Prophet Abraham's Early Life And His Monotheistic Movement, Part 1
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Translated by Mahboobeh Morshedian

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Abstract

Prophet Abraham is recognized as the patriarch of the three Abrahamic religions, as well as the prophet and messenger of God, and leader to all the nations of the world in Islam. This part of this series offers an account of Prophet Abraham's early life, specifically about his youth, his search for the truth, and his family and community. Despite the ongoing oppression towards him from his idolatrous father and idol-
worshipping community, as well as the additional trials he faced, Prophet Abraham’s unwavering faith earned himself the title of being one of the five Prophets of Determination.

Prophet Abraham in the Qur’an

What can be understood from the Qur’an is that Prophet Abraham lived in a hideout, away from his society from early infancy to his maturity. Afterwards, he moved to the tribe where his father lived, where he witnessed the society, including his father, worshipping idols. As Prophet Abraham had a pure innate disposition (fitra), God showed him the kingdom (malakut) of everything; he reached the rank in which all his sayings and actions were in accordance with the truth. Thus, he did not approve of his tribe’s actions and could not keep silent. He debated with his father1, prohibited him from worshipping idols, and invited him to monotheistic belief in God so that He may guide him to His right path and keep him away from Satan.

When his father saw that Abraham would not give up his beliefs, he banished him and threatened to stone him to death. In return for the harsh treatment, the well-mannered Abraham continued to treat his father affectionately, using kind and gentle speech. In response to his father, he first said "Salam" to him and promised him to seek God’s forgiveness for him. Prophet Abraham also added that if the father did not tread the God’s path, he would leave him and his tribe but would not give up worshipping God by any means.

Chapter Maryam, Verses 41–48

At this juncture, Prophet Abraham began debating with his tribe to negate the worship of idols2. The next phase of his life is his debates with other tribes who worshipped the sun, the moon, and the stars. In such debates, he obliged them to accept the truth. During this time, the news of his turning away from the worship of idols was spread3.

One day, when all idol-worshippers went outside the town to perform their religious ceremony, Prophet Abraham refrained from accompanying them on the pretext of being sick and stayed in the town alone. When the city was deserted, he went to the idol-temple and broke all idols except the greatest idol so that people may turn to it. When people returned to the city and heard about this event, they sought to find its agent. After discovering it was done by a young man named Abraham, they summoned him:

Was it you who did this to our gods, O Abraham?’ He said, ’Rather it was this biggest of them who did it! [If you do not believe me,] Ask them, if they can speak.’ [so that they tell you who changed them to this form!] (Qur’an, 21:62–63)
In so doing, Abraham had put the axe on the shoulder of the biggest idol to make a witness out of it. He knew they did not consider their idols as being alive and able to speak, but he intended to devise a plan to make people confess that idols lacked reason and life. Therefore, after hearing his response, people started to ponder on their misguidance, confessed to it, and said abjectly:

'You certainly know that they cannot speak. (Qur'an, 21:65)

Abraham, who did not have any objective but hearing them say so, said immediately:

Do you abandon Allah and worship these inanimate objects which cannot cause you any benefit or harm? Fie on you and what you worship besides Allah! Do you not apply reason!' [You worship what you have carved yourselves and are not willing to worship Allah has created you and whatever you make (your actions)??](Qur'an, 21:66–67)

They said, "Burn him, and help your gods." (Qur'an, 21:68)

They built a structure with a huge fire blazing in it, collaborating to do it to gain their gods' satisfaction, and then cast Abraham into the fire when it started blazing. However, the Almighty God made the fire cool and safe for Abraham and kept him safe and sound in the fire, foiling the disbelievers' plot.4

In the meantime, Prophet Abraham addressed the king, Namrud, who claimed to be a god, saying:

‘My Lord is He who gives life and brings death’ (Qur’an, 2:258)

Using sophistry, Namrud said,

'I [too] give life and bring death'. (Qur’an, 2:258) [I can either free or kill whoever I choose from
among captives and prisoners."

Prophet Abraham argued, saying,

الله يأتي بالشمس من المشرق فأت بها من الغرب

"Indeed Allah brings the sun from the east; now if you tell the truth, bring it from the west." (Qur'an, 2:258)

Here, Namrud became astounded and bewildered.

