

The Faith of Abraham: Bond or Barrier?

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Jon D. Levenson, a Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard University, last year published an article entitled “The Idea of Abrahamic Religions: A Qualified Dissent.”¹ It is a very subtle and interesting article and I wish to summarize Professor Levenson’s argument before entering my own qualified dissent to his qualified dissent. This sort of thing could lead to an infinite regression of qualified dissents.

Let me start with Professor Levenson’s essay. He begins by remarking that both the Jewish and the Christian traditions “revere figures who predate the central events of their redemptive histories.”² In itself, this is a remarkable concession by a Jewish scholar; I would have thought that Jews would insist on Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as first and foremost part of their own tradition. But note carefully the distinction made: these figures, Professor Levenson maintains, “predate the central events of their redemptive histories.”³ The first and most paradigmatic redemption of Israel is the deliverance of God’s People from Egyptian bondage. Important as the call of Abraham is for the identity of the people of Israel, the Exodus led by Moses takes center stage in their redemptive history, as can be seen in the annual Jewish celebration of Passover.

Professor Levenson admits that there are not a few today who wish to extend the “focus of Jewish-Christian commonality” on Abraham to Muslims as well, since Muslims

regard Abraham as “a person of high importance in the Qur’an.”⁴ Many today seek to focus efforts at interreligious understanding on Abraham, but Professor Levenson remarks that such reconciliation efforts prove problematic because “most Jews, Christians, and Muslims regard Abraham as the father of their own community alone.”⁵ Certainly this is true of Jews and, even more so, of Muslims, but I suspect that most Christians think first of Jesus as the founder of their community, even if they would not use the term ‘father’ to characterize him. Levenson points out that “however sharply Jews and Christians differ in the interpretation of the scriptures they hold in common, they are after all working from the same text.”⁶ Muslims, on the other hand, do not normally rely on the Hebrew Scriptures but on the Qur’an for their accounts of Abraham, although over the centuries not a few Muslims have consulted the Hebrew Scriptures. “Then again,” Professor Levenson continues, “Islam may be less of an outlier than first seems the case.”⁷ Moreover, he admits, the post-Biblical Jewish writings about Abraham can make one wonder whether “Jews and Christians are talking about the same figure either.”⁸

As if that were not enough ambiguity in characterizing both Judaism and Christianity as Abrahamic religions, the case for extending the category to fit Muslims as well raises more questions. For Jews, Levenson insists that Abraham, as portrayed in the Book of Genesis, is not the father of an idea—monotheism—but the father of a son and the progenitor through that son of Israel. For Christians, under the influence of Saint Paul, Abraham is the spiritual progenitor of everyone who puts faith in the Lord as Abraham did, everyone for whom “[the Lord] reckoned [that act of faith] to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6).⁹ Abraham for Jews and Abraham for Christians, and especially Saint Paul,

are very different from each other. The significance of Abraham for Muslims is another matter entirely. Most of the Quranic stories about Abraham center on his monotheism, his utter opposition to the idolatry of his father and his father's people.

Levenson disagrees sharply with a recent popular writer, Bruce Feiler, who maintains that a primitive Abrahamic monotheism, which Feiler characterizes as “the carefully balanced message of the Abraham story—that God cares for all his children,”¹⁰ was spoiled by later generations of Jews who narrowed down Abraham to being the progenitor of Jews alone. Levenson suggests, and wisely in my opinion, that Judaism, Christianity and Islam may all be characterized as “inextricably involved with the formation of a distinct community.”¹¹ “The connection of Abraham with ongoing communities,” Levenson continues, “and their distinctive practices and beliefs makes it possible for Abraham to have become a point of controversy among them and not simply, as many would desire today, a node of commonality.”¹²

Let me follow the husband of Sarah, Hagar and eventually Keturah, the father not just of the only sons he begot with Hagar and Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac, but the father as well, according the narrative of Genesis, of the six sons born of Keturah after the death of Sarah. What are the patrimonies we inherit from this father of many nations?

I. Abraham as the Progenitor of Israel

Much, perhaps too much, has been written about the presentation of Abraham in the Hebrew Bible. I wish to dwell on Abraham not only in the Hebrew Scriptures but also, although more briefly, in some of the extra-scriptural or post-scriptural elaborations which sometimes are as well known to Jews as the text of the Torah.

First, let me point out some of the highlights in the Genesis history of Abraham (Gen12:1-25:11). Certain central themes in scripture are told repeatedly, each time with important variations reflecting the interests of differing narrative schools. Thus there are three accounts of the call of Abraham in Genesis (Genesis 12; Genesis 15; Genesis 17), each expressing that call as a grant or promissory covenant,¹³ a pact in which God takes virtually all the obligations on himself. God assures Abraham, against all odds, that he will take possession of a particular land, Canaan, beget progeny there, and through that progeny, become a people who will dwell in the land of Canaan.

The so-called Yahwistic author (J) of Genesis, who uses the Hebrew name for God represented by the unpronounced tetragrammaton (YHWH) for which “The Lord” (Adonai) substitutes, seems to be the main source of the first of these call narratives in literary sequence.¹⁴ “The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you’” (Gen 12:1). The verses that follow take Abram on a great walk-about to and finally in the land he is being shown by the Lord. The territorial or geographical motifs of this chapter predominate. Virtually nothing is said of Abram’s progeny. The reader familiar with the whole Hebrew Bible recognizes the later significance of each of the places first visited by Abram. Considered as a whole, this Yahwistic narrative of the call of Abraham is totally centered on the Israelite claim to possession of the land of Canaan.

The second major narrative of Abraham's call, found in Genesis Chapter 15, is usually ascribed to the Yahwist as well, but with possible influences from the so-called Elohist (E), the traditional source that calls God *Elohim*. Precisely because of the importance of the narrative in this chapter for later Israelite identity, it is not insignificant

that multiple literary sources are involved; thus the Almighty in Chapter 15 is addressed as “Lord God” (*Yahweh-Elohim*), something of a compound name. The Elohist transformed by the Yahwist, or the Yahwist transformed by the Elohist, pays attention first and foremost to God’s promise of abundant progeny to Abraham: “[The Lord] took [Abram] outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ And He added, ‘So shall your offspring be’” (Gen 15:5). Most dramatically, the Lord God “cuts” a covenant with Abram, passing in the form of “a smoking oven, and a flaming torch” (Gen 15:17) between the halved animal victims. Just as these symbolic representations of the Lord God suggest the pillars of cloud and fire that accompanied the Israelites by day and by night in the Exodus, the Lord God assures Abram that his descendants four centuries later, who will have lived as “strangers in a land not theirs” (Gen 15: 13), will eventually return from their sojourn in Egypt to the Land of Promise. This second call narrative in literary sequence promises Abram a vast territory, as much as ever paid tribute to King David several centuries later: “To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates: the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites” (Gen 15:18-21).

The third call narrative, Genesis Chapter 17, usually ascribed to the Priestly source (P), pays less attention to land (although it does specify the divine gift of Canaan: Gen. 17: 8) and concentrates on progeny, in particular through Sarah (Gen 17:15-22), even though the patriarch pleads for Ishmael, the child he has by then begotten with Hagar (Gen 17:18). Abram’s name is changed to Abraham because, for the Priestly source, Abraham will not only be the progenitor of Israel but he will also be “the father of

a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:4). In the first instance, this suggests that not only Isaac but also Ishmael and his descendants, later identified with the Bedouins of Sinai and nearby territories (Gen. 25:12-18), will father Abrahamic nations. This third call narrative possibly reflects the period of priestly administration of Persian-colonized Judea after the Babylonian exile, when it had become quite obvious that the descendants of Abraham had survived as a people, some in the Promised Land but many outside it, but their territorial sovereignty and independence had been considerably curtailed. The Priestly author is more concerned with the ritual purity of Abraham’s lineage and the marking of that lineage by circumcision (Gen 17:9-14, 23-27). The Israelites are called through Abraham to a life of holiness: “Walk in My ways and be blameless” (Gen 17:1).

