

Children's Roles in Quranic Stories

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Abstract

The Quran is full of beautiful stories, which enlighten the hearts. These stories have been the subject of many studies and articles. The current study focuses on the place and role of children in Quranic stories. These children are the most heart-touching, gentle, and influential elements of the stories. The special conditions of childhood and the relations and connections between these children and the other characters put them in an outstanding position both for guiding the others in the story and for conveying the particular divine message of each story.

Keywords: Quranic stories, Children, Prophets, Role.

Introduction

A storyteller develops various elements and characters of the story based on different considerations. Often a character is focused upon, not only for narrating what happens to him/her but more importantly for what can be evoked in the reader, as if the reader is guided through the journey of the story by its various characters. A character may play the first role, a supporting role, or even a very indirect and behind-the-scene role but nevertheless leads the reader in a certain way.

Sacred texts such as the Quran are full of true stories that connect with the reader on a deeper level. These stories, which constitute a considerable part of these texts, are well developed to give guidance and glad tidings to the reader. Markedly interesting and extraordinary is the children's role in these stories. Their role can start many years before they are born or when the parents are informed of their birth. Sometimes these little children depict everlasting and beautiful pictures of devotion and obedience towards God. These pure and innocent children show us a world full of light and spirituality.

In this paper, we look at several stories from the Quran and see how the role of children in these stories goes beyond the usual. These dear children often contribute to the growth and elevation of others, and many deep spiritual concepts are conveyed through their blessed presence.

1. The Role of Baby Ishmael

Ishmael is mentioned in the Quran twelve times, in eight of which he is praised beside other prophets. But the verses that talk about his childhood never mention his name and only narrate the story.

1.1. Meek Ishmael, the Response to Abraham's prayer

Abraham is finally freed from the ignorance of the pagans and Nimrod's tyranny. As he and his family arrive in the Levant, he prays to God and asks Him for a child: "My Lord, grant me [a child] from among the righteous" (37:100). God responds to his prayer: "So We gave him good tidings of a forbearing boy" (37:101). Baby Ishmael was God's response to this prayer. The baby is described as *halim* (meek or forbearing). In all its occurrences in the Quran, this adjective is used for God, except two times: once for Abraham in 9:114 and once for Ishmael in the aforementioned verse. Ishmael is indeed the full embodiment of meekness. His childhood is spent away from his father in a barren land. Later, in the story of Abraham's great sacrifice, Ishmael's meekness is fully manifested.

1.2. The Story of the Migration of Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca

Per God's order, Abraham, his wife Hagar, and his infant Ishmael start a daring migration, which later became the basis for Hajj pilgrimage. Abraham was ordered to leave his wife and his infant in that arid land. Upon his departure, he felt great sympathy for them and cried to God: "Our Lord, I have settled some of my descendants in an uncultivated valley near Your sacred House, our Lord, that they may establish prayer. So make hearts among the people incline toward them and provide for them from the fruits that they might be grateful" (Quran 14:37).

Abraham left Hagar alone with his infant. The thirst and the burning heat meant that they had to find water very soon. Hagar, hoping to find water, ran back and forth the distance between al-Safa and al-Marwah hills seven times. After the last time, a miracle happened: Ishmael hits sand dunes with his tiny heels, and suddenly

water starts to stream under his feet—the water which continues to well up in the Zamzam until today. God’s response to Abraham’s prayer started with water flowing from underneath Ishmael’s feet, and more blessings flew to that land subsequently.

Elaborating upon the role of Ishmael in this story, the following can be mentioned: First, God took Hagar and Ishmael away from their home, leaving behind all their belongings, afloat in the sea of divine will. This sets the precedence for a divine tradition: when a believer finds all doors of hope closed, leaves behind all attachments to the world, and trusts in God, God showers him with infinite mercy and blessings. In this story, Hagar turns to God in this emergency situation with supplication and extraordinary effort, and God answers her prayer. The beauty of this story is crystalized when Hagar is searching, running, and appealing to God to save her child, and God makes water flow under the feet of this innocent child. And with the intermediation of Ishmael’s tiny heels, the impossible is made possible. Ishmael’s plea for water is so deep and strong that the answer to it is not only life and blessings for him and his mother but for other people of his time and future generations. Hagar supplicates and endeavors, and her prayer is answered with the intermediation of Ishmael, as if all blessings and bounties is delivered to men via the intermediation of a perfect human being. When Ishmael is born and many virtues are expected to be manifest in him, envy emerges in Sarah, the pious wife of a great prophet, with whom angels talked: “And his Wife was standing, and she smiled. Then We gave her good tidings of Isaac and after Isaac, Jacob (11:71).” So, Abraham is commanded to move Ishmael out of Sarah’s life, together with envy and its negative effects. Ishmael and his future brother Isaac will be nourished in safe and quite places to continue Abraham’s prophethood.

