

Jon D. Levenson. *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. 288 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-15569-2.

Reviewed by David Sandmel (Catholic Theological Union)

Published on H-Judaic (August, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman

How Many Abrahams?

In *Inheriting Abraham: the Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Jon Levenson offers a close reading of the Abraham narrative in Genesis. He describes how each of the three religions has developed its own Abraham, at times over and against the Abraham of the other traditions. And he challenges the notion, which appears in both popular and academic writing, that it is possible to distill an Abraham that is distinct from those three traditions. He writes, "The assumption that we can recover a neutral Abraham that is independent of Judaism, Christianity and Islam—yet authoritative over them—is ... quite unwarranted. Any argument that the Abraham of one of these three religions is the real Abraham will necessarily be fatally circular and privilege the scriptures and traditions of the very religion it seeks to validate.... It is surely the case that Jews, Christians, and Muslims have more in common than most of their adherents recognize, and one important item they have in common is a tendency to reflect on the figure of Abraham as he appears in their respective collections of authoritative literature. But those collections differ, the Abraham who appears in each of them is distinctive in important ways, and, although interreligious concord is devoutly to be desired, the patriarch is less useful to that end than many think" (p. 9).

As a scholar of interfaith relations and an active participant in interfaith dialogue, I am keenly aware of both the usefulness and the shortcomings of focusing on the similarities between religious traditions while ignoring or glossing over the differences. Acknowledging commonalities is an essential first step in establishing positive relationships between adherents of different traditions, especially when there is a history of antagonism. However, if such relationships are to go beyond surface pleasantries, an honest examination of the differences as well as the similarities, or, better, the differences within the similarities, is required. Indeed, it is the differences

that define the other as "other" and make it possible to begin to understand "others" as they understand themselves. Statements like "Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God" obscure more than they reveal. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim concepts of God vary from one another in crucial ways, and there are variations between subgroups within each tradition as well. This is equally true for the figure of Abraham, who is venerated by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Levenson's exposition of the biblical Abraham reveals the complexity of the deceptively brief narrative in Genesis. He is careful to point out the ambiguities in the biblical text and to offer multiple possible interpretations when that text is not explicit. When he discusses subsequent traditions about Abraham, he is clear about what can be supported by the biblical text common to Judaism and Christianity (but not to Islam) and what is being read into it.

In chapter 1, "Call and Commission," he focuses on Genesis 12:1-3 and how subsequent Jewish and Christian traditions interpreted the concepts of "nationhood" and "blessing," and he treats at length the idea of "chosenness." Chapter 2, "Frustration and Fulfillments," traces "the long, circuitous, and difficult route that lies between the Lord's initial promise" and its partial fulfillment in the birth of Isaac (p. 36). In chapter 3, "The Test," Levenson considers God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac or, as it appears in the Qur'an, a son whom earlier tradition identified as Isaac, but whom Muslims now consider to be Ishmael. In each tradition, Abraham is seen to be "a paragon of obedience to God, faith in God, and love of God" (p. 66). Levenson rejects modern critiques of Abraham, beginning with Immanuel Kant, that isolate this chapter from the rest of the narrative and "locat(e) the story exclusively within the domain of ethics" (p. 108). He also refutes the charge that by glorifying Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, the three traditions pro-

mote religious violence; he specifically addresses the “accusation that the Qur’anic version of the Aqedah lies in the background” of Muslim terrorism (p. 110).

In chapter 4, “The Rediscovery of God,” Levenson describes Second Temple and rabbinic interpretations of Abraham in the light of a theme prominent in the Tanakh, that the God of Israel is the one true God and that the worship of foreign gods is idolatrous, a theme absent from the Abraham story itself. This Abraham is fiercely loyal to God and opposed to idol worship; he is a teacher or a philosopher bringing the message of Israel’s one, universal God to the nations of the world.

Chapter 5, “Torah and Gospel,” examines “how the two religious traditions that share Genesis manage to find in Abraham a positive model for their own religious traditions, even though he lived long before Sinai or Jesus” (p. 141). For Judaism, Abraham becomes “a man of Torah in all it senses” (p. 149). Turning to Christianity, Levenson argues against the view that Paul sees Abraham as “an exemplar of ‘a universal human essence.’” He claims “for Paul, *the Gentile Christian has abandoned the Adamic identity for the Abrahamic*. He has left the universal identity associated with the sin-infected human essence and been recreated as one who attains righteousness in the sight of God on the basis of his faith, just as Abraham did in the Pauline reading of Genesis 15:6” (p. 157, italics original).

In the final chapter of the book, “One Abraham or

Three,” Levenson critiques the tendency among some modern authors and practitioners of interfaith dialogue to posit one Abraham who is common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, creating, in effect, “a new religion that encompasses these three and supersedes them” (p. 207). This ignores the fact that each tradition’s specific understanding of Abraham defines what distinguishes it from the others and ignores the claim of each that the others are not truly Abrahamic. Rather than promoting positive interreligious relations, this “neutral” Abraham prevents the very deep understanding of the other that is the ultimate goal of dialogue.

The Muslim Abraham/Ibrahim is not explored in as much detail as that of Judaism and Christianity, though Levenson points out more that once that the patriarch plays a more central role in Islam than in the other two traditions. This is, in part, because so much of the book is either about Genesis or about Jewish and Christian interpretations of Genesis.

If I were to quibble with Levenson on anything (and it is a small quibble), it is his assertion that Abraham is less useful for promoting interreligious concord than is often assumed. I would argue that it is precisely his nuanced reading of Genesis and his clear presentation of how each tradition constructs Abraham that Levenson makes possible the kind of rich exchange that is interfaith dialogue at its best.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: David Sandmel. Review of Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37973>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.