The covenant struck between Yahweh-Elohim and Abram/Abraham in these three call narratives in the Book of Genesis basically comes down to a grant or promise by the Almighty to give this particular Mesopotamian Bedouin a territory (in particular, Canaan) as new grazing ground for his flocks, as well as progeny (in particular Isaac, Sarah’s son, although a modified filial inheritance would also be guaranteed for Ishmael, Hagar’s son). It is hard to say, from these three complementary narratives, which promise is more basic or original, land or progeny. In any case, for a Bedouin of the ancient Middle East, both were essential and intertwined. Without verdant land in which one could pasture flocks, the Bedouin had nothing to give to his progeny. Without progeny the Bedouin had no one to help him drive his flocks to pasture land and to inherit the flocks and the land when the Bedouin himself died. In some sense, it could be said that the diverse human authors of the traditions found in Genesis creatively reinterpreted a generic second millennium BCE Bedouin predicament as a unique predicament underlying their national

and religious identity. Every human predicament is unique for the person who undergoes it. The Book of Genesis assures us that God recognizes the uniqueness of every human predicament and that God calls human beings in those predicaments.

The whole of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, served later generations of Jews as a treasure trove from which they mined elaboration and commentary. An extraordinary Jewish intellectual in the cultivated Hellenistic city of Alexandria in Egypt, Philo (20 BCE-50 CE), evolved his own rather philosophical meditations on the story of Abraham. Philo knew no Hebrew or Aramaic and only visited the nearby homeland of his people once in his lifetime, but he identified himself with the patriarch Abraham, as can be seen in his lengthy disquisition on the Abraham narratives in Genesis. But Philo's approach is distinctly allegorical, definitely not territorial. Writing about Abraham's emigrations from Ur and Haran, Philo maintains that they "were performed by a wise man; but if we look to the laws of allegory, by a soul devoted to virtue and busied in the search after the true God."¹⁵ With Philo may begin the tradition of looking to Abraham primarily as a monotheist.

Within Palestine in the first centuries CE aggadic midrash, studied reflection on the narrative portions of the Torah, built up a body of traditional Jewish lore that expands on the Biblical narrative and engages the meditation of devout Jews to the present day. The great collection of aggadic midrash on the first book of the Torah that is referred to as *Bereshit Rabbah* ("The Great [Commentary on] Genesis") was codified between 100 and 400 CE by Jewish scholars still living in Palestine, but not in Jerusalem, from which the Jews had been banned by the Romans. Typically, this verse by verse commentary on Genesis, written partly in Hebrew and partly in Aramaic, compares and contrasts a verse

from Genesis with a very disparate text from what Jews have called the Writings, including such books of the Hebrew Bible as Psalms and Proverbs. The audience for whom the scholars were writing was probably made up of local rabbis exhorting their dispirited congregations to bear up under oppressive foreign domination: the Imperial Roman and later Byzantine hegemonies in Israel. The commentators' own sense of being uprooted deepens their appreciation for what Abram did at God's command when he emigrated first from Ur and then from Haran.

Thus the beginning of the first call narrative of Abraham, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen 12:1), is juxtaposed by the commentators with Psalm 45:11, a verse from a royal wedding psalm with possible significance as well as a celebration of the Lord's espousal with Israel. "Take heed, lass, and note, incline your ear," the Psalmist exhorts the bride. "[F]orget your people and your father's house" (Ps 45:11).¹⁶ Abram/Abraham is compared to the bride in his willingness to leave his father's house, no matter what the pain involved.

Some of the juxtapositions of verses from the Writings with verses of Genesis seem a trifle farfetched to the modern eye; others seem surprisingly contemporary, even postmodern, in the ways that they reread one ancient text in terms of another, possibly less ancient but still anterior to the time of the commentator. So habituated have we become over the last century or so to reading ancient scriptural passages in the light of their putative pre-scriptural sources that it is refreshing to find in this great commentary on Genesis literary parallels to the way in which the ancient Christian writers of the same era read both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. Philo's allegorizing of Genesis and the Palestinian rabbis' meditations on juxtaposed verses of Genesis and the

Writings both serve to direct the attention of their contemporaries and ourselves, all of us who struggle to keep faith with a mysterious God, a God who demands of us sometimes painful uprooting.

II. Abraham as One Justified by Faith

For the preachers and their communities who produced the New Testament, and especially those who surrounded the Beloved Disciple and Paul of Tarsus, the Hebrew Bible accounts of Abraham offered grist for their respective interpretive mills. For many of the sources of the New Testament, neither land nor progeny, literally understood, counted for much in their estimate of Abraham and his importance. Already in the New Testament recollections of the preaching of John the Baptist, we receive a hint that for John the Baptist and others looking forward to the reign of God, physical descent from Abraham did not constitute a real claim to share in Abraham's relationship to the Almighty: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Mt 3:9). John's Gospel ascribes to Jesus similar sentiments about his contentious critics who boast of their descent from Abraham: "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did" (John 8:39). But not every New Testament author is equally critical of the religious significance of Abrahamic physical descent; it must always be remembered that the authors of the New Testament were for the most part Jews, even if their first hearers may have been a mixture of Jews and Gentiles who had adhered to the Way of Jesus.

Most famously, Paul took up the story of Abraham as early as the fifties of the first century CE and found in it the grounds for his own teaching about justification by

faith apart from works of the Law. Both the Epistle to the Galatians and the Epistle to the Romans ground their teaching on this subject on elements in the call narratives of Abraham as preserved in the Book of Genesis. A Jew reading these interpretations of Genesis by Paul might legitimately consider them misunderstandings of the original texts; I would suggest that they are, precisely, different aggadic midrashim on these texts, created to express a new and different religious insight from what was first experienced by the authors of Genesis or by later thinkers in the Jewish tradition meditating on these foundational texts.

Levenson points out how differently Jews and Christians have interpreted Genesis 12:3: “And all the families of the earth/ Shall bless themselves by you,” as the Jewish Publication Society translation puts it, or “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed,” to use the New Revised Standard Version’s translation. Neither translation is made without presuppositions; the first was made under the influence of the great eleventh-century Jewish scholar known as Rashi, who maintains that Abraham was meant to be “a byword of blessing”¹⁷ among all peoples. The second was made under the influence of Saint Paul who sees the verse as evidence that even the Gentiles were included in the blessing of Abraham (Gal 3:6-9).

Paul also reads one verse in the second call narrative, Genesis 15:6, in a way that Jews find peculiar, to put it mildly. Let me quote the Epistle to the Galatians in detail:

Just as Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” [Gen 15:6], so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the Gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you” [Gen 12:3].

For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed (Gal 3:6-9).

What Paul has done in this excerpt is to take two verses respectively from the second call narrative and the first call narrative in the Book of Genesis and load them with meanings that differ from their original sense in the Hebrew text of Genesis as we have it. The first verse cited, Genesis 15:6, states quite simply, after the Lord had promised to give the childless patriarch progeny as countless as the stars: “[Abram] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness,”¹⁸ or “[Abram] put his faith in the Lord, who reckoned it to him as righteousness,” to use the Jewish Publication Society translation in contrast with the New Revised Standard Version. What was the original meaning of this verse? It is hard to say exactly; I can understand why the Italians say that a translator (*traduttore*) is a traitor (*traditore*). The significance of the verse is not terribly clear. It might mean that the Lord God accepted Abram’s faith, his profound trust in God’s ability to provide him with future progeny. That faith, that trust expressed by Abram, convinced God that Abram was a truly upright person, a person at rights with God, a deeply holy and just man. Is all that meaning found in the word usually translated as “reckoned”?

