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.” 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.”

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.” 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.” 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.”

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). 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,” 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.” “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.”

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, 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. “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.” 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). 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). 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. Some of these stories are known in extra-biblical Jewish tradition but play no part in the text of the Torah. 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):

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 trialogue 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” 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


2 Ibid., 1.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 2.

8 Ibid.


11 Levenson, 10.

12 Ibid.


17 Levenson, 3.


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

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


But note Joshua 24:2.

Levenson, 11.


Ibid., 37.