According to the Qur'an, after Prophet Abraham had been freed from the fire of Namrud, he pursued his sacred goal and started his call to Monotheism and the True (Hanif) Religion. At this time, very few people converted to this religion.

According to the Quran, Prophet Lut, his brother, and Prophet Abraham's wife were among the believers. His wife migrated along with Prophet Abraham and had married him before leaving her homeland to the Holy Lands.

Upon leaving their homeland, Prophet Abraham and his followers dissociated from their tribe and his step-father, Azar. He and his wife, along with Prophet Lut, set out for the Holy Land to worship God without being persecuted by their tribe.

Prophet Abraham asked God for offspring, and after this prayer when he had reached old age, God gave him the glad tidings of Is-haaq and Isma'il, and Ya'qub, who descended from Is-haaq. Shortly after, first Isma'il and then Is-haaq were born. As God promised, He made Abraham and his offspring blessed.

On God's orders, Prophet Abraham went to Mecca – a deep, dry valley – left his beloved son, Isma'il in infancy in that frightening place, and returned to the Holy Land himself. Isma'il grew there, with the nomad Arabs gathered round him.

Afterwards, he was given the mission of building the House of Ka'bah in one of his visits, and set to construct it along with Isma'il. Both before and after building Ka'bah, Prophet Abraham occasionally went to Mecca to visit Isma'il.

إن أول بيت وضع للناس للذي بركة مبارك وهدى للعالمين فيه آيات بنيات مقام إبراهيم ومن دخله كان أمنًا

'This was the first house built on God's orders, it is blessed, and there are manifest signs and Abraham's Station in it, and whoever enters it shall be secure' (Qur'an, 3:96–97)

After completion of the Ka'bah, Prophet Abraham issued the order of Hajj and legislated on its relevant acts of worship.
Likewise, God gave Prophet Abraham the mission of slaughtering Isma'il. After they both set out to perform the mandatory pilgrimage (Hajj) they were ordered to run between Safa and Marwah seven times. He told his son:

 يا ابن إني أرى في المنام أنني أنبحك فانظر ماذا ترى

My son! I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you. See what you think. (Qur'an, 37:102)

He said,

 يا أبتي أفعل ما تتوجسين إني شاء الله من الصابرين

Father! Do whatever you have been commanded. If Allah wishes, you will find me to be patient like the patient God’s servants. (Qur’an, 37:102)

When both submitted to this mission, Abraham laid him down on his forehead. God revealed:

 يا إبراهيم قد صنفت الروة نحن كذلك نجزي المحسنين

‘OAbraham! You have indeed fulfilled the dream [And we accept this little from you!]; surely thus do We reward the doers of good’: (Qur’an, 37:104–105)

وقد نبناه بندى بحب عظيم

‘Then We ransomed him with a great sacrifice’ (Qur’an, 37:107)

The last recount of Abraham’s life in the Qur’an is his prayer in several of his journeys to Mecca. His last request from God was:

 ربي اغفر لي ولوالدي وللمؤمنين يوم يقوم الحساب

‘Our Lord! Forgive me and my parents, and all the faithful, on the day when the reckoning is held’ (Qur’an, 14:41)

The Birth Of Abraham, The Friend Of Allah

According to hadiths on the birth of Prophet Abraham, Abi-Basir quoted from Imam al-Sadiq:
Abraham's father was the astrologer in the court of "Namrud ibn Kan'an," and Namrod did not embark on any course of action without consulting him. One night, he looked up at the stars and told Namrod in the morning:

I saw something strange last night. He asked: What?
Abraham replied: From the position of stars, I understood a boy will be born in our land soon, and we will be ruined by him, whose mother will become pregnant with him in the very near future.
Namrod was surprised and asked, "Has the conception already occurred?"
He answered, "Not yet."
Upon hearing this news, Namrod ordered all men to avoid marital relations with their wives. At this time, Abraham's mother became pregnant with Abraham.
When Abraham's father found out, he guessed this was the very child who would overthrow Namrud. His wife said, "To hide this from Namrud and not to trouble you, I will hide this child in a cave" Hence, Abraham grew up there, until he left the cave.