The second verse cited by Paul, Genesis 12:3, depends for the meaning Paul assigns to it—salvation for Gentiles—more on the Septuagintal Greek translation of Genesis than on the Hebrew original. It is likely that Paul’s original hearers and readers, not unlike Philo, only knew the Book of Genesis in that Greek rendering. Paul cites the verse as asserting that “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you” (Gal 3:8). But the meanings which Paul had come to read into these texts derive more from his own

experience of the action of God in his life than they do from the text of Genesis. The aggadic midrash Paul weaves on the first two calls of Abraham in Genesis, not unlike the midrash of *Bereshit Rabbah* on Genesis 12:1 or the allegorical interpretation by Philo of the same passage, tells us much more about Paul than it does about the original meaning of the text, if the original meaning of that text can be incontrovertibly established. I think that Paul is not that different from his contemporary Philo and the authors who were probably already starting to work out the midrashim of *Bereshit Rabbah* in Paul's lifetime.

Paul tells us in another context that he had been "as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Phil 3:5-6). And yet, for all these religious qualifications, Paul came to recognize himself as a sinner. The sin of which he found himself guilty seems to have consisted in his hounding "the church of God" (Gal 1:13), the earliest followers of Jesus in the Middle Eastern diaspora in the thirties of the first century CE. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles preserves three narratives of Paul's conversion. In this vision Paul heard Jesus asking him a poignant question: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4; see also Acts 22:7; 26:14).

In the Epistle to the Galatians, Paul is more reticent about the details of his conversion experience, but he does tell his readers that his career as a persecutor came to an end when "in his good pleasure God, who from my birth had set me apart, and who had called me through his grace, chose to reveal his Son in and through me, in order that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles" (Gal 1:15-16).¹⁹ The "in and through" of the Revised English Bible translation, here quoted, so renders one preposition in the Greek

original of Paul's Epistle (*en*). This preposition indicates an internal experience of Paul, something much more religiously significant than blinding by heavenly light. Paul implicitly compares *his* call/vision to that of the prophet Jeremiah, who also said that he had been chosen before the Lord formed him in his mother's womb to be "a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5). Likewise, Second Isaiah's second song of the Servant of the Lord begins with the declaration that "The Lord called me before I was born/ while I was in my mother's womb he named me" (Is 49:1). A few verses later in that same song the Servant is told by the Lord that he has more than a mission to the tribes of Jacob/Israel: "I will give you as a light to the nations/ that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Is 49:6).

To return to Paul's creative reinterpretation of two verses from two of the Abrahamic call narratives, I think it was Paul's experience of Jesus in glory identified with the Jewish Christians he was persecuting that convinced him that he, Paul, was a sinner and that he had a special calling to spread that news to the most notorious sinners of all, Gentiles outside the Law. The Acts of the Apostles notes that Saul/Paul witnessed the execution of Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:58), and approved of it (Acts 8:1). Stephen, in Paul's hearing, had replicated the blasphemy ascribed to Jesus (Mk 14:62) when he in his turn also envisioned Jesus as "the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). That apparent blasphemy—basically a symbolic presentation of the central Christian affirmation that "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor 12:3)—may have fascinated and disturbed Paul long before his conversion.

The third version of that conversion experience, as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles, adds to the question, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" an intriguing

additional sentence: “It hurts you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14). I would suggest that the conversion of Paul was gradually building up within him from the time of Stephen’s martyrdom until that day on the road to Damascus. The persecutor of the Church had been resisting his own instincts of sympathy with these Christians of similar Pharisaic background. That day on the road to Damascus something happened inside Paul, something that he described as God revealing his Son in and through him, making him a new Servant of the Lord or a new Jeremiah sent to proclaim good news to Gentiles. That experience persuaded Paul to read the Septuagintal Greek of the aforementioned texts from Genesis in such a way as to express accurately his new prophetic and apostolic calling rather than to reproduce exactly what the original Hebrew texts had said. Paul, like Abram in Genesis 15:6, had put his faith in the Lord—to be more precise, in the Lordship of Jesus—and that act of faith had been reckoned to him as the source of his new righteousness. That faith of Paul, making him righteous in God’s sight, could also make such notorious sinners as the Gentiles righteous in God’s sight. Through Paul, a new Abraham, all the nations would find blessing. It is not for nothing that the Church calls Paul the Apostle of the Nations.

III. Abraham as a Pure Monotheist

The first thing that strikes any Jew or Christian studying the Quranic passages about Abraham is the radical difference between Abraham as presented in the Book of Genesis, as well as the New Testament, and the Quranic Abraham. The call of Abraham to migrate to new pastureland and found a new people through his progeny dominates the Genesis narratives of the Hebrew Bible. But Abraham in the Qur’an in no sense plays the role of the forefather of the people of Israel; in fact, in one of its most famous passages,

the Qur'an insists that Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian but a *hani*. This word, difficult to translate, is probably close to the Syriac word *hanpa*, said to mean something like 'heathen,' but with a distinctive sense of a monotheistic Gentile, neither Jewish nor Christian:²⁰

People of the Book: why will you debate about Abraham when the Torah and the Gospel had not been sent down until after him? Can't you understand? ... Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian but a Gentile monotheist (*hanif*), surrendering (*muslim*) [to God]; nor was he one of those who ascribe partners [to God]. Indeed, those [who are] the people with Abraham are the ones who followed him, and this Prophet and those who keep faith. God is the Friend of those who keep faith (Qur'an 3:65, 67-68).²¹

Denying that Abraham was a Christian seems uncontroversial enough, but it may take some further reflection to demonstrate how even a Jew and a Christian can admit that he was not a Jew, either. The terms 'Jew' and 'Judaism' in Jewish usage reflect the reality of Israelite faith no earlier than the collapse of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE, and those terms are usually reserved for the population of Judah after the return from Babylon in the late sixth century BCE. Abraham took his origins from Mesopotamia and lived about a millennium before the era when Judaism, properly so called, developed.

Thus it would, indeed, be ahistorical to call Abraham a Jew. It would even be ahistorical to call him an Israelite—a child of Israel, in Hebrew—because he was the grandfather of Jacob or Israel. Abraham was a native of Mesopotamia and the ancestor of all who worship the Lord God alone. Much more vivid in the Qur'an are stories of how

Abraham confronted his father and his people about their worship of plural divinities symbolized by idols.²² Some of these stories are known in extra-biblical Jewish tradition²³ but play no part in the text of the Torah.²⁴ Abraham is not the forefather of the people of Israel in the Qur'an, but he is, instead, a model of a pure monotheism, not only as a theoretical issue but in practice.

The just quoted passage from the Qur'an describes Abraham as one who has surrendered himself to God, one who is *muslim*, in the root sense of the word. The implied context is not ancient Mesopotamia or the land of Canaan, but the Arabian peninsula and, more precisely Mecca, where the Qur'an portrays Abraham and his son Ishmael as consecrating the Ka'bah, the central sanctuary of that trading center, to the worship of one God alone:

And when We [God] appointed the House [at Mecca] as a refuge for the people and a sanctuary, [We said:] "Take Abraham's place of worship as your own." We then contracted with Abraham and Ishmael that they should purify My House for those who circumambulate it and those who adhere to it bowing and prostrating (Qur'an 2:125).

The Quranic Abraham has little of substance in common with Abraham in the Book of Genesis or Abraham in the New Testament, especially in the Epistles of Paul, as far as narrative is concerned, but there may be a deeper similarity in that all three scriptures depict Abraham as a human being uniquely in dialogue with one God alone. Even if the human authors of the Hebrew Bible may not have come to a notion of the absolute oneness of God until as late as the era of Second Isaiah (the sixth century BCE), the trajectory of the Genesis narrative about Abraham was headed in that direction. Just

as Abraham in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians has much in common with Paul sent to preach to the Gentiles justification by faith apart from works of the Law, Abraham in the Qur'an has much in common with Muhammad in seventh-century polytheistic and hostile Arabia, "this Prophet" in the first Quranic quotation cited above, "and those who keep faith" (Qur'an 6:68).

