Isaac or Ishmael? Abraham’s Intended Sacrificed Son

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Summary

The identity of the son whom Abraham was commanded to sacrifice is one of the most interesting points of difference between the biblical and Islamic traditions concerning Abraham (AS). The Torah explicitly identifies the son as Isaac (AS), whereas the Quran does not name the son in its account of the sacrifice. The identification of the son as Ishmael (AS) became the dominant position in later Islamic tradition, but the early Islamic exegetical record is more complicated. A substantial body of early Muslim reports identifies the sacrificed son as Isaac (Ishaq), including reports attributed to prominent Companions (RA), Tabi'een (RA) and early Quranic interpreters. Most significantly, the great early Muslim exegete (a person who performs exegesis, a critical explanation, analysis, or interpretation of a difficult or complex Quranic verses) Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923 CE) not only preserved these reports but ultimately argued that Isaac was the sacrificed son.

Biblical Claim

The issue therefore deserves to be distinguished carefully: the Quran itself does not explicitly say *"Ishmael was sacrificed."* Nor does it name the son at all in the sacrifice passage. The identification of Ishmael is principally an interpretation developed through Islamic exegetical and transmitted traditions. The Torah explicitly names Isaac.

The biblical account is unambiguous. God tells Abraham:[1]

[5]אמֶר קַח־נָא אֶת־בִּנְךָ֞ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ֣ אֲשֶׁר־אָהַ֗בְתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק֮ וְלֶךְ־לְךָ֣ אֶל־אֶ֣רֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה֒ וְהַעֲלֵ֤הוּ שָׁם֙ לְעֹלָ֔ה עַ֚ל אַחַ֣ד הֶהָרִ֔ים אֲשֶׁ֥ר אֹמַ֖ר אֵלֶֽיךָ׃

"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering..."

The son is therefore explicitly identified as Isaac before Abraham begins the journey. The holy Torah (Genesis) then describes Abraham binding Isaac and preparing to sacrifice him, before an angel intervenes and a ram is provided instead. This is the source of the Jewish and Christian understanding that Isaac was the intended sacrificial son.

Hagar and Ishmael are sent away from Abraham's household.[2]

וַיְהִי אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵ֑לֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּ֖ה אֶת־אַבְרָהָ֑ם וַיֹּ֥אמֶר אֵלָ֖יו אַבְרָהָ֣ם וַיֹּ֔אמֶר הִנֵּֽנִי׃

"Some time later God tested Abraham..."

Thus, the biblical narrative presents the sacrifice episode after the separation of Ishmael.

God tells Abraham concerning Ishmael:[3]

כִּ֥י בְיִצְחָ֖ק יִקָּרֵ֣א לְךָ֣ זָֽרַע׃

"It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."

1 Genesis 22:2 (www.sefaria.org/Genesis.22.2?lang=bi&aliyot=0)

2 Genesis 21: Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away.

3 Genesis 21:12

This becomes especially significant when Hebrews later interprets the sacrifice.

Hebrews 11:17–18 says:[4]

Πίστει προσενήνοχεν Ἀβραὰμ τὸν Ἰσαὰκ πειραζόμενος, καὶ τὸν μονογενῆ προσέφερεν ὁ τὰς ἐπαγγελίας ἀναδεξάμενος,

"By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice... even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.'"

Quranic Claim

The holy Quran, however, tells the story differently. The Quran does not name the son.

The relevant passage in the Quran is, Abraham asks God:[5]

"My Lord, grant me [a child] from among the righteous."

God responds:[6]

"So, we gave him good tidings of a forbearing boy."

The boy eventually reaches an age at which he can accompany his father. Abraham tells him:[7]

"O my son, indeed I have seen in a dream that I [must] sacrifice you..."

The son accepts the command. Abraham then prepares to fulfil the vision, but God stops him and says:[8]

"You have fulfilled the vision."

The Quran then states:[9]

"And We ransomed him with a great sacrifice."

Only afterwards does the passage say:[10]

"And We gave him good tidings of Isaac, a prophet from among the righteous."

The critical observation is that verses 100-107 never give the name of the son.

This has led to two principal Islamic interpretations. The later dominant interpretation identifies the son as Ishmael, whereas another early and substantial interpretation identifies him as Isaac. The argument from the Quranic sequence. Those who identify Isaac point particularly to the sequence of the Quranic narrative. In verse 37:100 Abraham asks for a righteous child. Verse 101 says that God

4 Hebrews 11:17–18 — Abraham offered Isaac. (original Greek text)
5 Quran 37:100 -113
6 Quran 37:101
7 Quran 37:102
8 Quran 37:105
9 Quran 37:107
10 Quran 37:112

gave him good news of a ***"forbearing boy"*** (*ghulam halim*). The sacrifice narrative immediately follows. After the sacrifice, verse 112 explicitly announces Isaac.

The question therefore becomes: Who is the ***"forbearing boy"*** in verses 101-102?

The Quran itself does not say Ishmael (Isma'il)