Hadith scholars agreed that in his early life, Abraham lived alone for fear of Namrud. After this period of his life ended, he appeared and debated with his father and tribe over the deity of idols, the stars, the moon, and the sun. He contradicted the claim of his contemporary king, Namrud, to be a deity. This is inferred from the style of the related Qur’anic verses.

**Abraham's Father**

Non-Shi'a historians claim that Abraham's father was "Tarukh" and his title "Azar". According to them, the polytheist who the Qur'an referred to as Abraham's father and whom Abraham debated with in the Qur'an was Tarukh, the biological father of Abraham. Some Sunni Hadith scholars and theologians also agree.

Several others, as well as all Shi'a scholars, disagreed with this account. Only few Shi'a hadith narrators recounted the narrations on the first account. Shi'a scholars and several Sunni scholars maintain that the Messenger of Allah’s forefathers were all monotheists; none was a polytheist.

Overall, this is a point of contention for both Shi'a and Sunni scholars. However, this is an unnecessary discussion because the Qur'an itself points out that polytheist Azar referred to in Chapter al-An'am was not Abraham's real father. Thus, narrations indicating he was the biological father of Abraham are opposed to the Qur'an.

There is also a narration that considers Azar as Abraham's uncle and astrologer in Namrud's court, and Tarukh as his biological father.
Abraham's First Advent And Call

These verses indicate the most important news on Abraham, who with a healthy and pure innate disposition, rose against his idol-worshipping tribe and stood up for the monotheistic religion and worship of God. He dissociated himself from his people, defended the truth, and underwent challenging events for God's sake. All were His miracles and signs, but most people did not believe in him.

In these verses, God wanted Prophet Muhammad to narrate the life story of Abraham to his people because He wanted the Arab polytheists, who were mostly Qurayshites, to become familiar with Abraham as their forefather to know that Prophet Muhammad had risen up to disseminate the religion of monotheism and truth like his forefather, Abraham.

In those days when nobody would say "There is god but Allah", God was Abraham's aid to confirm monotheism to disseminate in the Sacred Lands of Palestine and Hijaz. This was because there already is a caller to monotheism in men's innate disposition (fitra), the disposition God created in all people. There is a sign of God in this from which one should learn a lesson and, as a result, dissociate from idolatry as Prophet Abraham did; he dissociated from that religion and those who advocated it, such as his father and tribe:

"Relate to them the account of Abraham, When he said to his father and his people: What is it that you are worshipping? They said, We worship idols, and we constantly worship them. He said, Do they hear you when you call them? Or do they bring you any benefit, or cause you any harm? They said, Rather we found our fathers acting likewise. He said, Do you know what you and your ancestors have been worshipping are indeed my enemies? But the Lord of all the worlds, who created me, is He who guides me, and provides me with food and drink, and when I get sick, it is He who cures me; who will make me die, then He will bring me to life, and who, I hope, will forgive me my sins on the Day of Resurrection.

'My Lord! Grant me judgement, and unite me with the Righteous, Confer on me a worthy repute among the posterity, and make me one of the heirs to the paradise of bliss. Forgive my father, for he is one of those who are astray.

Do not disgrace me on the day that they will be resurrected, the day when neither wealth nor children will avail, except him who comes to Allah with a sound heart, and Paradise will be
brought near for the God-wary, and Hell will be brought into view for the perverse” (Qur’an, 26:69-91)

This was Abraham's debate on the first day he came out of his cave and joined the society of his father – without any experience; his argument stemmed from a pure heart and innate disposition. His father and tribe did not have any reason for their idolatry except imitating their forefathers. Abraham expressed his dissociation from their gods, themselves, and their forefathers.

Then he began to introduce "Lord of all the worlds' and the blessings God bestowed upon him. He mentioned the attributes of God through which he gave them his most convincing proof (i.e., "He is a compassionate Lord, who is kind to me, paying attention to me. He has given me all blessings and wards off all evils").

He referred to the first blessing as being created by God, because creation is based on God; the management of the universe relies on Him. God, the Almighty, is a Guide, Who is also a Creator:

God, the Almighty, is the One, Who created me,
And guides me eternally,
And since the day He created me,
He has guided me toward salvation,
And guides me eternally!