The Quranic Abraham plays the role of the quintessential opponent of the false notion of plurality in the Godhead. Such plurality was symbolized by multiple images representing gods, including stars, the moon and the sun:

[Recall] when Abraham said to his father, Azar, "Do you take idols as gods? Indeed, I see you and your people in obvious error." Thus we caused Abraham to see the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, so that he might be among those with assurance. When the evening darkened on him, he saw a star. He said, "This is my Lord." But when it set, he said, "O my people, now I am quit of everything you ascribe as a partner [to God]. Indeed, I have directed my eyes towards the One who created the heavens and the earth, as a Gentile monotheist. I am not one of those who ascribe partners [to God]" (Qur'an 6:74-79).

In some sense, without making the claim so offensive to Muslims that the Qur'an borrows motifs from the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament, it might be more accurate to say that the monotheism of the Qur'an expresses itself more clearly precisely because Jews and Christians had previously gone through the development from henotheism (the exclusive worship of one god without any theoretical denial of the existence of other gods) to monotheism (the denial of divine reality to anyone or anything but God alone).

The post-Biblical Jewish tradition, and especially the Book of Jubilees (probably composed more than two centuries before the New Testament), is replete with stories of how Abraham opposed the worship of many gods in Ur and Haran. If Abraham in the Book of Genesis seems to have little pre-call history, the extra-biblical Jewish narratives proved very ready to fill in the gaps.

The Qur'an treasures those stories of Abraham's pure monotheism, his rejection of polytheistic idolatry, which may well have been preserved and shared orally in the Jewish and Christian communities through which Muhammad and his fellow Meccans passed on their trading trips to and from Syria. For Muhammad, these stories, known in his general oral environment, were re-presented to him as revelation from God when he began at the age of 40 to spend more time in meditation, withdrawn from the hurly-burly of Meccan commercial life. Even before his first experience of revelation, Muhammad and some of his conscientious fellow citizens seem to have criticized the polytheism of the Ka'bah and the dog-eat-dog commercialism of Mecca. That polytheism and that commercialism seem to have been intimately linked: the Ka'bah had for centuries encouraged Arabs from every part of the peninsula to enshrine their local deities in that Meccan shrine and to participate in the *entrepôt's* commercial life while there. The pre-Islamic polytheistic *hajj* had become something like a business convention in Las Vegas today, with every cultural and religious expression known to the Arabs and their immediate neighbors somehow represented. The monotheism of Muhammad and the moral coterie that surrounded him, especially after he began to share his experiences of revelation in 613 CE, challenged the religio-commercial status quo in Mecca, the

commercially attractive packaging of the Ka‘bah and its rites that made Mecca an important business hub—a financial mecca, as it were.

IV. Abraham’s Obedient Faith

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the Quranic portrait of Abraham lacks so many details of the portrait of Abraham in Genesis that it strikes the Jewish or Christian reader almost as if it were depicting someone else. It features no covenants, no land, no problem with progeny. The one story about Abraham that all three scriptural traditions contain or at least allude to, the narrative of Abraham’s obedient willingness in faith to offer in sacrifice his only son at God’s command, may well provide us with the one link – but a most important link—that makes it possible for us to talk realistically and fruitfully about a sharing of Abrahamic faith.

The biblical narrative in the Book of Genesis is beautifully crafted. Just as Abraham had originally been commanded by the Lord to leave his country and his kindred and his father’s house “to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1), so too he is commanded once more to go to the land of Moriah and offer in sacrifice “your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love” (Gen 22:2). When Isaac questions his father as they approach the mountain top as to the whereabouts of “the sheep for the burnt offering” (Gen 22:7), the trembling patriarch assures his son that “God will see to [it]” (Gen 22:8). Isaac is bound and laid on the wood for burnt sacrifice when God’s angel intervenes, saving this patriarch from the crime of child-sacrifice known among many populations of the Middle East in ancient times. In so doing God and Abraham provide for a future free of such horrors; a ram is sacrificed instead.

The New Testament alludes directly to this core biblical narrative at least twice. The anonymously written Epistle to the Hebrews meditates directly on the faith this sacrifice demanded: “By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, ‘It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.’ He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back” (Heb 11:17-19). The Epistle of James seems to contradict, at least verbally, the Pauline theme of justification by faith apart from works of the Law when it asks a pertinent question: “Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?” (James 2:21). I have said that the New Testament alludes directly to this narrative twice, but most Christians will recognize in the accounts of the passion and death of Jesus and his resurrection “on the third day” (Gen 22:4; Mk 8:31, etc.) a more profound counterpart to the binding of Isaac and his redemption from death by the substitution of a ram.

The Quranic account of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son never specifies which son of Abraham is involved; nearly all Muslims take for granted that the only time Abraham had an only son was before the birth of Isaac. For most Muslims, the anonymous Quranic son, who participates much more willingly than Isaac in Genesis, must be Ishmael. In many ways, the willingness of both Abraham and his son to offer this sacrifice is the quintessence of *islam* in its root sense, the surrender or submission of oneself to God. Let me quote the relevant passage from Surat al-Saffat (Qur’an 37):

[Abraham] said: “My son, I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice you. Look, now, what do you think?” [The son] replied, “Do what you

have been commanded. God willing, you will find me among the patient.” When they had both surrendered themselves [to God] and [Abraham] had laid his son face down, we [God] called out to him, “O Abraham, you have proved true to the vision.” Thus do we reward those who do good (Qur’an 37:102-105).

In the process of such developing monotheism, the story of Abraham develops as well. Some might call these various anecdotal developments types of aggadic midrash. It is precisely this sort of development, the stories worked out on the theme of Abraham in the New Testament and the Qur’an, that involves what some would call, across religious lines of division, serious misunderstanding. Others are willing to state without much qualification that Jews and Christians and Muslims are all children of Abraham. Yes and no. Irenical dialogue between Jews and Christians and Muslims would be better served by our frank recognition of the different ways, based on our own historical experiences of faith, we think of Abraham.

The most ancient strains in Israelite thought saw in Abraham not just another Mesopotamian Bedouin looking for grazing land and progeny, but the forefather of God’s People and the pioneer of their God-given land. Later strains in Jewish thought saw Abraham more as the Jews’ forerunner in faith, the first of those marked with the covenant of circumcision (Gen 17:10-14; Sir 44:19-23), the quintessential friend of God (Is 41:8; Wis 7:27). The New Testament abandoned, for the most part, the centrality of biological descent from Abraham and Sarah as well as the territoriality of older Israelite thought about Abraham. Starting from the notions of John the Baptist and Jesus that Abraham’s true descendants were those who kept faith as he did with God, the Pauline

writings of the New Testament opened up the possibility of descent from Abraham being extended to all of humanity, Jew and Gentile alike, justified by faith apart from works of the Law. The Qur'an, recognizing the monotheism of the People of the Book, looks, however, for something more absolute, a supranational iconoclastic faith in one God who makes demands of all humanity called to surrender itself to God (*islam*).

We Muslims and Christians and Jews may live together more fruitfully and more peacefully if we recognize the polyvalence of Abraham, the polyvalence of great concepts like faith and revelation, community and the path of righteousness. Once we have learned how we all creatively reinterpret what may seem to be the same stories, how we all work out varying types of midrashim on common themes, we may learn to live together in peace.

Is Abraham, then, as Levenson puts it, a “bond” or a “barrier”²⁵ among Jews, Christians and Muslims? I would suggest that Abraham is a fruitfully ambiguous figure, one whose full significance has to be analogously understood. Abraham in the Hebrew Bible is in some ways the same, and in some ways very different, from Abraham in the New Testament. Abraham in the Qur'an is in some ways the same as Abraham in the Hebrew Bible and the extra-biblical Jewish tradition and Abraham in the New Testament, and in some ways the Quranic Abraham is quite different.