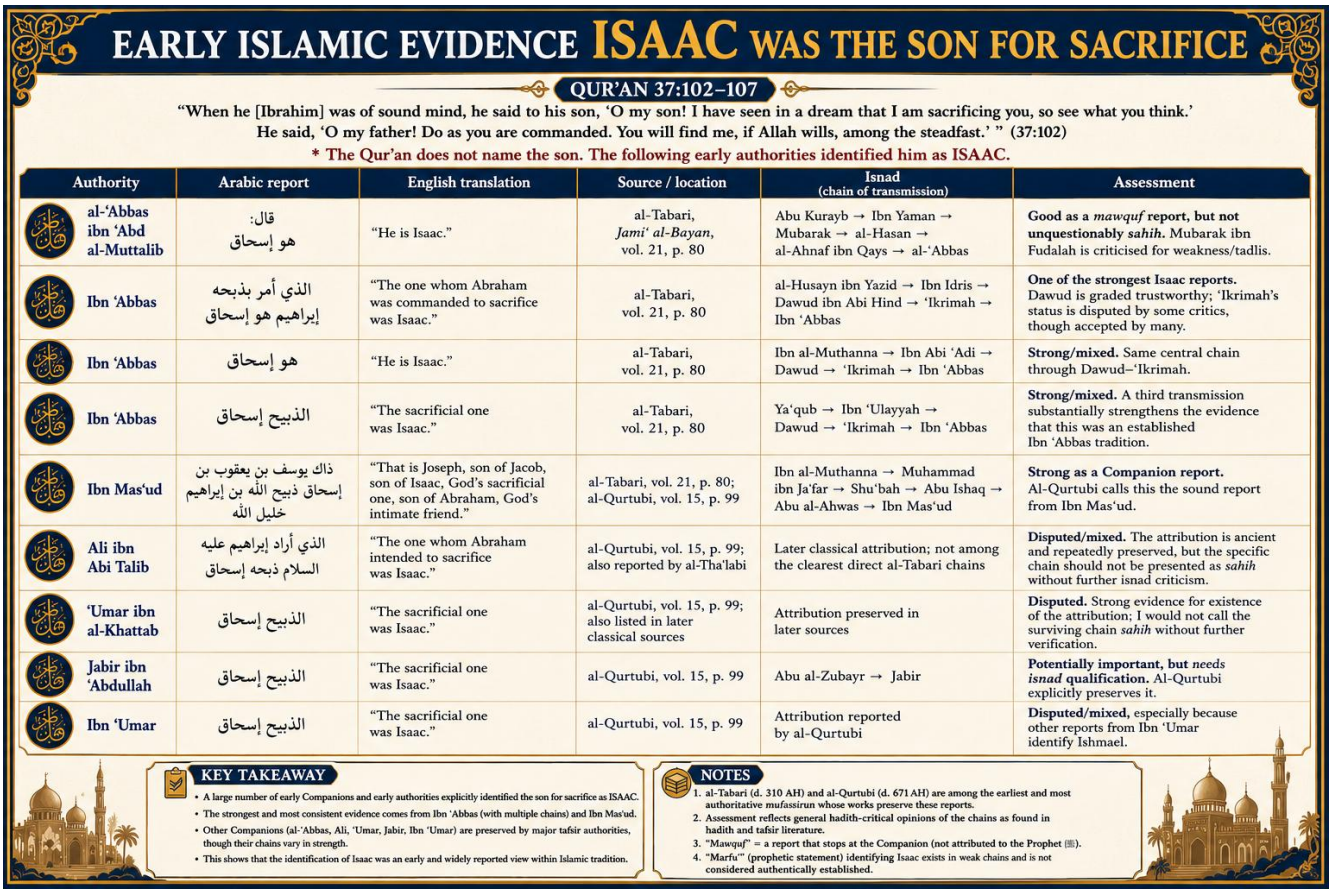
The Isaac interpretation argues that the "*forbearing boy*" is the same son later identified as Isaac. This was precisely the reasoning adopted by al-Tabari. He argued that when Abraham asked God for a righteous son, he had not yet received the son who was the subject of the promise. The Quran elsewhere explicitly identifies the promised son as Isaac.

Al-Tabari therefore concluded that the son ransomed in 37:107 was Isaac.

There is also a significant chronological argument. In Quran 11:71, Abraham's wife Sarah receives good news of Isaac and, after Isaac, Jacob. Thus, Isaac is explicitly associated with a promise of descendants. Those who defend the Isaac interpretation argue that the later announcement of Isaac's prophethood in 37:112 does not necessarily mean that Isaac had not already been born; rather, it can be understood as a further announcement or honour following the successful completion of Abraham's trial.

Al-Tabari explicitly considered and answered this objection. He argued that the promise of Isaac's prophethood could follow the sacrifice as a reward and confirmation after Abraham demonstrated his obedience.

Companions Support Isaac (Ishaq)



EARLY ISLAMIC EVIDENCE ISAAC WAS THE SON FOR SACRIFICE

QUR'AN 37:102–107

"When he [Ibrahim] was of sound mind, he said to his son, 'O my son! I have seen in a dream that I am sacrificing you, so see what you think.' He said, 'O my father! Do as you are commanded. You will find me, if Allah wills, among the steadfast.' " (37:102)

* The Qur'an does not name the son. The following early authorities identified him as ISAAC.

Authority	Arabic report	English translation	Source / location	Isnad (chain of transmission)	Assessment
al-'Abbas ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib	قال: هو إسحاق	"He is Isaac."	al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, vol. 21, p. 80	Abu Kurayb → Ibn Yaman → Mubarak → al-Hasan → al-Ahnaf ibn Qays → al-'Abbas	**Good as a *mawquf* report, but not unquestionably *sahih*.** Mubarak ibn Fudalah is criticised for weakness/tadlis.
Ibn 'Abbas	الذي أمر بذبحه إبراهيم هو إسحاق	"The one whom Abraham was commanded to sacrifice was Isaac."	al-Tabari, vol. 21, p. 80	al-Husayn ibn Yazid → Ibn Idris → Dawud ibn Abi Hind → 'Ikrimah → Ibn 'Abbas	**One of the strongest Isaac reports.** Dawud is graded trustworthy; 'Ikrimah's status is disputed by some critics, though accepted by many.
Ibn 'Abbas	هو إسحاق	"He is Isaac."	al-Tabari, vol. 21, p. 80	Ibn al-Muthanna → Ibn Abi 'Adi → Dawud → 'Ikrimah → Ibn 'Abbas	**Strong/mixed.** Same central chain through Dawud–'Ikrimah.
Ibn 'Abbas	الذبيح إسحاق	"The sacrificial one was Isaac."	al-Tabari, vol. 21, p. 80	Ya'qub → Ibn 'Ulayyah → Dawud → 'Ikrimah → Ibn 'Abbas	**Strong/mixed.** A third transmission substantially strengthens the evidence that this was an established Ibn 'Abbas tradition.
Ibn Mas'ud	ذاك يوسف بن يعقوب بن إسحاق ذبيح الله بن إبراهيم خليل الله	"That is Joseph, son of Jacob, son of Isaac, God's sacrificial one, son of Abraham, God's intimate friend."	al-Tabari, vol. 21, p. 80; al-Qurtubi, vol. 15, p. 99	Ibn al-Muthanna → Muhammad ibn Ja'far → Shu'bah → Abu Ishaq → Abu al-Ahwas → Ibn Mas'ud	**Strong as a Companion report.** Al-Qurtubi calls this the sound report from Ibn Mas'ud.
Ali ibn Abi Talib	الذي أراد إبراهيم عليه السلام ذبحه إسحاق	"The one whom Abraham intended to sacrifice was Isaac."	al-Qurtubi, vol. 15, p. 99; also reported by al-Tha'labi	Later classical attribution; not among the clearest direct al-Tabari chains	**Disputed/mixed.** The attribution is ancient and repeatedly preserved, but the specific chain should not be presented as *sahih* without further isnad criticism.
'Umar ibn al-Khattab	الذبيح إسحاق	"The sacrificial one was Isaac."	al-Qurtubi, vol. 15, p. 99; also listed in later classical sources	Attribution preserved in later sources	**Disputed.** Strong evidence for existence of the attribution; I would not call the surviving chain *sahih* without further verification.
Jabir ibn 'Abdullah	الذبيح إسحاق	"The sacrificial one was Isaac."	al-Qurtubi, vol. 15, p. 99	Abu al-Zubayr → Jabir	**Potentially important, but *needs isnad* qualification.** Al-Qurtubi explicitly preserves it.
Ibn 'Umar	الذبيح إسحاق	"The sacrificial one was Isaac."	al-Qurtubi, vol. 15, p. 99	Attribution reported by al-Qurtubi	**Disputed/mixed,** especially because other reports from Ibn 'Umar identify Ishmael.