The reason why he chose foods, drinks, and recovery from diseases over other blessings is that they are the most important ones. "Making people die" i.e., death is ordained by Him for everybody, as He said,

"Every soul shall taste death." (Qur’an, 3:185)

This death does not mean annihilation and destruction; rather, it is a general management technique in the universe. Likewise, "bringing to life" refers to the life in the hereafter. Prophet Abraham did not God's forgiveness on the Day of Judgment as a definite occurrence; rather, he said,

"And the One who I hope will forgive me!"(Qur’an, 26:82)

Because being forgiven does not depend on one's entitlement to it: it is God's grace on us, and generally God owes nothing to anyone. It is true that He has obliged Himself to guide people, provide them with sustenance, make them die, and bring them to life [in the hereafter], but He has not obliged himself to
forgive every sinner.

**Abraham, A Truthful Prophet**

These verses refer to part of Prophet Abraham’s life-story when he debated with his father about idols using proof, innate guidance, and his certitude-based knowledge, all of which were granted to him by God. It is also about his retreating from his father, the people, and his two sons Is-haaq and Ya’qub. He placed a lasting word – ‘There is no god except Allah,’ the monotheistic creed of Abraham – for generations to come, and gave him and his ancestors a good reputation among all people who would highly revere him:

وَاتَّمَّنَّكُ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِبْرَاهِيمُ ﷺ إِنَّهُ كَانَ صَبِيحًا نَبِيًّا

“And mention in the Book Abraham. Indeed he was a very truthful one, a prophet.” (Qur’an, 19:41).

The one who is very committed to telling the truth is called ‘very truthful’. In other words, he says what he does and does what he says, and there is no contradiction between his sayings and actions. Abraham was so because he spoke of monotheism in a place where everyone was an idolater. He clashed with his father, his contemporaries, and the king of Babylon; broke false gods, and did not give up what he said until he was thrown into the fire. Finally, as he promised to his father, he retreated from everyone in seclusion. As a reward for this persistence, God granted him Is-haaq and Ya’qub and fulfilled other promises He had given him.

**Abraham's Call To His Family**

When Abraham told his father,

إِذَا قَالَ لَيْهِيْيَ يَا أَبِي لَمْ تَعْبُدَ مَا لَا يُمْسِيكَ وَلَا بَيِّنَىْ عَنَّكَ شَيْئًا يَا أَبِي إِنِّي أَتَّمَّنَّكُ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِبْرَاهِيمُ ﷺ إِنَّهُ كَانَ صَبِيحًا نَبِيًّا

قدْ جاءني مِنِّ الْعَلَمِ مَا لَمْ تُبَلِّكْ فَاتَبَغْيُ أَهْدِكَ صَرِّفًا سُوَىْ يَا أَبِي لَمْ تَعْبُدَ الشَّيْطَانَ إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ كانْ لِلْرَّحْمَٰنِ عَصِيبًا يَا أَبِي إِنِّي أَتَّمَّنَّكُ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِبْرَاهِيمُ ﷺ إِنَّهُ كَانَ صَبِيحًا نَبِيًّا

O’ Father! Why do you worship idols?
O’ Father! Indeed a knowledge has already come to me which has not come to you.
So follow me that I may guide you to a right path.
O’ Father! Do not worship Satan.
Indeed Satan is disobedient to the All-beneficent.
O' Father! I am indeed afraid that a punishment from the All-beneficent will befall you, And you will become Satan's accomplice! (Qur'an, 19:42–45).

In the above verses, Prophet Abraham pointed out two issues:

1. His father's ideology to worship idols was invalid and false.

2. He had some knowledge that his father lacked, and it is incumbent on the father to follow Abraham so that he may be guided to the right path as his father was at the risk of the wilayah of Satan.

(Note: As mentioned above, the one who was called "O' Father!" by Abraham was not his real, biological father; rather, he was his paternal uncle, maternal grandfather, or his stepfather.)

Abraham's Knowledge Before The Start Of His Religious Call

Because Abraham spoke with his father in his early life at the start of his religious call, and said,

"Indeed a knowledge has already come to me" (Qur'an, 19:43).