Perhaps all of us who revere the memory of Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice his only son at God's command need to reflect on the obedient faith of Abraham with Søren Kierkegaard. In his famous prelude to *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard rehearses over and over again other possible narratives of Abraham's willingness to

sacrifice his only son. Towards the conclusion of that meditation, Kierkegaard insists on the uniqueness of Abraham's faith:

Abraham believed, and he believed for this life. Yea, if his faith had been only for a future life, he surely would have cast everything away in order to hasten out of this world in which he did not belong. But Abraham's faith was not of this sort Yes, Abraham believed and did not doubt, he believed the preposterous Venerable Father Abraham! Second Father of the human race! Thou who first wast sensible of and didst first bear witness to that prodigious passion which disdains the dreadful conflict with the rage of the elements and with the powers of creation in order to strive with God.²⁶

I join Kierkegaard, finally, in his words of apology to Abraham: "Forgive him who would speak in praise of thee, if he does not do it fittingly . . . [He] will never forget that in a hundred and thirty years thou didst not get further than faith."²⁷

NOTES

¹ Jon D. Levenson, “The Idea of Abrahamic Religions: A Qualified Dissent,” *Jewish Review of Books*, no. 1 (Spring 2010), <http://www.jewishreviewofbooks.com/publications/detail/the-idea-of-abrahamic-religions-a-qualified-dissent> (accessed January 29, 2011). Page numbers are in reference to the Printer Friendly Version: 1-11.

² *Ibid.*, 1.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Here I quote the New Revised Standard Version translation (1989), the best presentation of how Christians read this text. See *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, revised edition, ed. Harold W. Attridge (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006). The Jewish Publication Society translation (1999/5759) renders the whole verse thus: “And because [Abram] put his trust in the Lord, he reckoned it to his merit.” See *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999/5759), second edition. Generally speaking, when discussing scriptural texts in the context of the faith of Jews, I quote the JPS translation; when discussing the faith of Christians, even when the texts come from the Hebrew Bible, I quote the NRSV, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ Bruce Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 130.

¹¹ Levenson, 10.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ On grant or promissory covenants, see Richard Elliott Friedman, “Torah and Covenant,” in *The Oxford Study Bible: Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha*, ed. M. Jack Suggs et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 154-163.

¹⁴ See Richard Clifford and Roland Murphy, “Genesis,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 8-43. I presume that the reader is familiar with the source-theory of the authorship of Genesis and much of the rest of the first four books of the Bible.

¹⁵ “On Abraham,” xv, in *The Essential Philo*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, trans. C.D. Yonge (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 96.

¹⁶ See *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 3rd ed., ed. H. Freedman (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 1:313.

¹⁷ Levenson, 3.

¹⁸ Note that in Galations 3:6 Paul uses ‘God’ rather than ‘the Lord’ in his quotation of Genesis 15:6.

¹⁹ The scriptural citation is from *The Oxford Study Bible: Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha*.

²⁰ See Tor Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, rev. ed., trans. Theophil Menzel (New York/San Francisco: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 108-110. “The Arabic word comes doubtless from the Syriac *hanpa*, meaning ‘heathen.’ How then came the word ‘heathen’ to have in the Koran the sense of ‘monotheist’? It is used in the Syriac Bible of heathen in general, and in ecclesiastical language for Greek heathenism in particular. Thus, for example, Julian the Apostate is called *Yulyana hanpa*. The Christian Syrians did not use the word for heretics in general, but only for those whose standpoint approximated so nearly to that of Hellenic heathendom that they could be reckoned as apostates from the Christian religion. Thus Mani’s teaching is plainly called *hanputa*, heathenism. The Sabians, it is true, are first called ‘heathen’ in works that were written after the Arabic conquest, but everything suggests that they were known as ‘heathen’ at a much earlier date.

If Manicheans and Sabians were thus directly called *hanpe*, ‘heathen,’ we can understand how the word could gradually come to mean, in Arabic, a monotheist who is neither a Jew nor Christian. Mohammed, however, seems to understand the term *hanif* rather a man who, without belonging to a definite religious community, yet spontaneously, directed only by the ‘God-given predisposition,’ has separated himself from the popular heathenism.”

²¹ My own rendering of the Arabic into English with bracketed filling out of words understood.

²² I prefer this way of putting what is usually referred to as “the worship of idols’ or “idol worship.” I have found over many years of living in areas of Africa, where not everyone is a Muslim or a Christian, that the problem designated by these phrases is one of divided attention to God, the postulation of other forces in the transcendent realm, somewhat in competition with God for the attention of worshippers. It is the plurality of divine forces rather than the imaginative sculpting or depicting of such forces that constitutes the real religious problem for Jews, Christians and Muslims.

²³ See “Apocalypse of Abraham,” trans. and ed. R. Rubinkiewicz, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 1:681-705.

²⁴ But note Joshua 24:2.

²⁵ Levenson, 11.

²⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 34, 35, 37.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

Laurence J. McGinley Lecture Response

April 2011

Daniel F. Polish

I am so happy to be with you again and to again be the beneficiary of your gracious hospitality. I thank Fordham University for its kindness and express my gratitude to Father McShane and to Sister Anne-Marie Kirmse for all they have done to make this event possible. Most especially, I want to express my delight in having once again the opportunity to collaborate with Professor Hussain and my deepest thanks to Father Ryan for inviting me to share in what is really his evening. This is our fourth go around at this. And each time finds me increasingly grateful for the opportunity to be part of this quite remarkable endeavor.

Once again, Father Ryan has offered us a bountiful feast of information, a menu well-crafted and well executed, tasty and nourishing. And once again, he has left me nothing to do but add some garnish and perhaps suggest an appropriate aperitif. I can do nothing but suggest some shadings and nuances to a magnificent and important presentation. I appreciate especially his suggestion that with regard to Abraham, and, in fact to many episodes, personages and instructions of the Hebrew Bible, the Christian and later Jewish traditions offer “different aggadic midrashim” on the core text. Perhaps the most efficacious thing I could do is say amen and sit down. Nonetheless, I will offer a few further reflections on Abraham from the Jewish perspective.

I am in complete agreement with Father Ryan’s depiction of the role of Abraham in the Bible. But I would italicize the dimensions of descendants and land. He is clearly presented as father of those who first heard the book in genetic terms. This is in diametric opposition to the quite remarkable piece of rhetoric in the Pauline Midrash of Galatians 3:6-9. In virtually every one of his interactions with G-d, the theme is the promised and long-delayed descendants. This

longing becomes the engine of the episodes involving Hagar and Ishmael. And it provides the true tension and drama of the Binding of the son, whom the Bible identifies as Isaac, where the “test” becomes his willingness to give up that which had been promised and then withheld for so long. With the banishment of Ishmael, at the moment of his near sacrifice, Isaac represents the only hope that Abraham may have for any future descendants. His willingness to forsake that, so often discussed in terms of his fidelity to G-d, represents, as well, the culmination of the descendants theme. It is soon enough followed by the account of the fecundity of Keturah and the re-emergence of Ishmael.

As for the theme of land, it is intertwined with the promise of descendants—your descendants will be numerous and they will possess this land. The attachment to the land, properly interpreted by Father Ryan as the transformation of a Bedouin to a land-holder, is the real motif of chapters 13 and 14 and reaches its apogee in chapter 23, which is less about Abraham’s mourning of Sarah than it is a record of his purchase of a title-deed to a piece of the land. This chapter goes to great length to document the process of negotiation and the final public purchase and acquisition of a part of the land he had been promised at the beginning of his career. Here is the final transformation. Abraham becomes, now, a land holder. And that land will continue as an often unrecognized major actor in the rest of the Biblical narrative.

Of course, it is no less true that by virtue of the sheer volume of communication between Abraham and G-d, any reader of the text could not but infer a different quality to the relationship between the two of them than existed with any of the earlier figures in the Bible. Further, the notion of covenant, though introduced at the conclusion of the Noah narrative, is much more evolved and assumes a new centrality in the Abraham account. So, certainly, the theological role

of Abraham, which becomes the essential feature in the Christian presentation, cannot to be scanted in our reading of the core text.

