

ABRAHAM IN THE KORAN¹

NORMAN DANIEL

THIS impressive book marks very clearly the revolution that is taking place in Christian thinking about Islam, and at the same time it illustrates an important new trend in scholarly treatment of the Qur'ān. In the past, theological hatred of Islam has often been stronger among Oriental Christians than among Latins; the prejudice shared by both has been intensified by the frustrations of subordination in the political and social order. Now this important book comes from a Maronite author, that is, from the Church traditionally most anti-Muslim. It enjoys the blessing of that truly remarkable prelate, H. B. Mgr Meouchi, the Patriarch, who, however, is far from being at one with his church. The book is a little dour; it has all the severity of the thesis form. Even when it was turned into a book, the solid meat was served without sauce. This criticism, which militates against its readability, is the only criticism I can wish to make of a book which greatly promotes understanding of Islam, and clears new paths for scholarship.

It reverses the traditional attitude of Christians and of scholars, in a very simple revolution, which consists in treating the Qur'ān as a religious book; in treating it consistently as consistently a religious book; in assuming that religious ideas inspired and informed it and guided the Prophet. From the earliest days of Christian criticism, Islam was supposed to have been contrived out of Christian, Jewish and pagan elements, by a false prophet; hypocritically, it was thought in the old days, and more or less sincerely, or innocently, in a more modern view. The advent of modernist historical methods meant no break with the past; Christians, alas, had long before picked Islam to pieces. The deliberate or indeliberate *contrivance* of Islamic belief was taken for granted by modern scholars until recently; this is true of so brilliant a book, among recent publications, as Bell's *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, which analyses the Qur'ān with great subtlety, but never implies the idea that it has any part of truth. Latterly we have seen Muhammad treated as a consistent religious figure, and we have seen respectful treatment of Islam as a whole for rather longer; now, at last, Christians are invited to appreciate the Qur'ān itself.

The traditional attitude of scholarship to the key question of the position of Abraham in the Qur'ān was that in Mecca Muhammad was ignorant of Judaism and treated Abraham as a Jew, in the belief that the Jews would accept himself, Muhammad, as, in his turn, a

¹ *Abraham dans le Coran*. By Y. Moubarac. Etudes Musulmanes, No. V. (Librairie Philosophique: J. Vrin, Paris; n.p.)

true prophet; in Medina, faced with the reality of Jewish opposition, he built Abraham up as a non-Jewish, non-Christian, all-Islamic figure, the prototype of himself. Thus was added the weight of scholarship to a view nearly as old as the preaching of the Qur'an itself. To this the author opposes a new concept. He shows that there is consistent development of the figure of Abraham, an evolution which takes place 'under the impulse of religious thought'. This is the crucial question. The evidence is treated carefully and shown to suit the new interpretation as well as it did the old. Abraham is shown to be already in the Meccan period the type of religious perfection, and wholly independently of anti-Jewish or anti-Christian polemic.

The characteristic of this book is the care with which every passage is studied in order to extract its intended meaning. The Qur'an does not, for example, choose the God of Abraham in order to be different from Jews and Christians; it recognizes a difference because it believes the Only God of Abraham to be incompatible with their 'modified monotheism'. The second part of the book is given to textual exegesis; to Abraham as the 'model' of Islam and to his position in the religious history of the world, according to the Quranic conception; and it concludes with an essay of comparison between the Biblical and Quranic treatments of Abraham.

This leads on to the consideration (in a final appendix) of the 'sources' of the Qur'an. Jewish scholars have tended to recognize Jewish sources for the Qur'an, Christians to find, often in the same material, a Christian origin. The author perceives the need for a greater subtlety of method. Quranic words may be precisely related to words in Jewish or Christian sources, but the ideas they are used to convey may be 'much more variable' and wholly original. He points out that the comparison of texts is useful but can rarely prove direct borrowing; his own methods bring out the 'literary' originality and independence of the Qur'an. There is a valuable note on the ways in which Islamic belief in the Qur'an as the uncreated Word of God yet need not exclude the reasonable study of 'sources'.

An attempt, towards the conclusion of the book, to describe the spiritual lessons of the Quranic history of Abraham as they might appear to a Muslim 'anxious to interiorise his faith through Quranic readings' is brilliant, both delicate and sincere; it is of universal spiritual value, while aiming to avoid the danger of so Christianizing Islam as to make it unacceptable to Muslims. This tendency in the past has limited the success of much that has been done to build a bridge between the religions; the present attempt seems to deserve to come nearer to success than its predecessors.