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The Sacrificial Son of Ibrahim: Discourse on Q.37:102 with Emphasis on Hamka's Tafsir Azhar

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Abstract: This study investigates the identity of the sacrificial son mentioned in the Qur'anic narrative of Ibrahim, with particular focus on verse Q.37:102. It examines the exegetical discourse surrounding this passage by engaging with interpretations from classical scholars such as al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir, alongside the modern perspective of Hamka in his Tafsir Azhar. Through qualitative analysis of scriptural references, exegetical arguments, and historical contexts, the paper highlights the complexity of this narrative and its theological significance within Islamic thought. Special emphasis is placed on Hamka's approach, which combines rigorous textual analysis with cultural insight, offering a distinctive resolution to the longstanding debate. The findings underscore the importance of careful engagement with primary sources and demonstrate Hamka's extensive scholarship, ultimately affirming the identification of Ismail as the sacrificial son.

Keywords: Qur'anic exegesis, Sacrificial son, Q.37:102, Hamka, Tafsir Azhar

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INTRODUCTION

The story of Prophet Ibrahim's (Abraham's) willingness to sacrifice his son stands as one of the most profound and debated narratives in Ibrahamic traditions. Central to this discourse is the question of which son, Ishaq (Isaac) or Ismail (Ishmael), was intended for sacrifice, a subject that has generated extensive theological, exegetical, and historical discussion across Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources. While the Torah and the New Testament predominantly identify Isaac as the sacrificial son, Islamic scholarship presents a more nuanced debate, with early and modern exegetes offering differing perspectives based on scriptural interpretation and transmitted traditions.

This paper explores the identity of the sacrificial son as presented in the Qur'an, focusing particularly on verse 37:102, and examines the interpretations of classical scholars such as al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir, as well as the insights of the modern Indonesian exegete Hamka in his *Tafsir Azhar*. By analysing scriptural references, exegetical arguments, and the historical context of these interpretations, the study aims to illuminate the complexity of this narrative and its significance within Islamic thought. Special emphasis is placed on Hamka's approach, which not only addresses the longstanding debate but also offers a distinctive perspective rooted in both textual analysis and cultural understanding

Scriptural References to Ismail and Ishaq

The names of Ismail and Ishaq appear in the Qur'an in distinct contexts and arrangements. Ismail is mentioned on his own in several verses: 2:125, 2:127, 6:86, 19:54, 21:85, and 38:48. In contrast, Ishaq is referred to independently in 6:84, 11:71, 12:6, 19:49, 21:72, 29:27, and 37:113. Notably, verses 2:125 and 2:127 reference Ismail together with his father Ibrahim, specifically in relation to the construction of the Kaaba.

In Chapter *An'am*, the Qur'an differentiates between the two sons by mentioning Ishaq in verse 84 and Ismail in verse 86. Addressing this separation, al-Razi explains in his tafsir: "If someone were to ask: Why was Ismail not mentioned alongside Ishaq, and instead his mention was delayed by several degrees? We would answer: Because the intended focus of mention here is the prophets of the Children of Israel, all of whom are descendants of Ishaq and Ya'qub (Jacob)."[1]

When both sons are named together, as in 2:140, 3:84, 4:163, and 14:39, Ismail is consistently listed before Ishaq. This ordering suggests that Ismail was the eldest son of Ibrahim, preceding Ishaq in birth. Qur'an 14:39 supports this interpretation: "All praise be to Allah Who, despite my old age, has given me Ismail and Ishaq. Surely my Lord hears all prayers," illustrating Ibrahim's gratitude by mentioning Ismail first in his supplication.

[1] Al-Razi, Fakhr al-Din, *Mafatih al-Ghaib*, Dar al-Fikr, 1981, vol.13, p.51

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The Identity of the Sacrificial Son in Ibrahamic Scripture

The question of which son Prophet Ibrahim was commanded to sacrifice is extensively discussed in the Torah and the Injil. Both of these biblical sources largely concur that Ishaq (Isaac) was the son selected for sacrifice. This is most evident in Genesis 22:2: "Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.'" This passage recounts the trial of Abraham's faith and obedience through God's command to sacrifice Isaac.

The New Testament reinforces this perspective with references such as Hebrews 11:17: "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice," and James 2:21: "Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?" Both passages explicitly name Isaac as the son involved in the sacrificial event.

