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 discomforting 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 Hanoch 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.
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.
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 *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, 118.

4 *The Sane Society*, 121-22.

5 *Dynamics of Faith*, 52.