KEY TAKEAWAY

- A large number of early Companions and early authorities explicitly identified the son for sacrifice as ISAAC.
- The strongest and most consistent evidence comes from Ibn 'Abbas (with multiple chains) and Ibn Mas'ud.
- Other Companions (al-'Abbas, Ali, 'Umar, Jabir, Ibn 'Umar) are preserved by major tafsir authorities, though their chains vary in strength.
- This shows that the identification of Isaac was an early and widely reported view within Islamic tradition.

NOTES

1. al-Tabari (d. 310 AH) and al-Qurtubi (d. 671 AH) are among the earliest and most authoritative *mufassirun* whose works preserve these reports.
2. Assessment reflects general hadith-critical opinions of the chains as found in hadith and tafsir literature.
3. "Mawquf" = a report that stops at the Companion (not attributed to the Prophet ﷺ).
4. "Marfu'" (prophetic statement) identifying Isaac exists in weak chains and is not considered authentically established.

(1) Abdullah ibn Abbas

One of the most important pieces of early Islamic evidence comes from Abdullah ibn Abbas, a Companion and one of the most influential early authorities on Quranic interpretation. Al-Tabari records several reports attributed to Ibn Abbas identifying the sacrificed son as Isaac.

One report transmitted through Ikrimah from Ibn Abbas says:[11]

الذي أُمِر بذبحه إبراهيم هو إسحاق

"The one whom Abraham was commanded to sacrifice was Isaac."

Another says:[12]

الذبيح إسحاق

"The sacrificial one was Isaac."

These reports are particularly important because they originate in the earliest generations of Quranic interpretation and are preserved by al-Tabari, whose *Jami' al-Bayan* is one of the foundational works of classical tafsir.

11 Al-Tabari, Jami' al-Bayan, commentary on Qur'an 37:107, vol. 21, p. 80. Report transmitted by al-Husayn ibn Yazid ibn Ishaq, from Ibn Idris, from Dawud ibn Abi Hind, from Ikrimah, from Ibn Abbas.

12 Ibid

However, historical accuracy requires an important qualification: other reports attributed to Ibn Abbas identify Ishmael. Al-Tabari preserves those as well. Consequently, it would be incorrect to state categorically that Ibn Abbas unquestionably believed Isaac was the sacrificial son. The correct historical conclusion is that both Isaac and Ishmael traditions were transmitted under the authority of Ibn Abbas.

(2) Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud

There is also striking evidence from Abdullah ibn Mas'ud, another prominent Companion. Al-Tabari records an incident in which a man boasted about his noble ancestry in front of Ibn Mas'ud. Ibn Mas'ud responded by referring to Joseph's lineage:[13]

يوسف بن يعقوب بن إسحاق ذبح الله بن إبراهيم خليل الله

"That is Joseph, son of Jacob, son of Isaac, the one sacrificed by God, son of Abraham, God's intimate friend."

The Arabic expression is "*Ishaq Dhabih Allah*", effectively identifying Isaac as the *dhabih*, the son associated with the attempted sacrifice. This is especially significant because it is not simply a later commentator summarising Ibn Mas'ud's opinion. Al-Tabari gives a transmission to the statement. Al-Qurtubi later regarded this as the sound position attributed to Ibn Mas'ud and likewise lists him among the Companions who identified Isaac as the sacrificial son.

(3) Abbas Ibn Abd al-Muttalib

Al-Tabari also records a report from Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib, uncle of the prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

When commenting on:[14]

"And We ransomed him with a great sacrifice"

Al-Abbas is reported as saying:[15]

هو إسحاق

"He is Isaac."

Al-Qurtubi lists among the early authorities who said that the *dhabih* was Isaac. He writes that the Isaac position was reported from Ali and that it was also the position of Umar.
This is significant because it demonstrates that the Isaac interpretation was not confined to one isolated exegete. It was attributed to several of the most important figures of the first Muslim generations.

13 https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/tabary/sura37-aya107.
14 Quran 37:107
15 Al-Tabari, Jami' al-Bayan, vol. 21, p. 80, commentary on Qur'an 37:107.

(4) Umar ibn al-Khattab

Al-Qurtubi writes:[16]

وَعَنْ عَبْدِ اللهِ بْنِ عُمَرَ :أَنَّ الذَّبِيحَ إِسْحَاقُ .وَهُوَ قَوْلُ عُمَرَ رَضِيَ اللهُ عَنْهُ

"And it is reported from Abdullah ibn Umar that the sacrificial son was Isaac. This was also the opinion of Umar; may Allah be pleased with him."

(5) Ali ibn Abi Talib

Al-Qurtubi writes:[17]

وَرُوِيَ ذَلِكَ أَيْضًا عَنْ عَلِيِّ بْنِ أَبِي طَالِبٍ رَضِيَ اللهُ عَنْهُ

"And this was also narrated from Ali ibn Abi Talib, may Allah be pleased with him."

The preceding sentence identifies the opinion being discussed as:

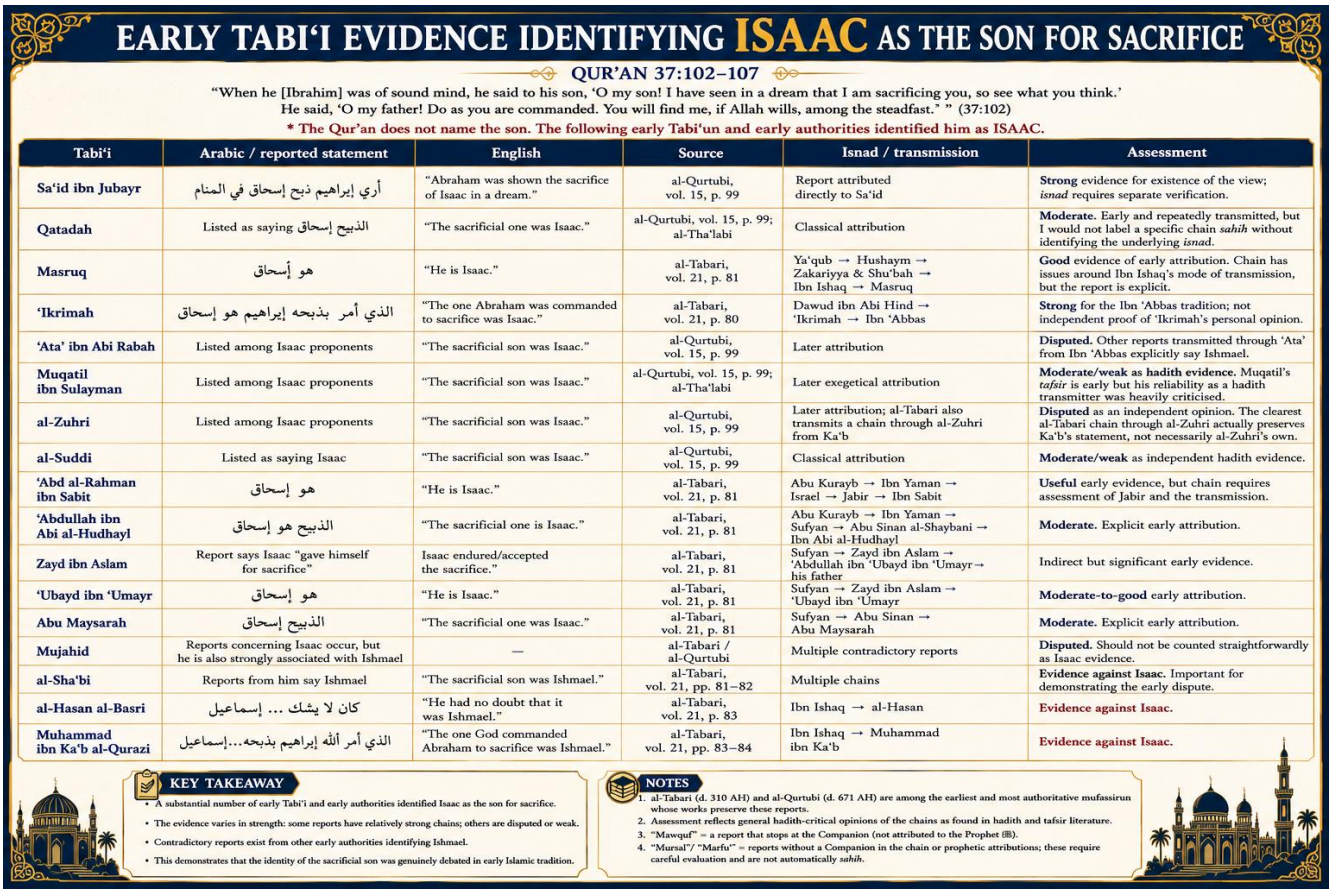
الذَّبِيحُ إِسْحَاقُ

"The sacrificial son was Isaac."

16 Al-Qurtubi, Al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān, vol. 15, p. 99.

17 ibid

Tabi’een Support Isaac (Ishaq)



EARLY TABI‘I EVIDENCE IDENTIFYING ISAAC AS THE SON FOR SACRIFICE

QUR’AN 37:102–107

“When he [Ibrahim] was of sound mind, he said to his son, ‘O my son! I have seen in a dream that I am sacrificing you, so see what you think.’ He said, ‘O my father! Do as you are commanded. You will find me, if Allah wills, among the steadfast.” ” (37:102)

* The Qur’an does not name the son. The following early Tabi‘un and early authorities identified him as ISAAC.

Tabi‘i	Arabic / reported statement	English	Source	Isnad / transmission	Assessment
Sa‘id ibn Jubayr	أري إبراهيم ذبح إسحاق في المنام	“Abraham was shown the sacrifice of Isaac in a dream.”	al-Qurtubi, vol. 15, p. 99	Report attributed directly to Sa‘id	**Strong** evidence for existence of the view; *isnad* requires separate verification.
Qatadah	الذبيح إسحاق Listed as saying	“The sacrificial one was Isaac.”	al-Qurtubi, vol. 15, p. 99; al-Tha‘labi	Classical attribution	**Moderate.** Early and repeatedly transmitted, but I would not label a specific chain *sahih* without identifying the underlying *isnad*.
Masruq	هو إسحاق	“He is Isaac.”	al-Tabari, vol. 21, p. 81	Ya‘qub → Hushaym → Zakariyya & Shu‘bah → Ibn Ishaq → Masruq	**Good** evidence of early attribution. Chain has issues around Ibn Ishaq’s mode of transmission, but the report is explicit.
‘Ikrimah	الذي أمر بذبحه إبراهيم هو إسحاق	“The one Abraham was commanded to sacrifice was Isaac.”	al-Tabari, vol. 21, p. 80	Dawud ibn Abi Hind → ‘Ikrimah → Ibn ‘Abbas	**Strong** for the Ibn ‘Abbas tradition; not independent proof of ‘Ikrimah’s personal opinion.
‘Ata’ ibn Abi Rabah	Listed among Isaac proponents	“The sacrificial son was Isaac.”	al-Qurtubi, vol. 15, p. 99	Later attribution	**Disputed.** Other reports transmitted through ‘Ata’ from Ibn ‘Abbas explicitly say Ishmael.
Muqatil ibn Sulayman	Listed among Isaac proponents	“The sacrificial son was Isaac.”	al-Qurtubi, vol. 15, p. 99; al-Tha‘labi	Later exegetical attribution	**Moderate/weak as hadith evidence.** Muqatil’s *tafsir* is early but his reliability as a hadith transmitter was heavily criticised.
al-Zuhri	Listed among Isaac proponents	“The sacrificial son was Isaac.”	al-Qurtubi, vol. 15, p. 99	Later attribution; al-Tabari also transmits a chain through al-Zuhri from Ka‘b	**Disputed** as an independent opinion. The clearest al-Tabari chain through al-Zuhri actually preserves Ka‘b’s statement, not necessarily al-Zuhri’s own.
al-Suddi	Listed as saying Isaac	“The sacrificial son was Isaac.”	al-Qurtubi, vol. 15, p. 99	Classical attribution	**Moderate/weak** as independent hadith evidence.
‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Sabit	هو إسحاق	“He is Isaac.”	al-Tabari, vol. 21, p. 81	Abu Kurayb → Ibn Yaman → Israel → Jabir → Ibn Sabit	**Useful** early evidence, but chain requires assessment of Jabir and the transmission.
‘Abdullah ibn Abi al-Hudhayl	الذبيح هو إسحاق	“The sacrificial one is Isaac.”	al-Tabari, vol. 21, p. 81	Abu Kurayb → Ibn Yaman → Sufyan → Abu Sinan al-Shaybani → Ibn Abi al-Hudhayl	**Moderate.** Explicit early attribution.
Zayd ibn Aslam	Report says Isaac “gave himself for sacrifice”	Isaac endured/accepted the sacrifice.”	al-Tabari, vol. 21, p. 81	Sufyan → Zayd ibn Aslam → ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Ubayd ibn ‘Umayr→ his father	Indirect but significant early evidence.
‘Ubayd ibn ‘Umayr	هو إسحاق	“He is Isaac.”	al-Tabari, vol. 21, p. 81	Sufyan → Zayd ibn Aslam → ‘Ubayd ibn ‘Umayr	**Moderate-to-good** early attribution.
Abu Maysarah	الذبيح إسحاق	“The sacrificial one was Isaac.”	al-Tabari, vol. 21, p. 81	Sufyan → Abu Sinan → Abu Maysarah	**Moderate.** Explicit early attribution.
Mujahid	Reports concerning Isaac occur, but he is also strongly associated with Ishmael	—	al-Tabari / al-Qurtubi	Multiple contradictory reports	**Disputed.** Should not be counted straightforwardly as Isaac evidence.
al-Sha‘bi	Reports from him say Ishmael	“The sacrificial son was Ishmael.”	al-Tabari, vol. 21, pp. 81–82	Multiple chains	**Evidence against Isaac.** Important for demonstrating the early dispute.
al-Hasan al-Basri	كان لا يشك ... إسماعيل	“He had no doubt that it was Ishmael.”	al-Tabari, vol. 21, p. 83	Ibn Ishaq → al-Hasan	**Evidence against Isaac.**
Muhammad ibn Ka‘b al-Qurazi	الذي أمر الله إبراهيم بذبحه...إسماعيل	“The one God commanded Abraham to sacrifice was Ishmael.”	al-Tabari, vol. 21, pp. 83–84	Ibn Ishaq → Muhammad ibn Ka‘b	**Evidence against Isaac.**