Scholarly Perspectives and Continuing Debate

Divergent opinions exist among Western scholars regarding the identity of the sacrificial son. Abraham Geiger asserts that Ismail was the intended sacrifice, while Richard Bell maintains that it was Ishaq.[2] The debate is mirrored in Islamic scholarship, where some scholars support the view that Ismail was the chosen son, while others argue in favor of Ishaq.

This enduring discussion demonstrates the complexity of interpreting sacred texts and the significant role of religious tradition and scholarly analysis. Within this broader discourse, the article examines the perspective of the Indonesian scholar Hamka, whose interpretation contributes valuable insight into the identity of the intended sacrificial son as understood in Islamic thought.

General Discussion by Early Exegetes on the Intended Sacrificial Son of Ibrahim

Tabari's Exegetical Discussion of the Sacrificial Son

The narrative concerning the sacrifice of Ibrahim's son is addressed in Quran 37:102. From the earliest periods, Muslim exegetes have debated the identity of the son, with significant attention given to this issue by the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad and later scholars. Among them, Tabari stands out for his comprehensive treatment of the topic in his exegetical work, *Jami` al-Bayan Fi Ta`wil Ayi al-Qur'an*.

In his commentary, Tabari records two main viewpoints regarding the identity of the intended sacrificial son: some authorities claim it was Ismail, while others assert it was Ishaq. To support these perspectives, Tabari presents two distinct sets of narrations. The first set, which identifies Ishaq as the intended son, is attributed to various authorities, most notably Ikrimah and Qatadah. Many of these narratives are traced to Ka`ab, a Muslim convert originally from the Jewish, also known as one of the People of the Book.

The second set of narrations favors Ismail as the son whom Ibrahim was commanded to sacrifice. Notably, these accounts are traced back to Ka`ab al-Ahbar.[3] Tabari also includes two reports suggesting that it was the Jews who changed the name from Ismail to Ishaq in the narrative, reflecting the influence of religious tradition on the transmission and interpretation of this story.

Reports from Muhammad bin Ka'ab al-Qurazi, who was of Jewish origin, recounted an incident in Damascus involving Umar b. Abd al-Aziz. Al-Qurazi asked Umar who he believed was the true intended victim of the sacrifice. Umar responded that he had not considered the matter previously but agreed with al-Qurazi's view. Seeking further clarity, Umar summoned a man present in Syria, a Jew who had converted to Islam and was recognized as a learned scholar among the Jewish community. Umar then questioned him about which of Abraham's sons was commanded to be sacrificed. The man replied that it was Ismail, affirming his certainty by swearing an oath. He explained further, "O caliph, the Jews know this fact, but out of envy toward the Arab community, whose ancestor, Ismail, was the one commanded to be sacrificed and thus credited with steadfastness, they deny it and claim that it was Ishaq, as Ishaq was their ancestor."

Another tradition supporting Ismail as the intended sacrificial son is reported in the court of the Umayyad caliph Umar b. Abd al-Aziz. According to al-Shanabihi,[4] a discussion arose in the presence of Mu'awiyah b. Abi Sufyan regarding whether Ismail or Ishaq was the intended sacrificial son. Mu'awiyah asserted his knowledge of the matter and recalled an occasion with the Prophet Muhammad. During that event, a man approached the Prophet and said, "O Apostle of God, repeat to me the knowledge God has given you, O son of two intended sacrifices." The Prophet laughed, and Mu'awiyah inquired further, "O Commander of the faithful, who are the two intended sacrifices?" He explained that Abd al-Muttalib, when commanded to dig Zamzam, vowed to sacrifice one of his sons if successful. The lot fell on Abdullah, but his maternal uncles intervened and suggested redeeming him

[2] Reuven Firestone, Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice (Al-Dhabih, Qur'an 37:99-113): Issues in Qur'anic Exegesis, *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 1989, p. 98.

[3] Reuven Firestone, Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice (Al-Dhabih, Qur'an 37:99-113): Issues in Qur'anic Exegesis, *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 1989, p. 98.

[4] He was a Successor who came to Medina from Yemen after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

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with one hundred camels, which was done. The intended sacrifice was Ismail.[5]

Despite presenting multiple traditions, Tabari ultimately concludes that the opinion he regards as most accurate is that the intended sacrificial son was Ishaq. In his historical work, *Tarikh*, Tabari notes that some reports identify the son as Ishaq, while others claim it was Ismail.[6] It appears that Tabari relied primarily on transmitted reports rather than analyzing the contextual meaning of the narrative, which may have provided additional insight into the identity of the intended sacrificial son.

