

REVIEW

Steven A. Hunt, Ed.

*Perspectives on Our Father Abraham:
Essays in Honor of Marvin R. Wilson*

(Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), hardcover, xiii + 396 pp.

Chris Boesel, Drew Theological School

Perspectives on Our Father Abraham is a *festschrift* for Marvin R. Wilson on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday and in honor of almost fifty years of teaching, scholarship, and activism. Wilson spent most of those years at Gordon College, introducing young evangelical students to the Hebrew Bible and modern Jewish culture. He has also been a leading figure in initiating and pursuing dialogue between evangelicals and Jews in the United States. *Perspectives* (whose title recalls Wilson's 1989 work, *Our Father Abraham*) includes eighteen essays on the figure of Abraham and the patriarchal narratives in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and in Jewish and Christian histories of interpretation from the early rabbinic and patristic periods to the present. While most of the essays are from evangelical colleagues at Gordon, there are several contributions by Jewish colleagues and friends and one co-authored entry, a Jewish-Christian collaboration.

The book is divided into three sections. The first two sections are on the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, respectively, in which the authors employ historical, exegetical, and archaeological approaches common in biblical scholarship. The third section is "interdisciplinary" and contains essays on the meaning and significance of Abraham across a variety of historical and interpretive contexts. These essays are comparatively less focused with regard to discipline and methodology than those in the first and second sections. This section also includes two essays explicitly addressing the contemporary state of Jewish-Christian—and more particularly Jewish-evangelical—relations, one by a rabbi (A. James Rudin) and one by a Christian Zionist (JoAnn G. Magnuson). In my reading, the book has two main points of interest with regard to Wilson's impact: the state of contemporary evangelical biblical scholarship, and evangelicals' relation to theological anti-Judaism and supersessionism.

Two-thirds of these essays are works by biblical scholars doing academic biblical scholarship. There are two things that are notable here. First, virtually all of these authors are unapologetic about their use of the tools of modern biblical scholarship and offer no warnings about the dangers they pose to evangelical, biblical faith commonly heard in evangelical educational settings. While there are hints of traditional evangelical concerns over authorship, dating, and inerrancy in several of the essays, these issues—together with the sense that absolute theological claims are at risk—are mostly absent. This freedom from the relatively narrow range of traditional evangelical concerns allows a broader range of methodological approaches. We find historical-critical (Edwin M. Yamauchi on biblical archaeology), canonical-intertextual (Ted Hildebrant on Psalm 105), rhetorical (Gordon D. Fee on Paul), and—in the essay most different from the others—liberationist-tinged postcolonial readings (Roy Ciampa on Galatians). The evangelical commitments of most of the authors, while less prominent when compared to earlier evangelical biblical scholars, are discernible in attempts to affirm traditional and doctrinally orthodox claims. For

example, we find efforts to use the methods of modern biblical scholarship to demonstrate the greatness of the biblical God's character and God's faithfulness in dealing with Israel and the Christian community. We also find traditional Christological readings of both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and accompanying theological affirmations of the unity and continuity of the two. Wilson's own concerns and influence are most clearly seen in the last thematic focus of the collection, on the unity of the Scriptures. The extent to which the second theme—traditional Christological readings across *both* testaments—reflects his own work is less clear.

This raises the second and more notable feature of the sections on biblical scholarship, and of the collection as a whole: the unapologetic and unexamined presence of a form of Christian supersessionism in a book honoring a scholar's contribution to improving Jewish-evangelical relations. It is true that replacement supersessionism that holds that God cast off the people of Israel and replaced them with the Church, and the Christian "teaching of contempt," is rejected on every page of the book—either explicitly or implicitly—as theologically unsound and ethically deplorable. However, this admirable rejection occurs by means of a softer, "fulfillment" form of supersessionism (e.g., pp. 136, 152, 156, 172, 220). Numerous authors, such as John N. Oswalt, Gordon D. Fee, and William B. Barclay, affirm the provisionality of the Hebrew Scriptures and Judaism's interpretation of them relative to the Gospel's proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. It is this that is the fulfillment of God's covenantal promise to Abraham regarding both Israel and the nations.