KEY TAKEAWAY

- A substantial number of early Tabi‘i and early authorities identified Isaac as the son for sacrifice.
- The evidence varies in strength: some reports have relatively strong chains; others are disputed or weak.
- Contradictory reports exist from other early authorities identifying Ishmael.
- This demonstrates that the identity of the sacrificial son was genuinely debated in early Islamic tradition.

NOTES

1. al-Tabari (d. 310 AH) and al-Qurtubi (d. 671 AH) are among the earliest and most authoritative mufassirun whose works preserve these reports.
2. Assessment reflects general hadith-critical opinions of the chains as found in hadith and tafsir literature.
3. “Mawquf” = a report that stops at the Companion (not attributed to the Prophet ﷺ).
4. “Mursal”/ “Marfu” = reports without a Companion in the chain or prophetic attributions; these require careful evaluation and are not automatically *sahih*.

The Isaac interpretation also continued among the Tabi’een, the generation that followed the Companions. He explicitly states that these authorities held that the sacrificial son was Isaac.

(1) Sa’id ibn Jubayr

Sa’id ibn Jubayr is particularly interesting. Al-Qurtubi preserves a statement attributed to him saying that Abraham was shown the sacrifice of Isaac in his dream. According to the report,[18] Abraham travelled an extraordinary distance to the place of sacrifice, but God ultimately ransomed Isaac with the ram.

أُرِيَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ ذَبْحَ إِسْحَاقَ فِي الْمَنَامِ

“Abraham was shown the sacrifice of Isaac in a dream.”

This account is also preserved by al-Baghawi in commentary on Surah al-Saffat (37:102). He introduces it with:[19]

وَرُوِيَ عَنْ سَعِيدِ بْنِ جُبَيْرٍ قَالَ

أُرِيَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ ذَبْحَ إِسْحَاقَ فِي الْمَنَامِ

18 Al-Qurtubi, Al-Jami‘ li-Aḥkam al-Quran, vol. 15, p. 99, commentary on Quran 37:102; report attributed to Sa’id ibn Jubayr.

19 Al-Baghawi, Ma‘alim al-Tanzīl, vol. 7, p. 23, commentary on Qur’an 37:102; report attributed to Sa’id ibn Jubayr.

"It is narrated from Sa'id ibn Jubayr that he said: Abraham was shown the sacrifice of Isaac in a dream..."

(2) Masruq

Masruq provides particularly clear evidence in al-Tabari. Commenting on Quranic verse:[20]

وَفَدَيْنَاهُ بِذِبْحٍ عَظِيمٍ

"And We ransomed him with a great sacrifice,"

Masruq is reported to have said:[21]

هو إسحاق

"He is Isaac."

This is one of the clearest surviving statements from Tabi'i.

(3) Ikrimah

Ikrimah is particularly important because he transmitted the Isaac interpretation from Ibn Abbas. Al-Tabari records multiple chains.

Ikrimah → Ibn Abbas → Isaac

Al-Tabari repeatedly records, from Ikrimah, from Ibn Abbas:[22]

عن عكرمة، عن ابن عباس، قال: الذي أُمِر بذبحه إبراهيم هو إسحاق

"The one whom Abraham was commanded to sacrifice was Isaac."

Thus, Ikrimah is important not necessarily because we have an independent statement from him, but because he is a significant transmitter of the early Ibn Abbas tradition.

(4) Qatadah, (5) Ata', (6) Muqatil and (7) al-Zuhri

Classical exegetical literature likewise attributes the Isaac interpretation to Qatadah, Ata', Muqatil ibn Sulayman and al-Zuhri. Al-Qurtubi includes all of them among those who held that the sacrificial son was Isaac.

(8) Ka'b al-Ahbar

Another important early figure is Ka'b al-Ahbar, a Jewish scholar who converted to Islam and became an important transmitter of biblical and Israelite traditions in early Islamic scholarship. Al-Tabari preserves a detailed tradition attributed to Ka'b in which Abraham takes Isaac to the place of sacrifice. In the narrative, Satan attempts to deceive Sarah by telling her that Abraham has taken Isaac to

21 Al-Tabari, Jami' al-Bayan, vol. 21, p. 81, commentary on Qur'an 37:107. Report transmitted by Ya'qub ibn Ibrahim, from Hushaym, from Zakariyya and Shu'bah, from Ibn Ishaq, from Masruq.

22 Al-Tabari, Jāmi' al-Bayān, vol. 21, p. 80, commentary on Qur'an 37:107.

sacrifice him. Al-Tabari also records Ka'b explicitly saying that the son whom Abraham was commanded to sacrifice was Isaac.

Al-Tabari preserves an explicit statement attributed to Ka'b:[23]

أن الذي أُمر إبراهيم بذبحه من ابنيه إسحاق

"The one of Abraham's two sons whom he was commanded to sacrifice was Isaac."

Ka'b's testimony must nevertheless be treated differently from that of Ibn Abbas or Ibn Mas'ud. His knowledge of Jewish scripture makes him an important witness to the existence of the Isaac tradition, but it also means that his reports may reflect Jewish/Israelite traditions incorporated into early Islamic storytelling.