Ibn Kathir's View on the Identity of the Sacrificial Son

Ibn Kathir, in his historical work al-Bidayah wa-l-Nihayah, presents a clear position regarding the identity of the intended sacrificial son in the story of Abraham. He asserts that there is no disagreement among Muslim scholars on this matter: the son whom Abraham was commanded to sacrifice was Ismail. This view, according to Ibn Kathir, is not only accepted among Muslims but also reflected in the traditions of the People of the Book.

Expanding upon this in his Qur'anic exegesis, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*, Ibn Kathir interprets verse Q.37:101 and explains that the phrase "*ghulam halim*", meaning "a forbearing son", refers specifically to Ismail. He notes that Ismail was the eldest son of Abraham, born when Abraham was eighty six years old, while Ishaq was born when Abraham reached the age of ninety six. Ibn Kathir emphasises that this timeline is agreed upon by both Muslims and the People of the Book.[7]

Ibn Kathir further claims that the narrative was altered by the People of the Book, who swapped the name of Ismail with Ishaq, due to their connection with Ishaq as the ancestor of the Jews, whereas Ismail is considered the forefather of the Arabs. Although Ibn Kathir acknowledges that some scholars have put forward the view that Ishaq was the intended sacrificial son, he insists that this opinion lacks any basis in the Qur'an or in the traditions of the Prophet. He concludes that such a view must have been adopted from the People of the Book, as there is no supportive evidence for it within Islamic sources.

In his commentary on Quran 37:101, Ibn Kathir reiterates that Ismail was the first child born to Abraham, fulfilling the glad tidings given to him. Ismail is described as older and greater than Ishaq, and, according to the consensus of Muslims and the People of the Book, the scriptures also state that Ismail was born when Abraham was eightysix years old, while Ishaq was born when Abraham was ninety nine years old.[8]

The discussion concerning the identity of Abraham's sacrificial son has continued among modern Muslim exegetes, particularly when interpreting the relevant Qur'anic verses. For instance, Ibn 'Asyur maintains that the boy whom Abraham received the good news of was Ismail, his firstborn. He clarifies that this was not the same child mentioned in the story of the angels visiting the people of Lut. Instead, the birth of Ismail was the direct result of Abraham's prayer to God for righteous offspring.

The article proceeds to examine the perspective of the modern exegete Hamka, drawing from his work *Tafsir Azhar*, in relation to the identity of the intended sacrificial son of the Prophet Ibrahim.

Hamka

Hamka's discussion on slaughtered son of Ibrahim takes place from verse 99, Chapter 37 (*Saffat*). He begins his discussion by highlighting Ibrahim's heartfelt prayer for a child, as he had remained childless despite many years of marriage. This longing for offspring is set against the backdrop of Ibrahim's unwavering resolve to migrate, a determination that Hamka describes as irrevocable. Migration (*hijrah*), according to Hamka, manifests in two forms: an inner transformation of the heart or a physical relocation, which involves leaving one's homeland, community, and family while placing complete trust in God's guidance (Qur'an 37:99).

Before embarking on this journey, Ibrahim realized his solitude without a child and prayed earnestly: *"My Lord! Bless me with righteous offspring."* (37:100). With Sarah's consent, Ibrahim married Hajar, Sarah's maid, hoping for a son. At the age of eighty-six, his prayer was fulfilled when Hajar gave birth to Ismail, whom the Qur'an describes as *"a forbearing son"* (37:101).

Hamka draws attention to the distinction between forbearance (*ḥilm*) and patience (*ṣabr*). Forbearance, he explains, is a deeply ingrained character trait, a calm and enduring disposition, whereas patience is situational, a temporary restraint in the face of sudden trials. Ismail's characterization as forbearing thus reflects a profound inner strength rather than mere reactive patience.

When Ismail reached an age where he could accompany his father, likely between ten and fifteen years old, Ibrahim shared his vision, *"O my dear son! I*

[5] See Tabari, *Jami` al-Bayan Fi Takwil Ayi al-Qu'ran*, ed. Abdullah b Muhsin al-Turki, Giza: Dar Hajr, 2001, vol.19, p.597 ; Reuven Firestone, Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice (*Al-Dhabih*), Qur'an 37:99-113, Issues in Qur'anic Exegesis, *Journal of Semitic Studies*, No. 1 , March 1989, pp. 117-118.