An affirmation of the unity and continuity of the two Scriptures does indeed support the rejection of replacement supersessionism. However, it necessarily implies that the two testaments are about the same thing—the same God making and fulfilling the same promises, acting consistently and faithfully in and through history to fulfill the same redemptive will. More specifically, some authors imply that what happens in the Church's New Testament is a continuation of the will and action of the God of Israel recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures; the New Testament's proclamation about Jesus Christ names the one who is promised and expected in the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, Barclay argues against the Christian supersessionist tradition that sees a stark, pejorative contrast between the Abrahamic covenant (a covenant of "faith," as interpreted in the New Testament and Christian theology) and the Mosaic (read: Jewish) covenant of "law," with the former, better, eternal covenant surpassing the latter. This is a clear argument against the hostile logic of replacement supersessionism. However, the grounds given for the unity and continuity between the two covenants are their mutual fulfillment in Jesus Christ as he is proclaimed in the Christian Scriptures and in Christian faith as the eternal ground and goal of both. In another essay, Steven A. Hunt argues that Jesus Christ, as the pre-existent Word, appeared to Abraham on Mt. Moriah. This reflects the assumption that the God of Israel referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures is the Trinitarian God known in Christian faith, a God quite specifically *not* known and / or acknowledged by rabbinic Jews according to their own readings of the Hebrew Scriptures. The unavoidable implication of both these examples is that Jews' knowledge of the God of their own Scriptures is only partial in relation to Christians' fuller knowledge and interpretation of the Scriptures.

It is not surprising that this kind of supersessionism should be present in evangelical biblical scholarship and theology, even among moderate and progressive voices like those found here. Indeed, it is to be expected. For inasmuch as evangelicals confess Jesus Christ as the eternal God incarnate and Israel's promised Messiah, sent for the redemption of Israel and the nations, their theology is essentially supersessionist though not essentially replacement supersessionist in relation to Jews' self-definition and self-understanding. What is surprising is that fulfillment supersessionism goes unremarked and unexamined in a collection informed by and in celebration of advances in Jewish-evangelical conversation and mutual understanding. There is simply

no mention of it as a sensitive and problematic issue, even though supersessionism on some level contributed to the ugly history of Christian anti-Judaism and antisemitism and that is so clearly deplored and rejected throughout the book.

What is perhaps most surprising is that the Jewish contributions to the collection are equally silent on the issue. Rabbi Rudin, an early partner with Wilson in pioneering Jewish-evangelical dialogue in the 1970s, praises Wilson's attack on replacement supersessionism and pejorative assessments of Judaism as "an incomplete religion devoid of intrinsic spiritual value" (p. 318). However, the supersessionist basis for much evangelical support for the State of Israel—belief in "a divine economy that calls for a Jewish ingathering of exiles as a prerequisite for the Second Coming of Jesus" (p. 316)—is acknowledged without critique. Given that Rudin is clear about his discomfort with just this kind of supersessionist logic in other works, the reader is left to speculate as to the extent to which his silence here is a matter of judicious respect for the *festchrift* context or more generally reflective of the nuanced politics of Jewish-evangelical dialogue in which he and Wilson have played such a significant role. The other Jewish contributions, which together make up roughly half of the interdisciplinary section of the book, avoid theological analysis altogether. Focusing on rabbinic (David J. Zucker) and modern Jewish cultural (David Klatzker) interpretations of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, they seem largely intended to familiarize and educate evangelical readers about the interpretive practices and thought patterns of Jewish tradition up through modern times.

I recommend this book to all those interested in the above issues and questions. It is a worthy celebration of Wilson's exemplary career of moderate to progressive (depending on one's perspective) evangelical scholarship, teaching, and activism. It will be especially useful to those committed to finding ways to continue to address the intractable complexity of the issues and questions Wilson has raised with the self-critical honesty, transparency, and sensitivity required for both *intra*- and *inter*-religious theological and ethical responsibility.