Al-Tabari's own conclusion

Perhaps the most significant evidence is the position of al-Tabari himself. Al-Tabari does not merely mention the Isaac interpretation. He presents the competing reports and then argues that Isaac is the stronger interpretation based on the apparent Quranic sequence. He writes, in substance, that the correct position is that the son who was ransomed was Isaac, because the boy described as the "forbearing" son in the passage was the son whom God had announced to Abraham, and the Quran elsewhere identifies that promised son as Isaac.

This is important historically because al-Tabari was writing in the ninth and early tenth centuries and was one of the most influential authorities in Quranic interpretation. His conclusion demonstrates that the Isaac interpretation was not merely an obscure opinion surviving at the margins of Islamic scholarship. It was considered sufficiently substantial for one of the greatest classical Quranic exegetes to adopt it.

Al-Qurtubi's Testimony about the Early Tradition

Several centuries later, Abu Abdullah al-Qurtubi (d. 1273) provides a valuable summary of the earlier disagreement. He says[24] that most authorities he discussed held that the *dhabih* was Isaac. He specifically lists several Companions and numerous Tabi'een, including Umar, Ali, Ibn Mas'ud, Ibn Abbas, Sa'id ibn Jubayr, Qatadah, Masruq, Ikrimah, 'Ata', Muqatil and al-Zuhri. Al-Qurtubi also acknowledges the opposing Ishmael tradition. He therefore provides valuable evidence that classical Muslim scholars themselves recognised that both interpretations existed within Islamic tradition.

Why did Ishmael's Claim Eventually Become Dominant?

The eventual dominance of the Ishmael interpretation should not be confused with the Quran explicitly naming Ishmael in the sacrifice story. *The Quran never says so.*

The Ishmael interpretation developed through a combination of exegetical arguments and transmitted reports. Supporters of Ishmael pointed to the description of the boy as patient and steadfast, to

23 Al-Tabari, Jāmiʿ al-Bayān, vol. 21, pp. 81–82, commentary on Qur'an 37:107; report attributed to Ka'b al-Ahbar through Abu Hurayrah.

24 Al-Qurtubi, Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ahmad, Al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān, vol. 15, p. 99, commentary on Surah al-Saffat (37:102–107).

Ishmael's later association with Mecca, to Abraham and Ishmael's construction of the Ka'bah, and to Quranic descriptions of Ishmael as patient and faithful. Some early authorities, including reports attributed to Ibn Abbas, supported Ishmael. Al-Tabari himself records a substantial body of Ishmael reports alongside the Isaac reports. Thus, the historical picture is not one of a simple Quranic statement followed by unanimous Muslim acceptance. It was a genuine exegetical dispute.

However, some early Islamic authorities, including the Prophet's companions and Tabi'een, held that Ishmael was Abraham's intended sacrificial son. This alternative interpretation therefore cannot be overlooked.

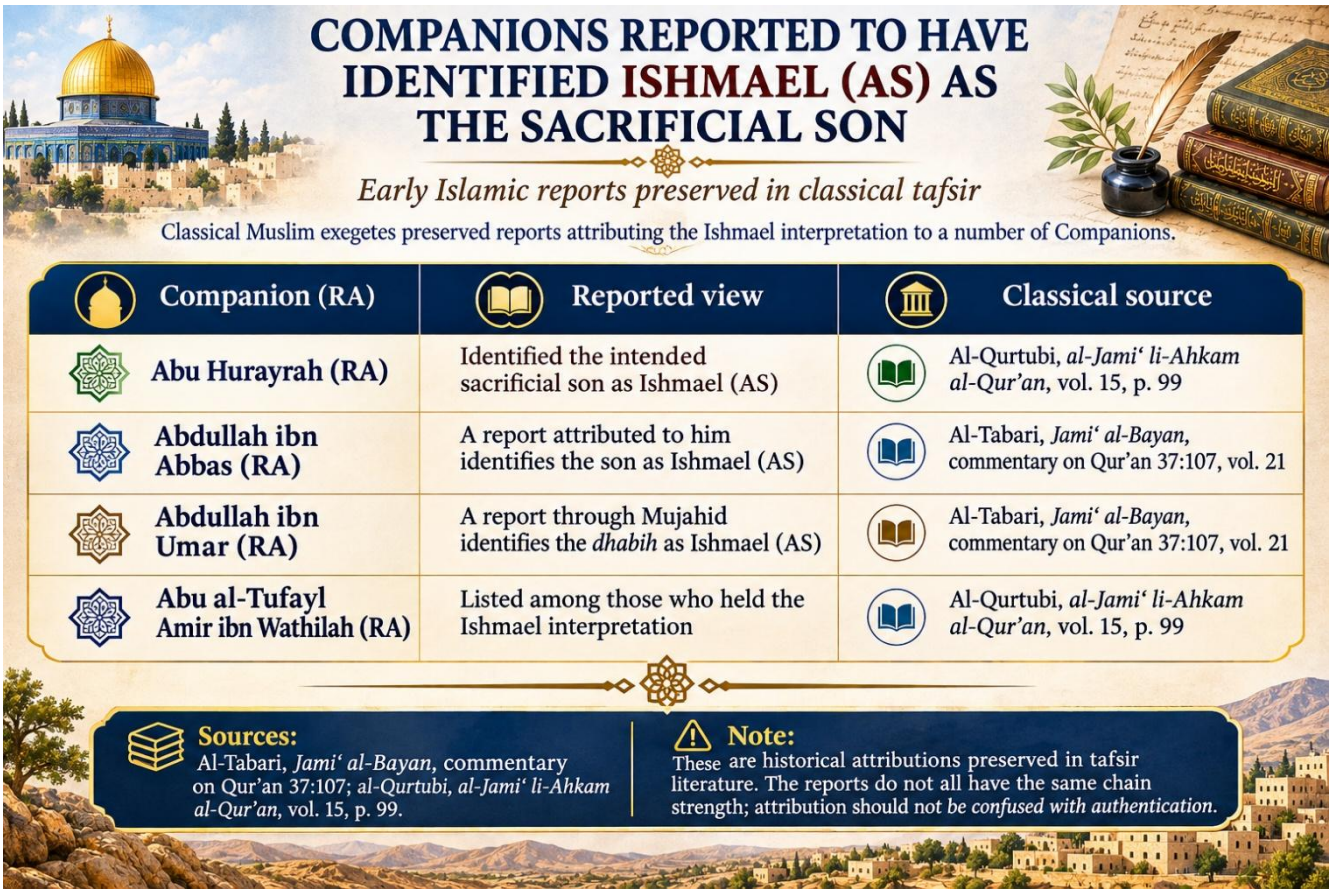
It is also mentioned by Tabari as:[25]

وَقَالَ آخَرُونَ: الَّذِي فُدِيَ بِالذِّبْحِ الْعَظِيمِ مِنْ بَنِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ إِسْمَاعِيلُ

"Others said that the one from among Abraham's sons who was ransomed with the great sacrifice was Ishmael."