Second, anyone reading this story would say that Abraham should not have submitted to the irrational request of Sarah to move away Ishmael and put him and Hagar in so much difficulty. But when Abraham asks God for a solution, he is faced with the same very difficult choice. So, Ishmael becomes a medium of a very difficult test of devotion for Abraham, and subsequently a medium of exaltation and growth for him. The father has to leave his family in a barren and dry land and fully submit to God's order.

1.3. The Story of the Great Sacrifice

The mystery of the divine order to sacrifice Ishmael is to attain more affinity with God. The Almighty wished to test this father and son and remove any barrier between them and Him. Abraham loved this tender child so much and God wanted to break this attachment (Maybudi 1371 Sh, 8:300). He also wanted Ishmael to let go of his sweet life for the Beloved.

The story is narrated in Quran 37:102-7. Baby Ishmael plays such a pronounced role alongside his father that it is difficult to say who had the first role. If this honorable child showed any sign of fear or restlessness, his father probably would not be able to pass this divine test successfully. It was exactly this patience that put Ishmael among patient prophets: "And [mention] Ishmael and Idrees and Dhal-Kifl; all were of the patient (21:85)." Also, because of his patience and submission, Ishmael is referred to as promise-keeper (Razi 1420 AH, 26:153-54; Qurtubi 1364 Sh, 15:68): "And mention in the Book, Ishmael. Indeed, he was true to his promise, and he was a messenger and a prophet." (19:54).

Therefore, the role of Ishmael in the story of the great sacrifice can be noted in the following points:

a. Ishmael is once again the means of divine test and ultimately growth for his father. Abraham asked God for years to have a child, but now that his son is grown up and his dream has come true, God Almighty orders Abraham to sacrifice him. All that love and all those years of waiting should turn into submission to God's order. This dear child is a precious medium for Abraham to show his purity and contentment with God's will and for getting closer to Him.

b. Ishmael at his very young age is the other hero of this story with his submission and contentment with God's (and his father's) order. This was a great glory that was given to this meek child, and his memory is honored today in Hajj with the ceremony of sacrifice (Tabataba'i 1374 Sh, 7:339-41).

2. Role of Isaac as a Child in Quranic Stories

Abraham looks at having children through its long term results and considers future generations. He prays not only for his direct children but for all his descendants: "My Lord, make me an establisher of prayer, and [many] from my descendants. Our Lord, and accept my supplication" (14:40).

2.1. Annunciation of Isaac's Birth

Sarah was amongst the first people who believed in Abraham and his prophethood. She was tired of Nimrud's disbelief and misdeeds and appreciated the faith, piety, and high morals of Abraham. As a result, she fell in love with Abraham and married him. Sarah was affluent and wealthy with many lands and sheep. She devoted all her properties to Abraham, while he managed and expanded them. As a result, Abraham became one of the wealthiest men of his time (Kulayni 1407 AH, 8:370).

After all the cruelty of Nimrod to Abraham, the latter decided to emigrate. Sarah, Abraham's devoted wife, accompanied him in that dangerous journey. Because of all her sacrifices and good deeds, Sarah reached such a high spiritual level that, along with Abraham, she was addressed by the angels and was given the glad tidings of the birth of Isaac and then Jacob. In other words, Isaac has an invisible role in the story of the annunciation of his birth, though he still does not exist in this world. It is all because of Isaac that Sarah is addressed by the angels. It is reported that the conversation between the angels and the couple (Abraham and Sarah) is much longer than what is narrated in the Quran. It is said that when Gabriel saw Sarah's surprise and wonder, Gabriel asked Sarah to look at the dried wood of the ceiling. The wood became green and full of fruits. This ensured Sarah of God's promise about Isaac (Ibn al-Jawzi 1422 AH, 2:387).

