

Abraham and Ishmael

A Muslim story

Key ideas: key religious figures, key events

Abraham and Sarah had been married for many years, but they had no children. In those days it was the custom for a man to take a second wife if he had no children with his first. Sarah suggested to Abraham that her Egyptian servant, Hagar, would be a good choice.

Abraham agreed to this suggestion, and soon a son was born to Hagar. They called him Ishmael. Some time later Sarah also had a son, whose name was Isaac. Allah spoke to Abraham and told him that from his sons would come two nations and three religions, but Abraham must do as Allah asked.

So Abraham followed Allah's instructions. He took Hagar and his son Ishmael out of Palestine, travelling for several days. When they arrived at the valley of Bacca, Abraham left Hagar and Ishmael. He knew that Allah would take care of them.

It was not long before their water ran out. Ishmael began to get very weak. Hagar was desperate to find a well. There were two hills, Safa and Marwa, one on either side of the valley. Hagar climbed first one, then the other, looking in all directions to find water. She saw nothing. Desperate, she ran from hill to hill seven times, searching in case she had missed any sign of a stream or well.

Sadly she returned to her son. She was beginning to think there was no hope for them, but as she grew closer to Ishmael, she saw something strange. Bubbling and sparkling in the sun, there was a small spring of water rising out of the ground near her son's feet. She was delighted, and relieved. They drank, and thanked Allah. Hagar and Ishmael settled by this spring, which came to be called the Well of Zamzam, and it is still visited by Muslims on pilgrimage today.

From time to time Abraham would visit his second wife and their son in their new home and he saw Ishmael grow into a fine man. God's promise was fulfilled. Ishmael is seen as the founder of the Arab nation, Isaac of the Jewish nation. The three religions which have grown from those people are Judaism, Christianity and Islam.