25 al-Tabari's Jāmi' al-Bayān, commentary on Qur'an 37:107, volume 21, approximately pages 83–86.

Companions Support Ishmael (Isma'il)



Al-Tabari also recorded reports from Companions of the Prophet who identified Ishmael as the intended sacrificial son.

(1) Ibn Abbas said:[26]

إِنَّ الَّذِي أُمِرَ بِذَبْحِهِ إِبْرَاهِيمُ إِسْمَاعِيلُ

"The one whom Abraham was commanded to sacrifice was Ishmael."

(2) Ibn Umar, who said:

الذَّبِيحُ إِسْمَاعِيلُ

"The sacrificial son was Ishmael."

(3) Abu Hurairah:

26 Al-Tabari, Jāmi' al-Bayān, vol. 21, pp. 80–84, commentary on Qur'an 37:107.

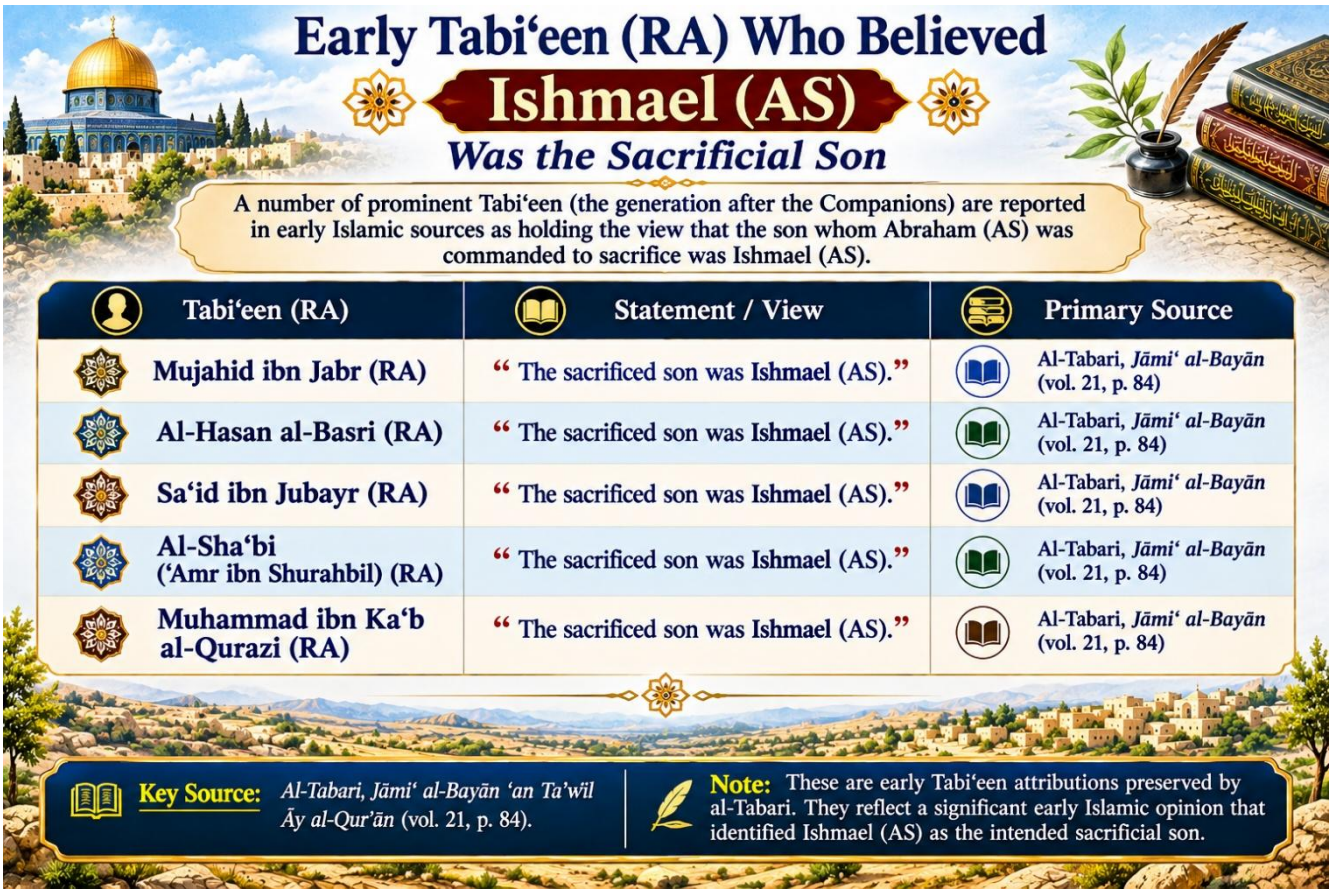
Al-Qurtubi explicitly writes:[27]

وَقَالَ آخَرُونَ :هُوَ إِسْمَاعِيلُ .وَمِمَّنْ قَالَ ذَلِكَ أَبُو هُرَيْرَةَ وَأَبُو الطُّفَيْلِ عَامِرُ بْنُ وَاثِلَةَ

"Others said that he was Ishmael. Among those who held this opinion were Abu Hurairah and Abu al-Tufayl Amir ibn Wathilah."

27 Imam Abu Abdullah al-Qurtubi, Al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān, commentary on Surah al-Saffāt (37:102), volume 15, page 99

Tabi’een Support Ishmael (Isma’il)



Several Tabi’een identified Ishmael, rather than Isaac, as the intended sacrificial son. Al-Tabari recorded their views as well in his Tafsir; a few are listed below.

(1) ***Mujahid said***:[28]

هُوَ إِسْمَاعِيلُ

“He is Ishmael.”

(2) ***Al-Sha’bi said***:[29]

الذَّبِيحُ إِسْمَاعِيلُ

“The sacrificial son was Ishmael.”

(3) ***Al-Hasan al-Basri said***:[30]

هُوَ إِسْمَاعِيلُ

“He is Ishmael.”

28 Al-Tabari, Jāmiʿ al-Bayān, vol. 21, p. 84.
29 Ibid
30 Ibid

Why Two Claims

The prominent early Islamic scholar al-Tabari recorded both interpretations to document the differing views and transmitted reports of early Muslim authorities, rather than repeat a single accepted tradition. After weighing the evidence, he favoured Isaac (Ishaq) over Ishmael (Isma'il). His commentary is particularly important because he preserved and examined the Ishmael reports rather than dismissing them, then explained why he found the Isaac interpretation more consistent with the Quranic narrative.

