

2021

Ishmael Album Review

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This article was written as part of the curriculum for the Bachelor of Music in Music Management and the Bachelor of Science in Music Industry Studies at University of the Pacific. Each student conducted research based on his or her own areas of interest and study.

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Recommended Citation

Moore, Robert N. (2021) "Ishmael Album Review," *Backstage Pass*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/backstage-pass/vol4/iss1/17>

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***Ishmael* Album Review**

By Robby Moore

The Basics (ready for second, final review)

On January 10, 2021, the one-man band Heliocentric released their second full-length album, called *Ishmael*. In simple terms, *Ishmael*, is an album unlike anything I've ever experienced. Jagged guitar riffs give way to haunting ambient refrains; pained screams overlay carefully chosen instrumentation to create a truly unique sound. However, the sound is a subservient means to the greater end found in the lyrics. At its core, *Ishmael* is a discourse between the three main Abrahmic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The album grapples with intense and complex theological topics such as sacrifice, the voice of God, and salvation.

Heliocentric's creator, Jared Smith, wrote, performed, recorded, mixed, mastered, and released the entire project all on his own. On top of that, *Ishmael* is only half of Smith's senior project for his university degree. The other half of his project is a 93-page scholarly thesis called *Ishmael: A Heavy Metal Dialogue Among the Three Abrahamic Faiths*, which gives greater insight into Smith's research and the meaning behind the songs. In essence, *Ishmael* is more than just an album. It's the hard work and dedicated research of a passionate intellectual.

The Sound

Ishmael's structure and sound is thoughtfully orchestrated. Heliocentric joins metalcore with elements of deathcore and progressive metal to create an avant-garde piece of art. None of the songs follow the "standard" verse-chorus song structure. They are all mostly asymmetrical with only a few songs containing a traditional chorus. The structure of "Writhe" demonstrates the divergent song patterns found throughout *Ishmael*. Dynamically, the track starts high with an aggressive guitar riff before it drops to an atmospheric break. The break slowly builds back into the starting guitar riff and then ends in a strange type of coda, almost completely separate from the rest of the song.

Smith performs all of the vocals for the album, often sounding more grief-stricken in his delivery than wrathful. The best example of his vocal capabilities can be found in the track "Antithesis," which features his full range from guttural, deathcore screams to poignant, clean choruses. His passionate vocal performance perfectly matches the crunchy distortion of his 8-string guitar and creates a contrast to the ambient soundscapes in the record.

On top of the familiar bass, drums, guitar and vocals, clever instrumentation formulates the rest of the dark and ominous mood of the record. Polyrhythmic riffs counterbalance the

atmospheric synths and exotic instruments that are not often found in metal. “Threnody for a Burnt Offering” starts with the sound of clarinets; little bells lead off “Rung;” the opening of “Antithesis” features an Arabian stringed instrument called a Kanon; and “Whispers” features the gentle sound of the reeded Armenian Duduk. The integration of these foreign instruments give Ishmael an Arabic flare appropriate to its subject matter.

Lyrics and Message

Though *Ishmael* is an incredible piece of art and the music rivals that of the most dedicated modern metalcore bands, what truly sets Heliocentric apart are his ruminative lyrics. The entire album is an intricate discourse of the three Abrahamic religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. He dives headfirst into the toil, exploring the violent history between the faiths. He discusses the pain that each religion has caused the other, and he fights to find some resolution between them. Ultimately, Smith comes to the conclusion that there is a unifying factor between the three religions found in an event called the Akedah.

First, I want to look at the lyrics themselves as it is nearly impossible to separate the writing style from the meaning. Each song is beautifully woven. The language used is more akin to poetry than to normal song lyrics. Footnotes embedded in the text further decipher the often cryptic language. Smith’s use of language is extremely effective with just enough words to get the message across and sufficient ambiguity that one song can contain multiple meanings.

Some of my favorite lyrics from Ishmael include stanzas from the tracks “Whispers” and “Antithesis,” which I’ve included below. What stood out to me from “Whispers”: *Ineffable / Frozen in beauty / Like a fly caught in amber / I’m transfixed / Suspended between terror and bliss*. What stood out to me from “Antithesis”: *I hurl my curses to you / Yet find them damning me / The mirror image that taunts me / The scathing spite that I know / Cancerous contaminant / Ravaging my righteous soul*.

Each song is devoted to voicing a different point of view. For instance, the track “Gabriel” comes from the outlook of the archangel Gabriel, who spoke to Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the Bible and who delivers the message of the Quran to Muhammad in Islam. Other examples include “Whispers” which comes from the viewpoint of Muhammad after receiving the vision of the Quran, and “Never Again,” which is written through Jewish eyes as they look back at their persecution throughout history.

The goal of *Ishmael* is best explained in Smith’s thesis. He states on page 86, “My hope and prayer is that this album will act as a stepping stone for mutual understanding and empathy between adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths.” I could go into more detail about the lyrics

and the message, however, I don't wish to steal the thunder from Smith's final project. I'd recommend you check that out instead. (*Link found below.*)

My Thoughts

Previous to *Ishmael* I had never heard of Heliocentric, so when I stumbled across this album I was blown away. It's been awhile since I heard something so carefully constructed. With djent-heavy riffs, zealous vocals, magnificent ambience, and philosophical lyrics that rival that of Silent Planet, *Ishmael* is, in my opinion, a phenomenon. It's important to note that although Heliocentric shares many similarities with Silent Planet and Smith acknowledges their influence on his music, Heliocentric is definitely not a Silent Planet knock off. Smith has his own particular writing style, sound, and focus that differs greatly from Silent Planet.

I took the time to read Smith's 93-page thesis and it made me appreciate *Ishmael* that much more. Fans of modern metal will enjoy the creativity found in this album. Message aside, it is excellent music in its own right. For those willing to dig deeper, *Ishmael's* weighty subject matter and sophisticated musical approach will provide an altogether different experience. I hope that many more will listen to *Ishmael* and seek to learn from the insights found within.

Links For everything Heliocentric: <https://linktr.ee/Heliocentric>

To purchase *Ishmael: The Written Report*: <https://teespring.com/ishmael-the-written-report?tsmac=store&tsmic=heliocentric&pid=960&cid=104025>