2.2. Isaac, the Knowledgeable Servant

'*Alim* (knowledgeable) is used in the Quran only for God and Isaac. It appears 161 times in the Quran; in all the usages, it is an adjective for God except in two instances where it is used as an adjective for Isaac.¹ In these two cases, it is followed by the word "servant." Hence, we infer that the state of being a perfect knowledgeable entity is restricted to God. Referring to other Quranic verses which mention Isaac's name (21:72-73) shows that Isaac, together with Abraham and Jacob, had the position of imamate,. This imamate, or leadership, does not seem to be limited to religious matters, because Abraham, for instance, was a prophet and religious leader years before reaching the position of

1. In three cases in the Quran, '*alim* appears as a false adjective used by the sorcerers for themselves (7:109; 10:79; 26:34).

imamate. Hence, this imamate refers to social leadership and executive authority. With executive orders, an Imam can lead the society and its members to perfection, which also elevates their spiritual position. So, perhaps the good news of Isaac's birth, along with referring to him as "*alim*" is a way to inform Abraham that his child, like himself, is going to be a prophet and also an Imam by having the required knowledge for leadership.

3. Role of Joseph as a Child in Quranic Stories

Unlike the stories of other prophets in the Quran, which are narrated in several parts in different places, Joseph's story is narrated wholly in one surah. This story starts with Joseph's strange dream in his childhood.

Joseph's father, Jacob, recognized signs of virtue, smartness, and wisdom in his child, especially after Joseph's true dream. This made Jacob love Joseph even more, leading to Joseph's brothers' jealousy towards him. The brothers planned to take Joseph far away and put him into a well when he was seven or nine years old ('Ayyashi 1380 AH, 2:170). When his brothers put him cruelly into the well and left him, Gabriel came to Joseph consoling him: "So when they took him [out] and agreed to put him into the bottom of the well... But We inspired to him, 'You will surely inform them [someday] about this affair of theirs while they do not perceive [your identity]'" (12:15). It was in the same well that God made Joseph a prophet.

Although Joseph's brothers attempted to destroy him, God made him not only a prophet but one with a high worldly position. Joseph eventually helped Egypt out of a big drought. In fact, the jealousy of his brothers not only could not harm Joseph but also became a way for Joseph to grow. The story highlights the importance of God's will that can work in spite of, and against, human beings' will, as God owns

everything in all worlds. At the end, the brothers unknowingly come back to Joseph to ask him for their basic necessity of life, i.e., food.

In the story of Joseph, God manifests His great power and will in a weak and innocent child, Joseph. In Quran 12:21, God concludes that divine power and will is the ultimate winner among all powers and wills, no matter how hard others try.

4. Role of Moses as a Child in Quranic Stories

4.1. Victory of a Child over the Greatest Worldly Power

Moses' story starts in the Quran with a verse describing the difficult time in which Moses was born: "Indeed, Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and made its people into factions, oppressing a sector among them, slaughtering their [newborn] sons and keeping their females alive. Indeed, he was of the corrupters" (28:4). In order to preserve his empire, Pharaoh ordered the murder of seventy-thousand (Majlisi 1403 AH, 13:52) or ninety-thousand infants (Maybudi 1371 Sh, 7:276). However, the will of God was the ultimate winner; although Pharaoh killed many infants, God saved Moses and put him under the care of Pharaoh himself. Thus, this child became the savior of his people from the oppression and cruelty: "And We wanted to confer favor upon those who were oppressed in the land and make them leaders and make them inheritors" (28:5). Not only is the victory of God's power and will splendidly depicted in this story but also the weakness of anything other than Him is effectively illustrated. Moses, a weak child, becomes the reflection of God's infinitely powerful will.

4.2. Growth of the Mother through Her Child

In Quran 20 and 28, the story of Moses starts with God's inspiration to his mother: "And We inspired to the mother of Moses, 'Suckle him; but when you fear for him, cast him into the river and do not fear and

do not grieve. Indeed, We will return him to you and will make him [one] of the messengers” (28:7) and “When We inspired to your mother what We inspired” (20:38). God inspired Moses’s mother, and Moses was saved in spite of Pharaoh’s efforts. It was because of Moses that his mother was inspired several times by God: “So We restored him to his mother that she might be content and not grieve and that she would know that the promise of Allah is true. But most of the people do not know” (28:13).