Al-Tabari's central argument was based on the sequence of the Quranic announcements. Such as the Quranic verses,

Abraham prays:[31]

رَبِّ هَبْ لِي مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ

"My Lord, grant me a righteous child."

God responds:[32]

فَبَشَّرْنَاهُ بِغُلَامٍ حَلِيمٍ

"So, we gave him good tidings of a forbearing boy."

In verses 102-107, God tests Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his son, then ransoms the boy with a great sacrifice. Al-Tabari argues that the boy promised just before this account was Isaac, citing other Quranic passages that identify the promised son.[33]

فَبَشَّرْنَاهَا بِإِسْحَاقَ وَمِنْ وَرَاءِ إِسْحَاقَ يَعْقُوبَ

"Then We gave her good tidings of Isaac, and after Isaac, Jacob."

Al-Tabari took this as confirmation that Isaac was the son promised to Abraham in the Quran, identifying him as the "forbearing boy" in Surah 37. His second argument concerned the announcement of Isaac in verse 112.

Quranic Verse states:[34]

وَبَشَّرْنَاهُ بِإِسْحَاقَ نَبِيًّا مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ

"And We gave him good tidings of Isaac, a prophet from among the righteous."

Supporters of the Ishmael interpretation argue that Isaac's announcement after the sacrifice account identifies him as a different son from the one nearly sacrificed. Al-Tabari disagrees; verse 112 may announce Isaac's prophethood and elevated status, rather than his birth.

In this reading:

31 Quran 37:100
32 Quran 37:101

34 Quran 37:112

- God had already promised Isaac.
- Isaac had since grown up.
- Abraham underwent the sacrifice trial.
- God then announced Isaac's prophethood as an honour and reward.

Al-Tabari therefore did not regard verse 112 as proof that Ishmael was the intended sacrificial son. His third argument addressed the promise of Jacob. Supporters of the Ishmael interpretation asked how God could command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac after promising that Isaac would have a son, Jacob, and thus descendants.

Al-Tabari answers that Isaac was old enough to accompany and assist Abraham but had not yet fathered children when the command came. In his view, the promise of Jacob did not preclude the sacrifice command: God could test Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac, then fulfil the promise concerning Jacob.

As an exegete and historian, al-Tabari collected transmitted interpretations even when they contradicted his conclusions. He thus preserved reports supporting Ishmael, including traditions attributed to:

(1) Abdullah ibn Umar (2) Abdullah ibn Abbas (3) Mujahid ibn Jabr (4) Al-Sha'bi, Sa'id ibn Jubayr (5) Al-Hasan al-Basri (6) Muhammad ibn Ka'b al-Qurazi.

He likewise preserved reports favouring Isaac, including those attributed to Ibn Mas'ud, Ibn Abbas, al-Abbas and Masruq.

In his commentary, al-Tabari addressed these claims:[35]

قَالَ أَبُو جَعْفَرٍ :وَأَوْلَى الْقَوْلَيْنِ بِالصَّوَابِ فِي الْمُفْدِيِّ مِنِ ابْنَيْ إِبْرَاهِيمَ خَلِيلِ الرَّحْمَنِ عَلَى ظَاهِرِ التَّنْزِيلِ قَوْلُ مَنْ قَالَ :هُوَ إِسْحَاقُ

"Abu Ja'far said: Of the two opinions concerning which of Abraham, the intimate friend of the Most Merciful' s, two sons were ransomed, the opinion that is more correct, according to the apparent meaning of the revelation, is the opinion of those who say that ***he was Isaac."***

The phrase عَلَى ظَاهِرِ التَّنْزِيلِ is especially important. It means "according to the apparent meaning of the revelation." Al-Tabari believed that the Quranic textual sequence supported Isaac.

35 Jāmiʿ al-Bayān, volume 21, commentary on Qur'an 37:107.

Conclusion

The evidence can therefore be summarised in four stages.

First, the Torah explicitly names Isaac. Genesis 22:2 identifies Abraham's son as Isaac before the sacrifice begins.
Second, the Quran does not name the son in its sacrifice account. Surah 37:100 -107 calls him a "*forbearing boy*" and describes the sacrifice and ransom but does not use the name Ishmael or Isaac. Only in verse 112, after the sacrifice narrative, does the Quran explicitly announce Isaac as a prophet.
Third, early Islamic tradition contains substantial evidence for Isaac. Reports attributed to Companions including Ibn Abbas, Ibn Mas'ud, al-Abbas, Umar and Ali, together with Tabi'een such as Sa'id ibn Jubayr, Qatadah, Masruq, Ikrimah, Ata', Muqatil and al-Zuhri, preserve or support the Isaac interpretation. Al-Qurtubi explicitly records this extensive early tradition.
Fourth, the position was not merely preserved by later scholars. Al-Tabari himself ultimately preferred Isaac, after examining both the Isaac and Ishmael reports.

Consequently, the historically careful conclusion is not that *"the Quran says Isaac,"* because it does not. Nor is it accurate to say that *"Islam has always taught Ishmael."* A more precise conclusion is, the Torah explicitly identifies Isaac as Abraham's intended sacrificial son; the Quran deliberately leaves the son's identity unnamed in the sacrifice passage; and the earliest Islamic exegetical tradition preserved a substantial Isaac interpretation, supported by reports attributed to prominent Companions and Tabi'een and ultimately preferred by al-Tabari. The Ishmael interpretation later became dominant in Islamic tradition, but it should be understood as an exegetical conclusion rather than an explicit identification made by the Quran itself.

The existence of contradictory reports, sometimes even attributed to the same early authority, such as Ibn Abbas also means that the evidence should be evaluated at the level of individual isnads rather than treating every attribution as equally authentic. What can be established with considerable confidence is that the Isaac interpretation is genuinely ancient within Islamic exegetical literature and cannot accurately be dismissed as a modern or purely Jewish-Christian intrusion into Islamic thought.

Abbreviation

- PBUH = (Pace be upon him) This title attributes to Prophet of Islam.
- Alayhi Aalam – AS = (Peace be upon him) This title attributes to Prophets.
- Radhi Allahu Anhu- RA = (May Allah be pleased with him) This title is attributed to a single companion of Prophet.
- Ridwan Ullah Alayhim Ajma'een – RA = (May Allah be pleased upon all of them)
- Rahmatullah Alyahya – RA = (May Allah's mercy upon him) This title attributes to a successor of a companion of Prophet.
- Isnad = (The chain of transmitters or narrators)
- Companions = (The companions of the Prophet of Islam)
- Tabi'i = (Single successor of the companions)
- Tabi'een = (The successors of the companions)
- Tafsir = (Exegesis, Interpretation)