreed it was Ismā‘īl. According to Sayyid Qutb, Ibrāhīm was given a child and when the boy became of age, Ibrāhīm saw a vision that he was slaughtering his one and only son. He understood the vision to be a divine signal to sacrifice and so did not hesitate, rather, he was engulfed with consciousness of obedience and submission. Though, it was not a clear and direct revelation, but a signal, all the same, it was a signal from Allah, and that was enough for submission without asking why.³² This shows the extent of faith of Ibrāhīm in Allah.

Another interesting story on the issue of the sacrifice is narrated in the *Gospel of Barnabas*, where Jesus gave an account of how an Angel came to Abraham telling him that all the world would know how God loved him (Abraham) and that Abraham should let the world know the extent of his love for God. Abraham was said to have answered that he was ready to do all that God wished him to do. Thereafter, God asked him to take his first son, Ishmael up to the mountain to sacrifice him.³³ With this version of history of sacrifice, it cannot be taken ordinarily that Abraham vowed. He only demonstrated his readiness his readiness to do whatever God would ask him to do and which he actually did eventually.

Islamic Standpoint on Vowing

Nadhrah (vow) is an obligation a person imposes on himself which is not hitherto obligatory on him. Indeed, Qur’ān 76 verse 7 addresses those who fulfil their vows as *al-abrār* (righteous believers). Some sayings of the Prophet equally give credence to fulfilment of vow whenever it is made. Jurists have discussed extensively on conditions governing vow, namely those related to the person who makes vow and those related to the thing on which the vow is made. For a person who makes a vow, he has to be a Muslim, matured and must have ability to voice out. Also, he has to have power of choice and must be in possession of the vowed item. As per what he makes vow on, it must be something supererogatory, something possible and must be meant to worship Allah. For a vow to be valid, it has to be intended for an *‘ibādah*, not a sinful act and should not be something that is obligatory before the vow. Vow should also be something possible, and

should not be made on something which does not belong to one. Also, its obligation should not be more than his capability.³⁴

While Islam allows vowing to do something, some precautionary measures are expected to be taken so as to avoid its abuse. From all indications, a supplicant resorts to vowing or attaches vowing to his supplication with the aim of fast-tracking his prayers. A tradition of the Prophet says:

وَعَنْ سَعِيدِ بْنِ الْحَارِثِ أَنَّهُ سَمِعَ ابْنَ عُمَرَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمَا يَقُولُ أَوْلَمْ يُنْهَوْا عَنِ النَّذْرِ إِنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ إِنَّ النَّذَرَ لَا يُقَدِّمُ شَيْئًا وَلَا يُؤَخِّرُ وَإِنَّمَا يُسْتَخْرَجُ بِالنَّذْرِ مِنَ الْبَخِيلِ

In a hadith reported by Sa'id bn Hārith, he said he heard Umar saying: “Have they not been forbidden from vow? The Prophet said: Certainly the vow neither expedite something nor delay it. Vow is only to get something from the stingy.”³⁵

To demonstrate that Allah has nothing to do with such a vow, the following *Ahādith* are relevant:

عن أبي هريرة، أن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم أدرك شيخاً يمشي بين ابنيه يتوكأ عليهما، فقال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم: «ما شأن هذا الشيخ؟» قال ابنه: يا رسول الله، كان عليه نذر، فقال له: «اركب أيها الشيخ، فإن الله عز وجل غني عنك» وعن نذرك

From Abu Hurayrah, he said: the Prophet - saw an aged man walking in company his two sons, reclining on them. The Prophet asked “what is wrong with this?” His son replied, “O Messenger of Allah, he made a vow.” Then the Prophet said “O old man go and ride (an animal), Allah is surely rich from you and from your vow.”³⁶

From another hadith related by Ibn ʿAbbas, that the Messenger of Allah passed by a man in Makkah who was standing under the sun. He said:

“What is this?” They said, “He vowed to fast while standing under no shed until the night and will not talk while he remains standing.” He said: “Let him talk, stay under shade and be seated. Let him then complete his fasting.”³⁷

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ قَالَ قَالَ النَّبِيُّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ لَا يَأْتِي ابْنَ آدَمَ النَّذْرُ بِشَيْءٍ لَمْ يَكُنْ قُدِّرَ لَهُ وَلَكِنْ يُلْقِيهِ النَّذْرُ إِلَى الْقَدَرِ قَدْ قُدِّرَ لَهُ فَيَسْتَخْرِجُ اللَّهُ بِهِ مِنَ الْبَخِيلِ فَيُؤْتِي عَلَيْهِ مَا لَمْ يَكُنْ يُؤْتِي عَلَيْهِ مِنْ قَبْلُ

Meaning:

Narrated Abu Hurayrah: The Prophet said: Allah says: “The vow does not bring about for the son of Adam anything I have not decreed for him, but his vow may coincide with what has been decided for him, and by this way I cause a miser to spend his wealth. So he gives Me (spends in charity) for the fulfillment of what has been decreed for him what he would not give Me before but for his vow.”³⁸

حَدَّثَنَا أَحْمَدُ بْنُ صَالِحٍ، قَالَ: حَدَّثَنِي ابْنُ وَهْبٍ، قَالَ أَخْبَرَنِي يُونُسُ، قَالَ أَحْمَدُ: وَحَدَّثَنَا عَنَبْسَةُ، حَدَّثَنَا يُونُسُ، عَنْ ابْنِ شِهَابٍ، قَالَ: أَخْبَرَنِي عَبْدُ الرَّحْمَنِ بْنُ كَعْبٍ بْنُ مَالِكٍ، قَالَ: أَخْبَرَنِي عَبْدُ اللَّهِ بْنُ كَعْبٍ، وَكَانَ قَائِدَ كَعْبٍ مِنْ بَنِيهِ جِئَ عَمِّي، قَالَ: سَمِعْتُ كَعْبَ بْنَ مَالِكٍ، فِي حَدِيثِهِ: {وَعَلَى الثَّلَاثَةِ الَّذِينَ خَلَفُوا} [التوبة: 118] قَالَ: فِي آخِرِ حَدِيثِهِ: إِنَّ مِنْ تَوْبَتِي أَنْ أَنْخَلَعَ مِنْ مَالِي صَدَقَةً إِلَى اللَّهِ وَإِلَى رَسُولِهِ، فَقَالَ النَّبِيُّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: «أَمْسِكْ بَعْضَ مَالِكَ فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَكَ»

Narrated Ka'b bin Malik: In the last part of his narration about the three who remained behind (from the battle of Tabuk). (I said), “As a proof of my true repentance (for not joining the Holy battle of Tabuk), I shall give up all my property for the sake of Allah and His Apostle (as an expiation for that sin). The Prophet said (to me), “keep some of your wealth, for that is better for you.”³⁹

The above sayings of the Prophet indicate man's attempts to fast-track his needs from Allah, while the Prophet was trying to discourage the practice,

as nothing can hasten what Allah had not decreed for such a person. In addition, one's vow should be watched, so that it does not cause any unnecessary hardship on him.

The Qur'ānic Account of the Sacrifice Story

The Qur'ānic passage that discusses the life history of Ibrāhīm with particular reference to the issue of slaughtering his son for Allah is contained in the Qur'ān 37 verses 99-111 which reads:

وَقَالَ إِنِّي ذَاهِبٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّي سَيَهْدِينِ رَبِّ هَبْ لِي مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ فَبَشِّرْنَاهُ بِغُلَامٍ حَلِيمٍ فَلَمَّا بَلَغَ مَعَهُ السَّعْيَ قَالَ يَابُنِّي إِنِّي أَرَىٰ فِي الْمَنَامِ أَنِّي أَذْبَحُكَ فَانْظُرْ مَاذَا تَرَىٰ قَالَ يَا آدَمُ افْعَلْ مَا تُؤْمَرُ سَتَجِدُنِي إِن شَاءَ اللَّهُ مِنَ الصَّابِرِينَ فَلَمَّا أَسْلَمَا وَتَلَّهُ لِلْجَبِينِ وَنَادَيْنَاهُ أَنْ يَا إِبْرَاهِيمُ قَدْ صَدَّقْتَ الرُّؤْيَا إِنَّا كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ إِنَّ هَذَا لَهُوَ الْبَلَاءُ الْمُبِينُ وَفَدَيْنَاهُ بِذَبْحٍ عَظِيمٍ وَتَرَكْنَا عَلَيْهِ فِي الْآخِرِينَ سَلَامٌ عَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ إِنَّهُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

Meaning:

And [then] he said, "Indeed, I will go to [where I am ordered by] my Lord; He will guide me.

My Lord, grant me [a child] from among the righteous."

So We gave him good tidings of a forbearing boy.

And when he reached with him [the age of] exertion, he said, "O my son, indeed I have seen in a dream that I [must] sacrifice you, so see what you think." He said, "O my father, do as you are commanded. You will find me, if Allah wills, of the steadfast."

And when they had both submitted and he put him down upon his forehead,

We called to him, "O Abraham,

You have fulfilled the vision." Indeed, We thus reward the doers of good.

Indeed, this was the clear trial.

And We ransomed him with a great sacrifice,

And We left for him [favorable mention] among later generations:

"Peace upon Abraham."

Indeed, We thus reward the doers of good.

Indeed, he was of Our believing servants.