Another role of Moses in this story is to show that the promise of God is always true and is achieved through natural ways. This promise did not only return Moses to his mother but also ended the oppression of Pharaoh (Tabatabaei 1374 Sh, 16:16).

4.3. Moses as a Child under the Care of Asiya

God made Asiya and even Pharaoh love Moses :“[Saying], ‘Cast him into the chest and cast it into the river, and the river will throw it onto the bank; there will take him an enemy to Me and an enemy to him.’ And I bestowed upon you love from Me that you would be brought up under My eye” (20:39), which means that God made Moses lovely so that everyone, whether they have faith or not, would love him (Tabarsi 1360 Sh, 16:27). This has not been said of any other prophet in the Quran. Moses was raised in Pharaoh’s palace, but his purity was preserved as he was closely supervised by God. Moses was raised by Asiya, who was faithful and righteous. Prophet Mohammad is reported to have said, “The best of the women of Paradise are Khadija bt. Khuwaylid, Fatima bt. Muhammad, Maryam bt. ‘Imran, and Asiya b. Muzahim, Pharaoh’s wife” (Fayd Kashani 1415 AH, 5:198). Moses’ role in this story was to make Asiya one of the best women of the world.

5. Role of Children in the Stories of Moses and Khidr

One of the strangest Quranic stories is the story of a small child killed by one of the prophets of God. When Moses was told to accompany Khidr in his journey, he saw Khidr killing an innocent child while the child was busy playing: "So they set out, until when they met a boy, he [i.e., Khidr] killed him. [Moses] said, "Have you killed a pure soul for other than [having killed] a soul? You have certainly done a deplorable thing" (18:74). Khidr justified his action by saying, "And as for the boy, his parents were believers, and we feared that he would overburden them by transgression and disbelief" (18:80). It seems that "*khashina*" (we feared) here indicates being concerned. Moreover, this verse means that the child would have led his parents astray, as parents are influenced by their children due to their deep love for them (Tabatabaei 1374 Sh, 13:482). Khidr said afterwards, "So we desired that their Lord would give them in exchange (a son) better in purity (of conduct) and closer in affection" (18:81). Based on a hadith, God gave the parents a girl instead of that boy, and seventy prophets were born among her descendants (Majlisi 1403 AH, 61:291). In other words, by cutting the attachment between the parents and the child, God showed the parents the way of perfection and growth and saved them from disbelief and transgression. The boy in this story is a way to depict God's infinite knowledge and power so that human beings would better understand His wisdom.

Next in the story, Khidr starts to repair a wall in a town whose people were unfriendly to him and Moses. The latter asks Khidr about the reason behind this repair. Khidr explains that there is some treasure hidden under the wall, belonging to two orphans whose father was a good man, and he is repairing the wall so that the hidden treasure remains safe and the children can access it in future. Since the

father was a good person, God had mercy on him and ordered Khidr to repair the wall for the sake of his orphans. Good behavior results in the happiness and well-being of both the good person and his/her descendants. Khidr is a minor actor in this story, while the major character is the virtuous father who was blessed by God because of his good behavior and faith. The orphans along with other characters of this story helped Moses grow in spirituality and knowledge.

6. Role of Mary as a Child in Quranic Stories

6.1. Mary, Chosen by God

Mary was chosen by God to be amongst His special servants, even before she was born. Many of the Quran's verses show her special role and place beside prophets like Adam, Noah, Abraham, and their followers: "Indeed, Allah chose Adam and Noah and the family of Abraham and the family of 'Imran over the worlds" (3:33). Moreover, choosing Mary as one of God's favorite servants means that the prayers of her mother was answered: Mary's mother was given a chosen and blessed child in her old age. She had the honor of being the first girl growing up in the temple under the supervision of a prophet: "So her Lord accepted her with good acceptance and caused her to grow in a good manner and put her in the care of Zechariah. Every time Zechariah entered upon her in the prayer chamber, he found with her provision. He said, 'O Mary, from where is this [coming] to you?' She said, 'It is from Allah. Indeed, Allah provides for whom He wills without account.'" (3:37). This child was specially looked after by God and reached high levels of truthfulness and virtue.