One can conclude that Abraham had knowledge of the right path before his religious call and arguments. Years before meeting and debating with his father and tribe, he had certitude-based knowledge of God and saw the kingdom (malakut) of heaven and the earth. When he said,

"That I may guide you to a right path " (Qur'an, 19:43).

He meant showing it rather than him taking them towards it because it is not the duty of a prophet to take his Ummah to the right path: his duty is merely to show it to them. It is the duty of "Imam" to take people to the right path, and those days Abraham had not reached the rank of "Imamate" yet. He reached this rank in his old age and after years of prophethood.

Prohibiting One's Family From Satan's Wilayah

By prohibiting his father from worshipping Satan, Abraham forbade him from obeying Satan. If a person – through Satanic deceits and ornaments – worships Satan and seeks proximity to him, he will be deprived of God's mercy (which is the very guiding of people to salvation) and will be punished since Divine help will no longer be given. God will no longer be his guardian; instead, Satan will be his master, and he will be Satan's friend. All in all, this is tantamount to annihilation. Hence, Abraham told his father:
O' father! Do not obey what Satan orders you to do, including idols-worship, because Satan itself disobeyed God and insists on disobedience to God, Who is the source of all mercy and blessings. (Qur'an, 19:44).

Thus, if someone disobeys God, Who is the source of all blessings, he will be deprived of God's mercy. Abraham told his father,

"I forbid you from worshipping Satan because I am afraid that you are punished by God and deprived of His mercy. Then you will have nothing but Wilayah of Satan, and inevitably you will be Satan’s friend, and Satan will be your master." (Qur'an, 19:45).

Consequently:

1. Worship Of Satan Means Obeying Him.
2. The use of the word "All-beneficent' instead of "Allah" is to point out that He is the source of all mercy and blessings so that one will not be deprived of his mercy and become wretched.
3. Here, punishment means being deprived of God’s assistance and the like such as God’s not having mercy on him and leaving him alone.

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1. The Qur’an says, "Lo! Abraham said to his lither Azar: “Takest thou idols for gods? For I see thee and thy people in manifest error.”" (6:74) According to Shi’a exegetes, Azar was the guardian of Abraham and his uncle or maternal grandfather and not his real father. This will be discussed in detail later.
2. A detailed account of his argumentation and debate can be found in the Qur’anic verses no. 51-56 in chapter al-Anbiya, no. 69-77 in chapter al-Shu'ara, and no. 83-88 in chapter al-Saffat.
3. The account of such debates can be found in the Qur’anic verses no. 74–82 in the chapter al An'am.
4. The account of the discussion above can be found in Qur’anic verses no. 56–70 in chapter al Anbiya, and no. 88–98 in chapter al-Saffat.
5. These events and contentions are referred in the Qur’anic verse no. 258 of the chapter al-Baqarah.
6. This part of his life is referred to in the Qur’anic verses no. 4 of chapter al-Mumtahanah and no. 100 of chapter al-Saffat.
7. The Qur’anic verses no. 4 of the chapter al-Mumtahanah and no. 71 of the chapter al Anbiya refer to this historic migration.
8. The Qur’anic verses no. 127–129 of the chapter al-Baqarah and no. 96–97 of the chapter Ale Imran refer to these historical realities.
9. The Qur’anic verses no. 126 of the chapter al-Baqarah and no. 35–41 of the chapter Abraham recount how Ka'bah was built.
10. These acts of worship are elaborated on in the Qur’anic chapter al-Hajj, verses no. 26–30.
11. The Qur’anic verses no. 101–107 of the chapter al-Saffat depict this event.
12. This prayer is referred to in the verses no. 35–41 of the chapter Abraham.
14. This issue is discussed in the commentary on the verses no. 74–83 of the chapter al-An'am.


16. Refer to Surah Al-Baqarah:

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاهُ بِالْحَقِّ بِشَهِرٍ وَلَدِينٍ وَلَا سَأَلْنَاهُ عَنْ أَصْحَابِ الْجَحِيم

Surely We have sent you with the truth as a bearer of good news and as a warner, and you shall not be called upon to answer for the companions of the flaming fire. (Qur’an, 2:119).

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