And, as Father Ryan suggests, in the parallel Midrashic treatment of Abraham, which took place essentially simultaneously in the Jewish and Christian traditions, the Jewish approach, too, gives greater emphasis to Abraham's theological role. But not without sufficient appreciation of his paternal role in the genetic sense. It is to the Abraham of the post-Biblical Jewish tradition that we now turn.

But, before we consider the Abraham of the rabbis and the Jewish tradition which they formed, allow me to share a paradoxical thought with you. As Father Ryan noted, the Jewish tradition does, indeed, regard Abraham as its father. And yet, as I think about my emotional relationship with my own father, each year I take note of my father's birthday and the anniversary of his death. It has been widely recognized that the calendar of any religious tradition is a good indicator of what is of greatest concern to it. The Christian calendar seems to revolve around the celebrations of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus. Islam devotes an entire month to commemoration of the revelation to Muhammad. The Buddhist tradition celebrates the birth of the Buddha. And the Jewish tradition commemorates: Moses, at least obliquely at Passover, which celebrates the exodus he initiated, the revelation at Sinai at Shavuot/Pentecost. It devotes eight days at Chanukah to celebrate the otherwise despised Maccabees and their victory over the Syrian Greeks, and observes the holiday of Purim to honor a fictional Persian queen. And Abraham? The most attentive study of the Jewish calendar would not suggest that Abraham figures in the Jewish story at all. No holiday commemorating his birth, nor any that attends to the significant moments of his career. What this implies, I cannot say.

Certainly it does not suggest that Abraham disappears behind the screen of the subsequent Patriarchs and prophets.

Abraham as genetic father is very much present in Jewish tradition. The rabbis introduced a very powerful theological concept called *Zechut Avot*/the merit of the fathers. In this concept the Patriarchs, especially Abraham, acquired by their actions and fidelity to G-d such powerful merit that it continues to accrue to their descendants. Whatever notice G-d takes of subsequent generations, and whatever protection G-d extends to them, is the result, not of their own worthiness, but of the merit their ancestors earned and bequeathed to them. It has been suggested that this accounts for one particular Jewish practice. On Rosh Hashanah, the Day of the New Year, the beginning of the Days of Awe, the assigned Torah reading is the account of the binding of Isaac, understood by the text and subsequent Jewish tradition as the ancestor of the Jewish people. And why is it this text that is read? Because, according to much traditional interpretation, even if the sins of any particular generation are sufficient to warrant the “severe decree” they will be spared and accorded divine mercy not “for any merit of ...[their] own,” but because of that bequeathed to them by these two patriarchs. This text is read on this most solemn day to assure the community that, whatever their own failings, they are guaranteed this protection and, perhaps, to remind the Divine Judge of this assurance. Some interpreters also trace the sounding of the shofar/ram’s horn on this day back to the ram caught by its horn in a bush which was, at the very last moment, substituted for Isaac. The sounding of the shofar, some say, serves as a reminder to G-d of the merit accrued by the Patriarchs and G-d’s own promise of protection to those descended from them.

The understanding of Abraham as the genetic father of the Jewish people is the context in which to understand the frequency with which the rabbis juxtapose the righteousness of

Abraham with that of Noah. When the rabbis discuss the implication of the verse, “Noah was a righteous man in his generation,” they dwell on the modifying phrase. Perhaps in a generation as depraved as Noah’s, he would be considered righteous. Had he lived in the generation of Abraham, he would be accounted as nothing. Similarly, the rabbis reflect on the phrase, “Noah walked with G-d.” They find the antithesis in G-d’s instruction to Abraham, “walk before Me and live.” With a child, say the rabbis, one must be protective and keep them with you. Only with a fully evolved person can you have the confidence to send them before you. Implicit in the consistent valuations of Abraham over Noah is the sense that the particular father of the Jewish people is superior to the general ancestor of all humankind. The preference for Abraham reveals a particularism that is predicated on Abraham’s genetic link to the people whose exegetes were making the assessment.

Is Abraham, indeed, the genetic father of the Jewish people? If so, then Jewish identity must be restricted to those who are entered into it by birth, and conversion impossible. And yet conversion is, indeed, a familiar enough reality. The rabbis themselves made provision for it. Here, significantly, we encounter Abraham again. For the conventional format of Hebrew names is for a person to be known as so-and-so the son (or daughter) of such-and-such. How could a convert even have a name? The rabbis ordained that converts be known as so-and-so the son (or daughter) of Abraham (in more modern times the child of Abraham and Sarah). The act of conversion is thus construed as bringing one directly into the genetic family line of Abraham. The philosopher Michael Wischogrod has gone so far as to suggest that the act of immersion in the waters of the mikveh that is part of the conversion ceremony has the symbolic effect of molecular reformulation such that one acquires Abraham’s genes and becomes in a literal sense the son or daughter of Abraham.

On the other hand, the rabbis deal more explicitly than the Bible itself with Abraham as theological exemplar. Indeed, they depict him as something of a philosopher. It is the rabbis who wonder about the abrupt beginning of the career of Abraham in Genesis 12. The text reads as if there were a pre-existing relationship between G-d and Abraham and the rabbis supply various Midrashic elaborations of the story. They provide numerous accounts of how Abraham reasoned his way to an understanding of the oneness of G-d. And they fill in the Bible's missing account of how Abraham came to be a "friend" of G-d. The tale of Abraham smashing his father's idols, which Father Ryan adverts to, is so well-known among Jews that most would be shocked to discover that it was not included in the Torah but is a rabbinic elaboration. Also, in a more explicitly theological vein, the rabbis stress the concept of G-d's "testing" of Abraham first introduced in Genesis 22. The rabbis understand Abraham as enduring "ten trials"—a motif we hear re-enunciated in the Qur'an. The rabbinic discussion of these trials serves to highlight Abraham as a champion of G-d in sharper relief than does the Bible itself.

The idea of Abraham as father in faith which comes to full fruition in Paul is not without its antecedents within normative Jewish teaching. But while Paul sought to disconnect any genetic or tribal associations from the Abraham he taught about, the rabbis retained them alongside the theological Abraham about whom they spoke.

Whether as genetic father or as exemplar of utterly faithful monotheistic devotion, Abraham as father is invoked in a most profound way in the Jewish liturgy. The central series of prayers of every worship service is called the Amida/standing prayer. The series begins with a prayer called the Avot/Fathers/Patriarchs (in contemporary liberal circles the avot v'imahot/Fathers and Mothers/Patriarchs and Matriarchs). The traditional formulation of this prayer begins with the words "Blessed are You O Lord our G-d and G-d of our fathers, G-d of

Abraham....” And concludes, “”Blessed are You O Lord shield of Abraham.”¹ In this way the memory of Abraham is invoked, and the visceral association with Abraham is renewed, every time a Jew prays. Despite his absence from the calendar, Abraham is, in this way, never far removed from the memory of the religiously engaged Jew.

In Jewish history we find the presence of the memory of Abraham as immediate and determinative of behavior. In his brilliant book, *The Last Trial*, Shalom Spiegel writes about how Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac became the terrible paradigm for Jewish parents during the many assaults on Jewish communities during the crusades. Rather than allow their children to be murdered by the attacking mobs, these parents invoked the memory of Abraham to offer the lives of their children—and then themselves—*al Kiddush ha-Shem/* for the sanctification of G-d’s Name. If Isaac is the exemplar of the martyr, then Abraham became the exemplar of the one who demonstrated their own fidelity to G-d by not holding their beloved child back from that martyrdom.

It is in that same context, the discomfiting image of Abraham as sacrificer, that we encounter Abraham in the works of numerous contemporary Israeli poets. Much in the manner of the English poet Wilfred Owen,² Israeli poets ponder on the character of parents that will send their children out to die in battle. In a searing reflection on the wars that blighted the history of his country, the poet Hanoeh Levin writes:

My dear father, as you stand by my grave,
Old and tired and bereft,
When you see them bury my body in the dust
While you stand above me, my father...
...don’t say you made a sacrifice
Because I’m the one who sacrificed.....

