

REVIEW

Jon D. Levenson

***Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch
in Judaism, Christianity and Islam***

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The great strength of Jon Levenson's *Inheriting Abraham* is his usual incisive exposition of biblical texts, challenging habitual readings and illuminating new avenues of inquiry. Drawing upon an eclectic collection of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim exegesis (mostly Jewish), he highlights the creative, contextual, and highly particularistic development of Abraham in the three religions. It is a traditions history of sorts that, for the most part, prefers to emphasize the relationship between text and interpretation rather than speculate about historical influence among the religions.

The study's purported target is those scholars and popular writers who collapse the essential particularisms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and argue for a unitary concept of Abraham that can transcend religious difference: "[A]lthough interreligious concord is devoutly to be desired, the patriarch is less useful to that end than many think" (p. 10). Levenson attends to the imaginative transfiguration of Abraham in new contexts, as a sage of astronomy and philosophy by interpreters living in a Hellenistic milieu; as an iconoclast by those facing imperial pressures to assimilate; as a Torah-observant Jew in the eyes of the rabbis; as a man justified by his faith when Paul addresses the Gentiles; and as a *hanif* (pre-Islamic monotheist) who illuminates the human capacity for faithful submission to Allah without knowledge of Torah or Gospel. However, it is a little surprising that Levenson does not embrace the Abraham who is a "source of reconciliation among

the three traditions” simply as a comparable modern development (p. 9). Whether or not the authors recognize the provisional nature of their reading of Abraham as part of a multivocal, eternally changing figure, their interpretations can be viewed as an exegetical portrait that speaks to *our* age, with its growing theological pluralism and simultaneous upsurge in violence committed in the name of the Holy One.

Still, it is easy to critique their careless reading of text, lopsided references to tradition, and occasionally sloppy theology, and Levenson does so with relish (see chapter six). He is not alone in this project; Aaron Hughes published *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (Oxford, 2012) the same year. Yet it is not clear whether Levenson simply wants to warn of the epistemological dangers of Abrahamic studies or to discount the entire field. Guy Stroumsa (who wrote a favorable blurb for the book), in his 2010 inaugural lecture as the first Oxford Professor in the Study of the Abrahamic Religions, asserted that comparison of these traditions with their textual, exegetical, and continuing historical relationship provides a powerful and critically responsible alternative discourse to talk of a “clash of civilizations,” even as it focuses narrowly on “understanding how and why genetic or structural similarities function differently in related systems.”

Levenson is critical of many contemporary interpretations, especially hermeneutical approaches that would wholly subordinate religion to ethics or historical criticism. (This may help to explain why he does not integrate feminist, womanist, post-colonial, or other contemporary commentaries that would enrich his engaging study.) While these arguments are tucked into individual chapters rather than systematically debated, they remind the reader how much is at stake in the (re)reading of Abraham.

Chapter One focuses on Abraham’s “Call and Commission” (Gen 12), reflecting first on the biblical movement from the curses and alienation that unfold between the narratives of Eden and Babel to the blessing and Divine friendship that

emerge with Abraham. Levenson draws in subsequent Jewish and Christian exegeses that articulate divergent concepts of blessing, peoplehood, and chosenness or election. Echoing scholars before him, he argues that 1) “the blessing of Abram and the blessing of all peoples of the earth are not at odds with each other. They are related parts of the same divine initiative” (p. 21), 2) chosenness does not imply rejection of other peoples, and 3) Paul presented an alternative particularism, not a universalist faith.

Chapter Two reviews a number of Genesis narratives to investigate two theological motifs that have always captured the Jewish exegetical imagination: the tension between religious quietism and human initiative, and the absolute or conditional nature of covenant. In “The Test” (Chapter Three), Levenson explores diverse interpretations of the text that did not fit the trajectory of his previous treatment of the binding of Isaac (in his *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, Princeton, 1993). Then noting that the narrative is barely referenced again in Tanakh, he traces its growing significance in later Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions and the exclusivist implications of each. Yet his most passionate argument is reserved for modern critiques of Abraham, beginning with Immanuel Kant, that remove the passage from its theological and narrative context and make it an ethical parable in which the man of faith fails miserably. Levenson rejects the charge that the traditions promote religious violence in their celebration of Abraham’s obedience to the Divine command, and recoils at the rendering of Abraham “as a model of the abusive father, the violent male, the man pathologically anxious about the paternity of his offspring, the hideousness of ‘patriarchy’ in general, and much else along the same thoroughly repellent lines” (p. 108).

Chapter Four illuminates how radically Jewish interpreters redraw the biblical portrait of Abraham in order to present him as the teacher of ethical monotheism over against idolatry. Facing its own dominant polytheistic culture, early Islam resonates with this theme, and the idea of Abraham smashing his

father's idols found in midrash (*Genesis Rabbah* 38) has scriptural status (*Qur'an* 21). Levenson explores interpretations that present Abraham reasoning his way to the One God, and others that emphasize the essential components of revelation and relationship. Abraham's rejection of iconography and astronomy might seem quaint, but Levenson draws it into contemporary relevance by engaging a challenge to scientism, questioning whether the belief that science "provides the final and truest description of all reality" smacks of idolatry (p. 133).

Chapter Five, "Torah or Gospel," both constructs and deconstructs the division of Jewish and Christian exegesis along the lines of faith / law, demonstrating the multivocality of each tradition and continuing an argument against viewing Christianity as universalist. These competing particularisms lead him to the final chapter in which he maintains, "The indisputable fact that a plurality of religions appeals to Abraham does not at all warrant the prescriptive claim that each religious community should regard the appeal of the others as legitimate" (p. 204). While he critiques particular studies of "Abrahamic" traditions in detail, he is also building a case against any contemporary theology or methodology that succumbs to what he views as historical relativism, claiming it is "at odds with all religious commitments—and hence with the long-term survival of all religious traditions" (p. 205). His resistance to undermining particularity—a task of Jewish scholars ever since Philo—also appears to be the cry of a confessional scholar against the secularization of religious studies.