Mary's parents were both righteous servants of God, especially her mother to whose high spirituality the Quran attests. This mother sacrifices all her love to Mary so that she can be raised in the temple and serve God. This is for sure an important step in Mary's spiritual

growth. Furthermore, God wanted her to be raised under the supervision of His prophet Zechariah. This was the greatest mercy of God upon her. Mary took the lead in spirituality over all the people of her time. Zechariah taught her good deeds, knowledge of God, and the Torah (Tabari 1356 Sh, 1:206). In fact, Mary was raised under God's supervision but through Zechariah, as it is stated in the Quran in the story of casting lots for supervising Mary (3:37).

It is important to note that although dispositions and talents are very important, they are never enough for anyone to reach spiritual growth. All dispositions and talents need to be nurtured by hard work, and Mary was so hard-working in worshipping God and acquiring virtues that she reached a spiritual degree where God fed her from heavenly food. This story highlights the role of rightly upbringing a gifted child.

6.2. Heavenly Food for Mary

Mary was a child when she received food from heaven. She attributed this all to the mercy of God and did not attribute anything to herself being special or superior to others. It can be inferred from Quran 3:37 that the food was given to Mary every day, or at least it was there whenever Zechariah visited her (Mustafawi 1360 Sh, 4:177). Zechariah recognized the importance of this heavenly food and found it a miracle from God.

After noticing this significant mercy from God, Zechariah "called upon his Lord, saying, 'My Lord, grant me from Yourself a good offspring. Indeed, you are the Hearer of supplication.'" (3:38). Zechariah asked God to give him a child, as virtuous and pious as Mary. God answered his prayer and blessed him with Yahya, who was the most similar human being and prophet to Jesus and Mary

(Tabataba‘i 1374 Sh, 3:274-75). These all happened while Mary was a child (Zamakhshari 1407 AH, 1:358; Jurjani 1377 Sh, 2:42; Kashani 1336 Sh, 2:214; Husayni Shah ‘Abd al-‘Azimi 1363 Sh, 2:84; Shubbar 1412 AH, 1:89). Surely Zechariah was a great prophet and had already asked God for having a child, but seeing Mary with heavenly food inspired him to pray with faith that his prayer will be heard and answered without doubt.

7. Role of Yahya as a Child in Quranic Stories

Zechariah’s prayers were answered by God, and he was given Yahya. This son is so special that one of the Quranic surahs start with describing him and his miraculous birth. Yahya as a child has yet another important role in the Quran: he was chosen to be a prophet when he was a child. This is unique to Yahya amongst all prophets in the Quran. From his childhood, Yahya was a complete and perfect human being with a high level of wisdom and low attachment to material world. During his childhood, Yahya once saw Jewish scholars praying and worshiping while wearing woolen outfits. Yahya came to his mother asking for the same outfits so that he can join the scholars for prayers. His mother refused as she believed that he was still very young to join the scholars for prayers. Yahya asked his father if children younger than him ever died. Zechariah answered affirmatively and allowed him to join the scholars for prayers (Majlisi 1403 AH, 14:165).

8. Role of Jesus as a Child in Quranic Stories

Jesus was born three months after Yahya. Gabriel informed Mary about her child: “He said, ‘I am only the messenger of your Lord to give you a pure boy.’” (19:19). So, God’s spirit was breathed into Mary: “And [mention] the one who guarded her chastity, so We blew into her [garment] through Our angel [Gabriel], and We made her and

her son a sign for the world” (21:92). So, Jesus was born by God’s will in a miraculous way and without having a father. In this process angels came to Mary several times and talked to her.

Conclusion

Children are important characters in Quranic stories. In some stories, they are the main characters, and in others they are supporting characters helping the main characters to deliver their message. Children are lovely, attractive, and at the same time weak. These characteristics have impacted the roles of children in Quranic stories in several ways. In some stories, loving a child provides the ground for testing the parents. These tests result in the growth and perfection of the parents. This spiritual growth is not only beneficial for the parents but also for society as a whole. In some stories, the efforts of a mother in taking care of her child helps the mother grow and reach high spiritual levels. In these stories, the child is the secondary character of the story in the beginning but gradually becomes the main character. In other stories the child has an invisible but yet important role. Although the child has not yet come to this world, the announcement of his/her birth becomes the origin of mercy and blessing. In yet other Quranic stories, an infant becomes the sign of the great power and will of God and through him the greatest power of his time is overthrown. In several Quranic stories, blessings come through children, but in some others, the children themselves are the blessings, such as the ones who became prophets in their childhood.

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