From the above Qur'ān passage, some facts and lessons are derivable. One of such is the description of a ram as a 'great sacrifice.' This fact implied that a ram could not be greater than Isma'īl if actually he was the object of sacrifice. In other words, it was not the sacrifice of Isma'īl that mattered, but the extent of the faith of Ibrāhīm that was tested. Another lesson is the prayer of Ibrāhīm for a righteous son and not just a son. A clear manifestation of the response of Allah to this prayer had to be made known to Ibrāhīm and this was demonstrated in the response of the son to what his father put before him. According to Sayyid Qutb, the response of his son was marked with acceptance and certainty and not a response of mere obedience and resignation. The response equally demonstrated his love for his father as he had the same feeling as his father taking the dream as a signal, which means an order.⁴⁰ He writes further:

Furthermore, we see in Ishmael's response proper manners with his Lord, and recognition of the limits of his ability in the face of hardship. Therefore, he seeks his Lord's help to overcome his weakness. He attributes to God the grace of helping him to obey and make the sacrifice: *"God willing, you will find me to be patient in adversity."* (Verse 102) He does not press the matter as a heroic act on his part. Nor does he describe it as facing the danger and caring little for the consequences. He does not give himself any credit in the matter; he simply attributes it all to God who has helped him in carrying out His orders with patience in adversity. This is an example of perfect humility before God, trust in Him, combined with complete obedience and submission to His will.⁴¹

The episode demonstrates a great test of time and the success of Ibrāhīm and his son in passing the test. This is further attested to by Qutb when he writes:

At this stage, Abraham and Ishmael have done all that is required of them. They have submitted themselves and carried out the order. All that remained was the actual shedding of Ishmael's blood and his death, which, in God's scales, counted for little, compared with the energy, feelings and determination both father and son put into what was bidden of them. By this time, the test had reached its climax, its results were known and its objectives fulfilled. What remained was physical pain and a dead body, but God does not want His servants to endure suffering. He does not require them to torment or kill themselves. Once they have submitted themselves and shown their true willingness to do what He bids, then they have fulfilled what is required and passed the test successfully.⁴²

The fact that the Qur'ān confirms the fulfilment of Prophet Ibrahim's dream and not vow summarises our stand that the issue of vowing did not feature in the story of the sacrifice. Indeed, the Qur'an says: "O Abraham, you have fulfilled the vision. Indeed, We thus reward the doers of good. Indeed, this was the clear trial" (Q37: 104-106). If the Qur'ān can say categorically that the episode was a fulfillment of dream, and not of vow, then one wonders why some exegetes subscribed to that.

Conclusion

All prophets of Allah faced one challenge or the other. Indeed, it seems one of the characteristics of a prophet is the type or nature of challenge he had. The enormity of challenges faced by a prophet determined his status in the comity of prophets. Those who attained the status of *'ūlul 'azmi* were able to face the challenges confronting them with endurance and patience. Indeed, the Qur'ān told Prophet Muhammad to be patient as the *'ūlul 'azmi* were. (Q46: 35). This clearly suggests that the dream of Ibrāhīm to slaughter his only son was another temptation by Allah to put him to test and which he passed colourfully.

It is also noted that the exegetes who subscribed to the fact that Ibrāhīm fulfilled the vow he made by attempting to slaughter his son to

Allah, did not actually say that Ibrāhīm made a vow before he was given a son. This implies that Ibrāhīm was not so desperate in searching for a child. Indeed, when he was praying for one, he specified a virtuous one from Allah. However, the exegetes believed that when the good tiding was brought to him that he would give birth to a child, it was when he remarked “he is a sacrifice for Allah.” To us, this kind of statement put into the mouth of Prophet Ibrāhīm remains a speculation of writers, and if at all he said so, it can be interpreted to mean, the child would be dedicated to Allah and this was the type of upbringing Ibrāhīm gave Ismā‘īl.

Furthermore, if Ibrāhīm could not be accused of desperation in his search for a child, Allah cannot also be considered the Lord that would look for promise from His servant before giving him anything. Vow as it has been discussed early, is only used to get something from the stingy. The earlier quoted hadith lays credence to this.

If an exegete, Yusuf Ali, is careful not to speculate on the name of the man who engaged in dialogue with Ibrāhīm where the Qur’ān is silent; and if Sayyid Qutb does not venture into why the fire refused to burn Ibrāhīm and why Ibrāhīm did to make the fire to be cold and peaceful for him, one feels that it is equally preferable for exegetes to have remained silent on why he had a dream to sacrifice his only son to Him. While fulfillment of oath and promise is a virtue of prophets and true believers, its establishment in the life of Prophet Ibrāhīm should not be sought in the history of sacrifice, as this undermines the status of Prophet Ibrāhīm and portrays him as being so desperate to have a son. It also indicates that the decision of Allah to give Ibrāhīm a son is as a result of the latter’s vow, which is a method of getting something from a miser and a stingy person. If at all the virtue of fulfilment of vow is to be attributed to Ibrāhīm, it should be sought in his vow to deal with the idols his people were worshipping. Indeed, he fulfilled the promise by dealing destructively with them.

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