[6] Tabari, *Tarikh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulk*, ed. Muhammad Abu Fadhl Ibrahim, 2nd ed., Cairo: Dar al-Ma`arif, n.d., vol. 1, pp. 272-274

[7] Ibnu Kathir, *Ringkasan al-Bidayah wa-l-Nihayah (The Abridgment of al-Bidayah wa-l-Nihayah)*, p. 64, n.d. n.p.

[8] Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, vol.7. pp. 27-28

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have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice you. So tell me what you think." (Q.37:102) Ismail's response was immediate and unwavering: *"O my dear father! Do as you are commanded. Allah willing, you will find me steadfast."* (37:102).

Hamka elaborates extensively on the identity of the sacrificial son. He firmly maintains that it was Ismail, not Ishaq, who was chosen for this trial. His reasoning follows the Qur'anic narrative: after years of longing and with Sarah's consent, Abraham married Hajar, who bore Ismail. When interpreting verse 37:102, Hamka emphasizes that Abraham's words, *"I am sacrificing you"* were addressed to Ismail during their journey together. Hamka does not entertain the alternative view that Ishaq was the intended sacrifice, consistently affirming Ismail's role in this profound act of submission.

After concluding his interpretation on verse 102, Hamka allocates a specific discussion in which he names it "who will be slaughtered, Ismail or Ishaq? He acknowledge that a great exegetes since the time of Tabari, Razi, Qurtubi, Ibn Kathir and others have discussed the issue in question in which the disagreement concerning this issue went back to the time of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad. Among those Companions who opined that the slaughtered was Ishaq are Abbas and his son Abdullah, Abdullah bin Mas`ud, Jabir bin Abdullah, Ali bin Abu Talib, Abdullah bin Umar and Umar bin Khattab. Among the Successors were `Alqamah, Sya`bi, Mujahid, Said bi Jubair, Ka`ab al-Ahbar, Qatadah, Masruq, Ikrimah, al-Qasim bin Abi Bazzah, Atha', Muqatil, Abdul Rahman bin Abdullah bin Thabit, Zuhri, Suddi, Abdullah bin Hudzail, and Malik bin Anas.

Among those who opined that the slaughtered was Ismail are Abu Hurairah, Abu Thufail, Amir bin Waailah, another opinion of Abdullah bin Abbas as well as Abdullah bin Umar and among the followers were Said bin Musayyab, Sya`bi, Yusuf bin Mihram, Mujahid, Rabi` bin Anas, Muhammad bin Ka`b al-Quradzi, Kalbi dan `Alqamah. Hamka quotes that Ashma'i has asked Abu Amr bin al-Alaa who said to him, "Where did you place your mind, O Ashma`i?"

When did Ishaq has been to Mecca. The one who has been to Mecca was Ismail, not Ishaq. He and with his father were commanded by Allah to build Ka`ba. *Manhar*, the place of slaughtering was in Mina, not in Syam. Hamka mentions that Tabari says the slaughtered was Ishaq whereas according to Ibn Kathir, it was Ismail. According to Ibn Kathir, the report saying that the slaughtered was Ishaq owes it from Ka`ab al-Ahbar,[9]. Sarah grew deeply resentful and jealous of her former servant, who had become her co-wife, because she had borne a child. She then urged her husband to send Hajar and Ismail away. So Abraham led them both to the valley of Mecca.

CONCLUSION

The discourse on Q.37:102 regarding the identity of Ibrahim's sacrificial son reveals a rich tapestry of exegetical interpretations within Islamic scholarship. Classical commentators such as Tabari and Ibn Kathir provide foundational perspectives that have shaped the traditional understanding of this narrative, while Hamka's *Tafsir Azhar* offers a distinctive approach that integrates textual rigor with cultural sensitivity. Through qualitative analysis, this study underscores the necessity of careful engagement with primary sources and the value of broad scholarly reading, as exemplified by Hamka's methodology. His interpretation not only reaffirms the identification of Ismail as the sacrificial son but also situates the discussion within a framework that resonates with contemporary Muslim thought. Ultimately, this inquiry highlights the enduring significance of exegetical diversity and the role of modern scholarship in enriching the understanding of Qur'anic narratives.

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[9] The former priest of Jewish in Medina. *Tafsir al-Azhar*, vol. 23, pp.195-197.

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