Troubling as the association is, it represents a profound encounter with Abraham, a wrestling that is characteristic of one generation struggling with the implications of the actions of its forebears—a confrontation that only attests to the ultimate inescapability of the relationship—in this instance the unavoidable recognition of Abraham, for good or ill, as the father of the people that understands itself as descended from him.

Allow me a personal reflection about the deeper implications of the issue Father Ryan has placed before us. How do children of one common father become better children of that father? One important way is to be enriched by one another's perspectives of him. We each could benefit so much by being reminded of the roles of Abraham that are central to other traditions. We could all emerge with a more three dimensional Abraham.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard builds a wonderful speculative work on the events of the Binding of Isaac. He sees it as representing putting faith in G-d above all things, including the laws of proper human conduct. It was Abraham's faith, after all, that made him willing to offer up his son—perhaps confident through that faith that he would get him back. That kind of faith would make each of us better children of Abraham. That kind of faith demands that we, children of Abraham, be prepared to give up our idolatry. I suppose we could ask ourselves what kind of idols we are prepared to give up. I know we do not bow down to statues of stone or wood. But the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm wrote:

Idolatry is not the worship of this or that particular idol...[it is] the deification of things, of partial aspects of the world and man's submission to such things...It is not only pictures in stone and wood that are idols. Words can become idols, and machines can become idols, the state, power,...Science and the opinion of one's neighbors can become idols.³

And he elaborates on this:

Man spends his energy, his artistic capacities on building an idol, and then he worships this idol, which is nothing but the result of his own human effort. His life forces have flowed into a “thing” ...[is experienced] as something apart from himself, over and against him, which he worships and to which he submits.⁴

We could all be better children of Abraham if, like him, we abandoned all the idolatries that define our lives: And let me go so far as to suggest that for many of us our religious traditions themselves become idols, a notion made explicit by the Protestant philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich:

Faith, if it takes its symbols literally, becomes idolatrous! It calls something ultimate which is less than ultimate. Faith, conscious of the symbolic character of its symbols, gives G-d the honor which is due him.⁵

We may worship our respective traditions rather than that they attest to. Abraham our father beckons to each of us to emulate him above all in this: that we be prepared to move beyond our idolatries.

But I most prefer to close with an image of Abraham as a symbol of reconciliation. The last event in the narrative cycle of Abraham comes at the very end.. When he has died and is to be buried in the cave he had purchased initially as a tom for Sarah, the Torah tells us, “ and Isaac, and Ishmael, his sons, buried him in the cave of Machpelah...” As due reverence Abraham finally brought his estranged sons together so long ago, so may he be a source of reconciliation for us in our time.

NOTES

¹ The phrase, “Shield of Abraham,” directs our attention back to Genesis 15:1, which seems to revolve around G-d’s assurance to Abraham and its attendant promises.

² The Parable of the Old Man and the Young:

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in the thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

³ Eric Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press), 118.

⁴ Eric Fromm, *The Sane Society*, (New York: Rinehart, 1955), 121-22.

⁵ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row: 1958), 52.

Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac: The Bonds of Family

Response to the Spring McGinley Lecture Delivered by Rev. Patrick Ryan, SJ

April 13 and 14, 2011, Fordham University

Amir Hussain

Greetings and good evening, *al-salaamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatahu*, peace be upon you and the Mercy and Blessings of God. I am honoured and delighted to be invited back to Fordham to offer a brief response to the superb spring McGinley lecture that we heard from Father. Ryan. A very simple and a very sincere “Thank you” to all of you here. I need to single out, as always, Father President Joseph McShane for his hospitality, Provost Stephen Freedman for his support, Sister Anne-Marie Kirmse for her help with the arrangements, Rabbi Polish for his wise words, and of course, Father Ryan for inviting me to respond to his lecture.

The title of my talk is “Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac: The Bonds of Family.” I was in Pittsburgh yesterday for a meeting of the Association of Theological Schools, so maybe this is an inspiration from “We are Family,” the Sister Sledge disco song that became the theme for the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1979. The famous five, Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac are of course not the first family in the Bible, but they are crucial to understanding our three religious traditions. They are, of course, a messy, dysfunctional family, illustrating the problems of sister wives long before *Big Love*, the reality show *Sister Wives*, and other modern television shows about polygamy.

Father Ryan has, with his usual erudition, discussed the role of Abraham in our three traditions. For Muslims, it is important to remember the significance of Abraham, who is mentioned by name the second-most of any of the prophets in the Qur’an, 69 times. It is also instructive to remember that Moses is the prophet mentioned most by name (137 times) in the

Qur'an, and also that Isaac is mentioned more times (17) by name than Ishmael (12). As a Muslim, I cannot understand the Quranic stories about them without being familiar with their roles in the Bible and oral traditions. For me, the metaphor is of a triptych, a painting in three panels, each panel unique, but when viewed together, part of a greater whole.

Father Ryan quoted the following line from Jon Levenson's article: "however sharply Jews and Christians differ in the interpretation of the scriptures they hold in common, they are after all working from the same text." While that is of course true, it seems to me important to point out that that same text, the Hebrew Bible, is read very differently by Jews and Christians. Christians read the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament, or at least through the prism of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Muslims, I would argue, need to understand both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in order to properly appreciate the Qur'an. Certainly, the first hearers of the revelation were familiar with the Biblical stories, or else, to take one example, 5:27, "recite to them the truth of the story of the two sons of Adam," would make no sense. Clearly the first hearers knew something of Adam and his two sons. Here, I make a plea to Muslims to become familiar with the Biblical texts and traditions.

To return to the family of Abraham, it is instructive to remember that the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II, made his first visit outside of Rome in 1979 to Turkey. In Ankara, he said this about our connections to Abraham: "Faith in God, which the spiritual descendants of Abraham, Christians, Muslims and Jews profess, when it is lived sincerely so that it penetrates life, is an assured foundation of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom and a principle of rectitude for moral conduct in life and society."¹

Abraham is crucial to the prayer life of Muslims. At the end of our five daily prayers, when we are on our knees in submission, we ask God to bless Abraham and the family of

Abraham, saying:

Allahumma salli 'ala Muhammad wa 'ala 'aali Muhammad kama sallayta 'ala 'Ibrahim wa 'ala 'aali 'Ibrahim. 'Innaka Hamidun Majid. Allahumma barik 'ala Muhammad wa 'ala 'aali Muhammad kama barakta 'ala 'Ibrahim wa 'ala 'aali 'Ibrahim. 'Innaka Hamidun Majid.

Oh God send prayers on Muhammad and on the family of Muhammad as You sent prayers on Abraham and the family of Abraham; Truly You are Worthy of praise, full of Glory. Oh God send blessings on Muhammad and on the family of Muhammad as You sent blessings on Abraham and the family of Abraham; Truly You are Worthy of praise, full of Glory.

It is the family of Abraham, especially his wife Hagar, that I would like to discuss further.

Her story is described in the hadith, the oral traditions of Islam, in the most authoritative collection of Al-Bukhari:²

Abraham brought Ishmael's mother and her son Ishmael while she was suckling him, to a place near the Ka'ba under a tree on the spot of Zam-zam, at the highest place in the mosque. During those days there was nobody in Mecca, nor was there any water. So he made them sit over there and placed near them a leather bag containing some dates, and a small water-skin containing some water, and set out homeward. Ishmael's mother followed him saying, "O Abraham! Where are you going, leaving us in this valley where there is no person whose company we may enjoy, nor is there anything to enjoy?" She repeated that to him many times, but he did not look back at her. Then she asked him, "Has God ordered you to do so?" He said, "Yes." She said, "Then God will not neglect us," and returned while Abraham proceeded onwards, and on reaching the Thaniya where

they could not see him, he faced the Ka'ba, and raising both hands, invoked God saying the following prayers [Qur'an 14:37]: "O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring dwell in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House [i.e., the Ka'ba] in order, O our Lord, that they may offer prayer perfectly. Fill the hearts of people with love towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks" [end of Quranic verse].

Ishmael's mother went on suckling Ishmael and drinking from the water she had.

When the water in the water-skin had all been used up, she became thirsty and her child also became thirsty. She started looking at Ishmael tossing in agony; She left him, for she could not endure looking at him, and found that the mountain of Safa was the nearest mountain to her on that land. She stood on it and started looking at the valley keenly so that she might see somebody, but she could not see anybody. Then she descended from Safa and when she reached the valley, she tucked up her robe and ran in the valley like a person in distress and trouble, till she crossed the valley and reached the Marwa mountain where she stood and started looking, expecting to see somebody, but she could not see anybody. She repeated that running between Safa and Marwa seven times.

The Prophet said, "This is the source of the tradition of the walking of people between Safa and Marwa." When she reached the Marwa mountain for the last time she heard a voice and she asked herself to be quiet and listened attentively. She heard the voice again and said, "O, whoever you may be! You have made me hear your voice; have you got something to help me?" And behold! She saw an angel at the place of Zam-zam, digging the earth with his heel [or in other traditions, "his wing"], till water flowed from that place.

Of this portrayal, Muslim scholar Riffat Hassan writes that Hagar is:

... a woman of exceptional faith, love, fortitude, resolution and strength of character.

Once she hears from Abraham that God commands her and her infant son to be left in the desert, she shows no hesitation whatever in accepting her extremely difficult situation.

She does not wail or rage or beg Abraham not to abandon her and Ishmael. Instead, surrendering spontaneously and totally to what she believes to be God's will, she says that she is 'satisfied with God,' who will never neglect her. She lets Abraham go, without any words of recrimination or sorrow, and returns to her infant son.³

It is also important to mention that Hagar is understood to be a black slave, and thereby has to deal with a triple threat of racial, class and gender bias. And it is instructive for Muslims to remember this heritage, as the Prophet Muhammad claimed descent from Ishmael and his mother. He comes not from a lineage of princes and kings, but from the quiet dignity of a slave woman. Father Tom Michel sees Hagar as our "Mother in Faith," and writes:

I believe that Hagar is a key religious figure and that meditation on her story can enrich the understanding of Jews, Christians, and Muslims concerning the nature of the God whom we worship and what it means to do God's will in contemporary societies. The image of Hagar and her child in the desert is part of today's reality. The low-born, hard-working domestic laborer, used and misused and cast out by her employers, the single mother abandoned by the father of her child, the foreigner and the refugee far from her native land, desperately trying to survive, frantic in her maternal concern for the safety of her child –this Hagar I have met many times.⁴

The account of Al-Bukhari continues in the hadith literature:

Then Abraham stayed away from them for a period as long as God wished, and called on them afterwards. He saw Ishmael under a tree near Zam-zam, sharpening his arrows.

When he saw Abraham, he rose up to welcome him and they greeted each other as a father does with his son or a son does with his father. Abraham said, “O Ishmael! God has given me an order.” Ishmael said, “Do what your Lord has ordered you to do.” Abraham asked, “Will you help me?” Ishmael said, “I will help you.” Abraham said, God has ordered me to build a house here,” pointing to a hillock higher than the land surrounding it.” The Prophet added, “Then they raised the foundations of the House [i.e., the Ka’ba]. Ishmael brought the stones and Abraham was building, and when the walls became high, Ishmael brought this stone and put it for Abraham who stood over it and carried on building, while Ishmael was handing him the stones, and both of them were saying, “O our Lord! Accept this service from us, Truly, You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing” [Qur’an 2:127]. The Prophet added, “Then both of them went on building and going round the Ka’ba saying: ‘O our Lord! Accept this service from us, Truly, You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.’”

These, for Muslims, are also crucial elements in the story of this family. The well revealed to save Hagar and Ishmael is the well of Zam-Zam, the well that to this day still waters the pilgrims that come to Mecca. Part of the pilgrimage ritual is running between the hills of Safa and Marwa, remembering the frantic search of Hagar. Then there is the rebuilding of the Ka’ba, the first place of monotheistic prayer, by Abraham and Ishmael. There are traditions that say it was first built by the first human being, Adam, and then rebuilt by Abraham and his son. This is why Mecca is central to Muslims. Not because the Prophet Muhammad was born here, even though he was. Not because this is where the Prophet Muhammad received his first revelations, even though he did. Mecca is important because this is where Ishmael and Abraham rebuilt the Ka’ba, the house of prayer to God.

For Muslims, there is a connection to the Biblical stories. The Qur'an 2:136 states: "Say: We believe in God, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to all prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them: And we surrender to God."

Later in this same chapter of the Qur'an is this intriguing little verse (2:260), that has elements from the covenant ritual that Father Ryan described in his lecture: "When Abraham said: 'Show me, Lord, how You will raise the dead,' God replied: 'Have you no faith?' He said 'Yes, but just to reassure my heart.' God said, 'Take four birds, draw them to you, and cut their bodies to pieces. Scatter them over the mountain-tops, then call them back. They will come swiftly to you. Know that God is Mighty, Wise.'"

While some may see the difference in these stories as a barrier, I see them as a bond. I mentioned earlier the metaphor of the triptych. Perhaps another way to look at it is as the same characters, but in three different plays, each of which needs to be read together, a trilogy. And just to be clear, I said triptych and trilogy, not trinity.

Another difference in the stories that Father Ryan outlined is the sacrifice of the son of Abraham. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, this is Isaac. In the Muslim tradition, it is Ishmael, although a few important commentators such as Ibn Masud and al-Tabari say it was Isaac. In the Qur'anic story, Abraham asks his son what he should do when he has been commanded to sacrifice his son. The son, like his mother Hagar before him, puts his trust in God.

For me, there's a connection here with the Jewish tradition, if only tangentially, in the poetry of Leonard Cohen. I need to disclose here that as a Canadian, I am required by Canadian law in any gathering outside of Canada to mention by name at least one Canadian artist, so yet another reason for choosing Leonard. In 1969, with memories of both the 1967 war and the

Vietnam War, he wrote a song about the sacrifice, but from the point of view of the son. What must the son of Abraham have felt? Leonard, of course, sees this in the long tradition of prohibiting the sacrifice of children, but extends his meditation in a time of war. It is with his song, "Story of Isaac," that I end.

The door it opened slowly,
my father he came in,
I was nine years old.
And he stood so tall above me,
his blue eyes they were shining
and his voice was very cold.
He said, "I've had a vision
and you know I'm strong and holy,
I must do what I've been told."
So he started up the mountain,
I was running, he was walking,
and his axe was made of gold.
Well, the trees they got much smaller,
the lake a lady's mirror,
we stopped to drink some wine.
Then he threw the bottle over.
Broke a minute later
and he put his hand on mine.

Thought I saw an eagle
but it might have been a vulture,
I never could decide.
Then my father built an altar,
he looked once behind his shoulder,
he knew I would not hide.
You who build these altars now
to sacrifice these children,
you must not do it anymore.
A scheme is not a vision
and you never have been tempted
by a demon or a god.
You who stand above them now,
your hatchets blunt and bloody,
you were not there before,
when I lay upon a mountain
and my father's hand was trembling
with the beauty of the word.
And if you call me brother now,
forgive me if I inquire,
"Just according to whose plan?"
When it all comes down to dust
I will kill you if I must,

I will help you if I can.

When it all comes down to dust

I will help you if I must,

I will kill you if I can.

And mercy on our uniform,

man of peace or man of war,

the peacock spreads his fan.⁵

Notes

¹ Quoted in Irfan Omar, editor, *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue by Thomas F. Michel, SJ* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 82.

² *Volume 4, Book 55, Number 583*. Narrated Ibn Abbas Accessed from <http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/hadith/bukhari/055.sbt.html>

³ Riffat Hassan, “Islamic Hagar and Her Family”, in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 154.

⁴ “Hagar: Biblical and Islamic Perspectives”, in Omar, ed., *A Christian View of Islam*, 87.

⁵ Story Of Isaac lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC