
Abraham Among Jews, Christians, and Muslims: Monotheism, Exegesis, and Religious Diversity

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In this series of lectures, I will address the place of Abraham within the history of biblical interpretation and the development of the monotheistic religious communities of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. First, I will explore the “conversion” of Abraham to Judaism and Christianity, which involves the *reabsorption* and *recontextualization* of the putative founder into a later stage of the religion. What happens to the founder when later generations try to think of his life in terms of their own patterns of religion, their own practices, their own beliefs? Second, I will pursue a related issue, namely the *identification* of specific religious communities—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—with the biblical Abraham; in particular, how the Abrahamic religions limit or define their communities vis-à-vis their common founding figure.

The Old Testament of the Old Testament

In the case of the figure Abraham in the book of Genesis, we are dealing with what the British scholar Walter Moberly calls “the Old Testament of the Old Testament.” Whatever we call this book—*Tanakh*, the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible—Moberly points out that there is behind it an *older* testament: the memories, or putative memories of an earlier dispensation; the dispensation of the *Avot*, the patriarchs,

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the memories of a pre-Sinaitic religion (Moberly 1992).

Most of the Pentateuch centres on the Mosaic revelation on Mount Sinai. This is important to all four of the major sources of the Pentateuch that critical scholars identify—J, E, D, and P. All are involved in the question of what was revealed on Mount Sinai, and all see ancient Israel's polity—religious, political, and legal life—as being recontextualized, put on a new and more enduring foundation, at Mount Sinai. Yet this same book, the Pentateuch, also speaks very positively about figures who predated Moses and the Sinaitic revelation, especially Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It would be difficult for an ancient Israelite to answer the question: who is the founder of your religion? Though he might understand the term "founder," he would probably have a hard time understanding the modern concept of "religion." But even if he were to understand the question itself, he would have difficulty answering it. Who was the founder of this thing? Who first practiced these things? Central to this religion is the practice of the Sabbath, for example, but who first observed the Sabbath? Certainly not Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, to judge from the relevant sections of the Pentateuch itself. If one looks at the religion that is practiced there—in the narratives about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—one discovers that this religion seems very different from the religion of Israel as one finds it in the rest of the Hebrew Bible, even in the rest of those four documents in the Pentateuch—J, E, D, and P. These prior sources speak of a different religion after the period of the patriarchs.

There are many stories that speak of Abraham as the founder of monotheism, shattering his father's idols, but this is a post-biblical legend. There is no polemic against idolatry in Genesis; there is no sense that these foreign kings with whom Abraham comes into contact—like Melchizedek in Genesis 14—are pagan, idolatrous, misguided, evil, or sexually perverted people. Abimelech in Genesis 20 actually reproves Abraham. Why, he asks, did you pass off your wife as your sister? Abraham comes up with this statement that perhaps we are supposed to think is true, or perhaps we are supposed to think is a further lie: She may not be my sister, but she is my *half-sister*. Moreover, Abraham says to the foreign king: I did this because I thought there was no *yir'at 'elohim*, no fear of God in this place. But there is fear of God in that place, and it is *Abraham* who has been caught lying. The foreign king is, in fact, reproving Abraham, who in this chapter is described as a prophet. This is the opposite of what one would expect from the rest of the religion of Israel, where it is

usually the Israelite prophet who reproves the foreign king. Along similar lines, Abraham's departure from his birthplace of Ur in Mesopotamia has nothing to do with a renunciation of idolatry. There is no hint in the text that he is opposing his father's religion, or that he was somehow persecuted by Nimrod at the time of the building of the Tower of Babel. These are important legends in Judaism and Christianity, but none of them has much of a biblical foundation.

In addition, there is no great concern with intermarriage in the Book of Genesis. To be sure, in chapter 24, Abraham dispatches his unnamed servant to find a wife for Isaac, a wife from his own family rather than from the Canaanites. But, generally speaking, there is no problem with intermarriage: Joseph marries the daughter of an Egyptian priest, with no indication that this priest or his daughter converted to Israelite religion (though later Judaism sometimes makes a great deal of her as an archetype of the female convert). When Joseph's brothers, Judah and Simeon, take Canaanite wives, the text does not seem to see this as a problem (Gen. 38:2; 46:10).

These patriarchs build altars on various sites, though Deuteronomy requires sacrificial worship to be limited to one place, which the tradition later identifies with Jerusalem (Deut. 12). They also set up cultic pillars and cultic trees, and call on names of God (or gods) that are not otherwise common or well-attested in the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, there is no hint of Sabbath observance (*shabbat*) or dietary restrictions (*kashrut*) in the patriarchal narratives. More important, there is no hint of the *condemnation* of any of the patriarchs in the later sources. We do not hear prophets like Ezekiel, who does insist on things like the observance of the Sabbath, telling the people to forget Abraham and these evil traditions. Ezekiel strongly endorses a certain pattern of religion, but makes no criticism of the founders who practiced a different religion—the Old Testament of the Old Testament—the earlier dispensation of this religion itself.

There is a problem here for the later believer: What are we to make of the founder of a religion who does not practice his own religion? What are we to make of a people who see their origins lying in this figure Abraham, who does not seem to observe things later considered so central to the tradition that their violation was a capital offense? Is this a reminiscence of a pre-Israelite religion that has somehow been preserved, or is it, as some scholars think, the product of a different social stratum, an ancestral or family religion, much more relaxed about matters of idolatry and not much involved in questions of cultic law (although it does have cultic practice)? That is another question, one which I cannot address in these lectures.

Abraham's Conversion to Judaism

To the later Jews, indeed, this became a serious problem. As Samuel Sandmel (1955, 228) put it, "If Moses' Law was divine Law, how could Abraham (and other patriarchs) have flourished without it?" How could Abraham have flourished without the *Torat Moshe*, the Torah of Moses? This was a great question which was very much on the mind of Jews of Second Temple and rabbinic times (mostly in 3rd century BCE-5th century CE).

The first text I want to examine is from the *Book of Jubilees*, a very important Jewish book written about the middle of the second century BCE, but one which is not part of the continuing rabbinic canon, for complicated reasons.

²⁵And the LORD God said to me, "Open [Abraham's] mouth and his ears so that he might hear and speak with his mouth in the language which is revealed because it ceased from the mouth of all of the sons of men from the day of the Fall." ²⁶And I opened his mouth and his ears and his lips and began to speak with him in Hebrew, in the tongue of creation. ²⁷And [Abraham] took his father's books—and they were written in Hebrew—and he copied them. And he began studying them thereafter. And I caused him to know everything which he was unable (to understand). And he studied them (in) the six months of rain (*Jubilees* 12:25-27; Charlesworth 1985, 82).

The point of this complicated text seems to be that the Angel of the Presence of the Lord is reviving the Hebrew language and teaching it to Abraham. Abraham has books, written in Hebrew, that he may not have had up to this point, and now he is copying them over, reading them, and learning from them. There is a sense of some ancient tradition that Abraham is now able to learn and to know from books—from heavenly tablets, to use the language of *Jubilees*—that is pre-Mosaic, and yet gives the essence or perhaps the totality of the Mosaic law, as *Jubilees* understood it. So when the *Book of Jubilees* retells the story of Abraham, it has him observing a number of laws, or customs, which from the rest of the Hebrew Bible one would never guess he ever observed, such as Passover. Though it may seem difficult to observe Passover when the Exodus has not yet happened, in *Jubilees* 17 through 18 it is none other than Abraham who founds and first observes Passover.

This is expanded in the Mishnah, a work of Jewish law from about 200 CE. In dealing with the question of different crafts and forms of human livelihood, the Mishnah speaks on behalf of the highest craft a

father can teach his son: *Talmud Torah*—the study of the Torah as a profession.

But with all other crafts it is not so; for when a man falls into sickness or old age or troubles and cannot engage in his work, lo, he dies of hunger. But with the Law it is not so; for it guards him from all evil while he is young, and in old age it grants him a future and a hope. Of his youth, what does it say? *They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.* Of his old age what does it say? *They shall still bring forth fruit in old age.* So, too, it says of our father Abraham, *And Abraham was old and well stricken in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things.* And we find that Abraham our father had performed the whole Law before it was given, for it is written, *Because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws* (Mishnah Qiddushin 4:14; Danby 1933, 329).

Here the Mishnah says that Abraham observed the entire Torah (*Kol ha-Torah kullah*) before it was given! The implication is that one does not need the Sinaitic revelation; one can have Abraham as a Mosaic, perhaps even rabbinic Jew, observing the entire Torah, including rabbinic law, and not simply the written law of the Pentateuch. The text on which the Mishnah bases this, the exegetical hook if you will, is the promise of God to Isaac, Abraham's son, after Abraham has died. God says,

⁴I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven, and give to your descendants all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your offspring—⁵inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, My teachings (Gen. 26:4-5).

The first part, verse 4, is very familiar. But *why* is the promise renewed to Isaac? In verse 5, the text says the promise is renewed *because of Abraham's obedience*. This is the only verse upon which one could possibly hang the rabbinic concept of Abraham as the law-observant Jew, practicing Mosaic Law or even all of rabbinic teaching—eventually including even laws about such matters as how far a Jew may travel on the Sabbath, which are strictly rabbinic in origin.

A number of Jewish exegetes came to wonder exactly what those "laws, commandments, and teachings" were. One of the first to wonder was Rashi (1040-1105), the great exegete from the north of France. This is how Rashi glosses this extremely important text:

Abraham hearkened to my voice when I tested him. And kept My charge: (Namely,) the decrees for prevention regarding the admonitions which are in the Torah, such as incest of second degree, and Rabbinical prohibitions regarding the Sabbath (Yeb. 21). *My commandments*, Those matters which even if they were not written are worthy of (being regarded as) commandments, such as robbery and bloodshed. *My statutes*, Matters which the evil inclination and the gentiles of the world criticize, such as (the prohibition of) eating swine's flesh and the wearing of a material mixed of wool and linen, for which there is no explanation (given), but the decree of the king and his statutes for his servants. *And my laws*. (This) includes the Oral Law, the laws (revealed) to Moses on Sinai (B.R.) (Rashi to Genesis 26:5; Ben Isaiah 1949, 248-49).

This you might call a *maximal* position. Abraham observed *everything*, in line with what the Mishnah said: oral and written, rational and not-so-rational. He observed the totality of Jewish Law.

In the next text, we have a gloss on the same passage by Rashi's grandson, Samuel ben Meir, known as Rashbam.

Inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me. Concerning the Binding of Isaac, as it is written, "inasmuch as you have obeyed Me" (Gen. 22:18). *and kept My charge*. Such as circumcision, as it is written about it, "And as for you, you shall keep My covenant" (Gen. 17:9). *My commandments*. Such as the commandment about the eight days (until the father performs circumcision on the son), as it is written, "As God has commanded him" (Gen. 21:4). *My laws and My teachings*. According to the essence of its plain sense, (it refers to) all the commandments that are (generally) recognized, such as the laws against robbery, sexual misdeeds, and coveting, and the laws of hospitality. All of these were in force before the Torah was given, but they were (then) renewed and explicated to Israel, and they made a covenant to practice them (Rashbam to Genesis 26:5).

If I understand Rashbam correctly, he is saying that Abraham did indeed observe laws, and we have a basis for this in Genesis 26:5. But the laws he observed were only ones that one would naturally expect Abraham to know because they had been revealed to him already, before Sinai (i.e., circumcision), or because they were specific commands that applied only to him (i.e., the command to sacrifice his son), or because they are generally recognized by the human conscience, without the benefit of any specific deposit of revelation. This one might call the most *minimal* position.

Now I would like to step back in time for a moment and talk about a figure who comes eleven hundred years earlier than Rash-

bam—Philo, the Jewish philosopher of Alexandria, who wrote at the turn of the Common Era. Philo, too, was concerned with the issue of Abraham and the law, but he approaches it in a somewhat different way, not in terms of exegesis of the specific details of Genesis 26:5. Philo, speaking of the patriarchs, says,

for in these men we have laws endowed with life and reason, and Moses [who wrote the Book of Genesis] extolled them for two reasons. First he wished to sh[o]w that the enacted ordinances are not inconsistent with nature; and secondly that those who wish to live in accordance with the laws as they stand have no difficult task, seeing that the first generations before any at all of the particular statutes was set in writing followed the unwritten law with perfect ease, so that one might properly say that the enacted laws are nothing else than memorials of the life of the ancients, preserving to a later generation their actual words and deeds. For they were not scholars or pupils of others, nor did they learn under teachers what was right to say or do: they listened to no voice or instruction but their own: they gladly accepted conformity with nature, holding that nature itself was, as indeed it is, the most venerable of statutes, and thus their whole life was one of happy obedience to law (*On Abraham*, 5-6; Colson 1935, 7).

Abraham is indeed in Philo a law-observant Jew, but unlike the rabbinic position, it is not that he has an oral tradition, nor, as in *Jubilees*, is it the case that he has a collection of ancient books that he is able to study. He is able to live the lawful life purely by reading nature. When the law finally comes in the form of divine revelation to Moses, it simply ratifies and makes explicit what one can learn from nature itself, if only one knows how to read it.

We have now seen, in the Jewish realm, four possibilities for handling the rather embarrassing fact that Abraham, according to Genesis, is not observing Jewish law, and that this lack of observance does not seem there to be a problem. The first possibility, which we find in *Jubilees*, says Abraham learned the law from ancient books, which had been handed down from time immemorial, perhaps from the original heavenly tablets given to Adam. The second possibility is that there was an Oral Law that Abraham followed, which did not yet appear in literary form. This is the position taken by the Mishnah and Rashi. Rashbam has a more minimal view: Abraham observed pre-Sinaitic directives (like circumcision) that were revealed to him, but not the totality of rabbinic law. And finally (though it is first chronologically), we have Philo, who says that Abraham observed the unwritten law, which can be read from nature alone, so that Abraham becomes a kind of philosopher, able to translate the mute voice of nature into

the moral directives that it provides. These are four different variations of the fundamental Jewish way of converting Abraham into a law-observant Jew.

Abraham's Conversion to Christianity

How is Abraham converted to Christianity? If one followed the Apostle Paul, one would believe in the complete legitimacy of a law-free gospel—at least for Gentiles. One could inherit the promise of Abraham, one could even acquire Abrahamic *status*, not through birth as a Jew (or not *solely* through birth as a Jew), and not through conversion to Judaism (entailing, for males, circumcision), but rather through *faith and faith alone*. The status of faith could make one *tzaddiq*—right in the eyes of God—*without* the observance of the Torah. If one had a theology like that, one would, like a bee to flowers, fly to the figure of Abraham, for Abraham is described as having been “right with God,” and yet, on the face of it in the Book of Genesis, he is not observing the Torah. And if Abraham could be “right with God” based on something else, like faith, or an obedient life that does not involve Sinaitic law, then who are these Jews or these Jewish Christians, the “Judaizers” or false brothers as Paul calls them, to say that Christians or Gentile-Christians have to observe the Mosaic Torah, that they have to be circumcised and observe dietary laws? How can they say this when Abraham himself did not observe those things? This we see in the following text, from Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians.

¹O stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? ²I want to learn only this from you: did you receive the Spirit from works of the law, or from faith in what you heard? ³Are you so stupid? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? ⁴Did you experience so many things in vain?—if indeed it was in vain. ⁵Does, then, the one who supplies the Spirit to you and works mighty deeds among you do so from works of the law or from faith in what you heard? ⁶Thus Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

⁷Realize then that it is those who have faith who are children of Abraham. ⁸Scripture, which saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, foretold the good news to Abraham, saying “Through you shall all the nations be blessed.” ⁹Consequently, those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham who had faith. ¹⁰For all who depend on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not persevere in doing all the things written in the book of the law.” ¹¹And that no one is justified before God by the law is clear, for “the one who is righteous by faith will live.” ¹²But the law does not depend on faith; rather, “the one who does these things

will live by them." ¹³Christ ransomed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree," ¹⁴that the blessing of Abraham might be extended to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:1-14).

For Paul, the key thing about Abraham is precisely that he *did not* observe the Mosaic Torah but had faith and he was completely in the right with God through this faith. That is Paul's view of how Christians—at least Gentile-Christians—should fall heir to the promise. Does he mean this as a criticism of Jews' observing the Torah? Does this man who calls himself the Apostle to the Gentiles intend to criticize Jewish observance or only Jewish observance by Gentiles? This is a very difficult and complicated issue in Pauline studies which I will, with your permission, nimbly evade.

The key verse for Paul is Genesis 15:6, which comes after God has promised Abraham that he will have an heir and the heir will be his own son, despite his and his wife Sarai's advanced age.

"The word of the Lord came to him in reply, "That one [Eliezer] shall not be your heir; none but your very own issue shall be your heir." ⁵He took him 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." ⁶And because he put his trust in the LORD, He reckoned it to his merit (Gen. 15:4-6).

Abraham is promised that he is going to be a father to thousands—*goy gadol*, a great nation. But how is he going to father a great nation if he has not fathered anybody, if his wife has been barren all her life and it is too late to have a child anyway? This is a big problem. Nonetheless, God tells him that one of his *own* issue will be his heir. He takes Abraham outside and tells him to look toward heaven and count the stars if he is able, so numerous shall his offspring be. Then we have the key verse, Genesis 15:6: "And because he put his trust [or faith] in the LORD, He reckoned it to his merit." Now we do not know whether the second "he" refers to Abraham or God. Our translation reads it as "God reckoned it as Abraham's merit," and that is how Paul reads it: *because of his faith*, God reckoned his faith as righteousness. This means one does not need to have the works and the law.

What was an embarrassment to Philo, *Jubilees*, the Mishnah, Rashi, and Rashbam, then, is a great resource to Paul. He develops this further in Romans 4:1-5:

¹What then can we say that Abraham found, our ancestor according to the flesh? ²Indeed, if Abraham was justified on the basis of his works, he has reason to boast; but this was not so in the sight of God. ³For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." "A worker's wage is credited not as a gift, but as something due." ⁵But when one does not work, yet believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.

God's promise, Paul here writes, was not a payment to Abraham for what he did. It was not that he observed something and therefore he got this promise. Rather it was a free gift and it came in response to Abraham's faith. Or, the gift came and Abraham then had faith, and that faith somehow "justified" him and substituted for the works that were not available to him. Now, I do not mean to suggest that Paul is an antinomian who does not believe in law or good works. Paul expects works of some sort; he expects good works of the redeemed. But he thinks that the promise is not *based on* the works. The works are not salvific, they do not necessarily produce deliverance or righteousness in the eyes of God, but he still expects Christians to have them, and in these epistles (especially in Galatians) he goes into some detail as to what those good works are.

When one looks a generation or two later in Christian history, this begins to take on a nasty tone. We begin to move from Abraham as a model of Gentile *inclusion*, to Abraham as a pretext or basis for Jewish *exclusion*—for excluding those who practice the law (Siker 1991, 185-98). The main point for Paul is to dignify faith as a means of righteousness, a term usually associated with law-observance. But when one comes to Justin Martyr, church father of the mid-second century, one sees the same verse, Genesis 15:6, cited with a different tone and for a different point.

⁵For we [Christians] are the true and spiritual Israelitish nation, and the race of Judah and of Jacob and Isaac and Abraham, who when he was still uncircumcised received witness from God for his faith, and was blessed, and was called father of many nations—we, I say, are all this, who were brought nigh to God by Him who was crucified, even Christ, as will be demonstrated in the course of our discussion (*Dialogue with Trypho* 11:5; Williams 1930, 24).

Justin argues that, in fact, the Church is the true Israel, because there is only one means of becoming Israel—*only* faith, *not* works—and those who rely on works are not Israel. There are verses in Paul that support this type of reading, and there are verses in Paul that counter such a

reading. People who like one type or the other will cite one or the other. But Justin is less ambiguous. For him the point is that we now move from Gentile inclusion to Jewish exclusion. Now we are polemicalizing against the Jews—not just Jewish-Christians, but against the Jews—who are still observing these Mosaic laws.

This Pauline notion about the lack of salvific force to the observance of Jewish law generated a huge cottage industry of negative stereotypes about Judaism, one that, unfortunately, still goes on to this day. These stereotypes portray Judaism as a religion of works-righteousness that does not know the meaning of the grace of God. One often sees a depiction of rabbinic Judaism, especially, as a kind of ledger-sheet religion: one tries to have more merits than demerits, and one's salvation itself supposedly depends on a calculation of this sort. Everything depends on this balance of merits and demerits, with little role for faith, repentance, or the mercy of God. One would think no rabbinic Jews ever threw themselves on the mercy of God or ever engaged in supplication. These stereotypes have deeply affected historical portrayals of Judaism in the works of critical scholars of the New Testament, especially in Germany, who tend to describe the Judaism of the time through the lens of a Pauline theology, often without even a passing acquaintance with the Jewish literature itself. Does the Jewish literature support this view? Or is this a depiction read out of certain polemics that early Christian polemicists such as Paul and Justin Martyr engaged in? The latter, as we shall see, is very much the case.

The following is an example of the negative stereotyping of Judaism, based on the idea that it does not have any role for faith, grace, or the mercy of God: everything is works-righteousness and merit. This text is from Rudolf Bultmann, certainly one of the greatest New Testament scholars of the twentieth century. Though by no means a racial anti-Semite (he was anti-Nazi), Bultmann was a very devout Pauline-Augustinian-Lutheran theologian—and it is through that triple lens that he reads the Judaism at the time of the New Testament.

Radical obedience would have involved a personal assent to the divine command, whereas in Judaism so many of the precepts were trivial or unintelligible that the kind of obedience produced was formal rather than radical. The equality of importance attached to ritual and moral precepts was no less conducive to formalism. The Law failed to claim the allegiance of the *whole* man. Although in theory it provided for every possible contingency in daily life, there were inevitably an infinite number of possibilities for which there was no provision. In the absence of a specific ruling, a man was free to decide for himself what

to do. Thus there was plenty of scope for egoistic impulses and passions, as well as for works of supererogation. Here we have a clear indication of the legalistic way in which the divine decrees were conceived. The Law could not possibly embrace every conceivable contingency, and, besides, it was essentially negative in character, with very few positive injunctions. This encouraged the notion that it is possible to do one's whole duty and leave nothing undone. What was required was specific actions, or specific abstentions from action. Once these had been got through, a man was free to do what he liked (Bultmann 1956, 68-69).

I submit that people who actually have studied rabbinic literature—the Mishnah, Gemara, *midrash*, rabbinic liturgy—would have a hard time recognizing rabbinic Judaism in this description. Though phrased as if it were historical fact, this is a description born out of theological polemics about the superiority of faith to works. But Paul's claim of the superiority of faith to works is different. It is not an attack on the *motivations* of those who do the works, nor does Paul say that works are trivial or silly, or otherwise negative. Rather, Paul's claim is that there is something else called faith, and a new era has dawned in which faith has supplanted works. (I should say, in the interest of equal time, that one does not meet many Jewish scholars that are any more sophisticated about Christianity. No religion has a patent on bigotry.)

If one looks at the next text, one sees a rather different view. This is from the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, written in the second or third century of the Common Era.

And thus it says: "I the Lord speak righteousness, I declare things that are right" [Isa. 45:19]. Already before I gave them the commandments I advanced them the rewards for them, as it is said: "And it shall come to pass on the sixth day that they shall prepare that which they bring in, and it shall be twice as much" (Ex. 16:5). And it also says: "Then will I command My blessing upon you in the sixth year," etc. (Lev. 25:21). One might think that it was only in the case of these two commandments, but Scripture says: "And He gave them the lands of the nations," etc. (Ps. 105:44). What for? "That they might keep His statutes and observe His laws" (Ps. 105:45) (Bachodesh 1; Lauterbach 1933, 2/199).

What we are reading here, in short, is a tale of two verses. Genesis 26:5 reports that Abraham observed the entire Law, the commandments, the teachings, and Genesis 15:6 tells us that Abraham was considered righteous because of his faith. One might say, very

broadly, that we have here both Judaism and Christianity attempting to claim Abraham and to impose upon him the pattern of their own religious life, both deriving from the same ancient Israelite culture and Scripture. The Jewish sources do this by having Abraham as a law-observant Jew, and this particular type of Christian source—Paul, Justin Martyr, Rudolf Bultmann—does it by speaking about faith as something in *opposition* to works, and Abraham as justified through his faith.

Faith and Works

That is a convenient place to conclude, but it would be too simplistic to say that what we have are two interpretations of Abraham—one depending on the notion that he was law-observant (Judaism), and the other saying that he was a man of faith without law (Christianity)—and that one depends on one verse and the other on another verse. These large generalizations and simplistic dichotomies do not totally hold water. For we can find places in Jewish literature that speak very positively about faith, even positively about Abraham's faith as his distinguishing characteristic, and we can find Christian readings that emphasize Abraham's observance and obedience and that tell us that he did many specific acts or works, even more works than were required. We even find Christians who say that he did works *before* he had the faith and that his faith was in some degree a *reward* for the works.

For example, let us look at the following passage, also from the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, which talks about the paschal lamb, the lamb for Passover.

And Ye Shall Keep It until the Fourteenth Day of the Same Month. Why did the Scripture require the purchase of the paschal lamb to take place four days before its slaughter? R. Matia the son of Heresh used to say: Behold it says: "Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, and, behold, thy time was the time of love" (Ezek. 16.8). This means, the time has arrived for the fulfillment of the oath which the Holy One, blessed be He, had sworn unto Abraham, to deliver his children. But as yet they had no religious duties to perform by which to merit redemption, as it further says: "thy breasts were fashioned and thy hair was grown; yet thou wast naked and bare" (ibid.), which means bare of any religious deeds. Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, assigned them two duties, the duty of the paschal sacrifice and the duty of circumcision, which they should perform so as to be worthy of redemption (Pischa 5; Lauterbach 1933, 1/33-34).

This text assumes that redemption has to be merited, that it depends on works, to use the Pauline term. Since the people did not have any works, what was God to do? Bultmann might suggest that the rabbis would say that God would not do anything—there could be no redemption because they did not have any basis for redemption. But that is not what the *Mekilta* says. It says that because the people were bare of religious duties, the Holy One assigned two of them, two *mitzvot*: the duty of the paschal lamb and the duty of circumcision, which they should perform so as to be worthy of redemption.

Is that works, or is it grace? It is *works* because it is something they have to do. It is *grace* because God makes this available so that they can be redeemed. And they *are* redeemed from slavery and given a land of their own. Why? Because they slaughtered a sheep, and removed a foreskin. This seems like an awfully large reward relative to the deeds they did. And yet here is a text that says that they can be redeemed from Egypt based on only *two* commandments, not 613—the two pre-Sinaitic commandments. There are, in fact, many texts like this in rabbinic literature, which speak of God's desire to redeem Israel in Egypt, and His generosity, or grace, in giving the people commandments (i.e., the opportunity for works) that enabled this to take place.

More remarkable is the next text, from the same collection of Tannaitic midrash. In it we see a paean to what this text calls '*amanah*—faith.

And so also you find that our father Abraham inherited both this world and the world beyond only as a reward for the faith with which he believed, as it is said: "And so he believed in the Lord," etc. (Gen. 15:6). And so also you find that Israel was redeemed from Egypt only as a reward for the faith with which they believed, as it is said: "And the people believed" (Ex. 14:31) (Beshallah 7; Lauterbach 1933, 1/253).

In both of these cases, the rabbinic text maintains that redemption depended on faith, not on anything else. This last text, however, is quite different from the one before. The former has a gracious God making commandments available so that Israel may be redeemed from Egypt; the latter, by contrast, identifies the reason for the promise to Abraham and the redemption from Egypt as *faith*.

One would think from scholars like Rudolf Bultmann that no literature like this existed in rabbinic Judaism, but that Paul proclaimed something new, that no one had ever thought like this before the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul's exegesis of Genesis 15:6, in and of it-

self, was probably not remarkable in its own time, and may have been quite conventional. It is indeed within the orbit of rabbinic thought, but the larger purposes to which Paul applies this exegesis was anathema to the rabbis. The larger purpose of Paul was to speak of faith *in place of* works—because man is too sinful ever to have works to his credit. The rabbinic model, rather, is faith *and* works, yet the rabbis, too, are quite capable of saying that Abraham's high status and even the redemption from Egypt depended only on faith.

One does not see in rabbinic religion an exaltation of works alone. But one does see some basis for Jewish respect for Christianity (as opposed to Jewish respect for righteous Gentiles, a well-established idea) in the notion that this thing called faith can exist outside and prior to the Mosaic revelation; outside and prior to the works of the Torah. In other words, "the Old Testament of the Old Testament"—the *Abrahamic revelation*—can be read as speaking positively about faith, quite apart from the works of law, and therefore establishing a kind of bond between Judaism and Christianity independently of the old controversies. This may move us beyond rabbinic theology as it stood in antiquity, but it is, I submit, very much in continuity with it.

Let us turn now to the Christian reading of Abraham as an observant Jew. In the Gospel of John, chapter 8, we see Jesus disputing with people described as "the Jews," but he insists that based on their works they are not descendants of Abraham at all, but of Satan, because they do what Satan wants. This has been the source of a great deal of theological anti-Semitism. Look, however, at the following passage.

³⁹They answered and said to him, "Our father is Abraham." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works of Abraham. ⁴⁰But now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God; Abraham did not do this" (John 8:39-40).

If you were really the sons of Abraham, you would be doing the works of Abraham. In Pauline language, this would be an odd thing to say; one would expect Jesus to concentrate on the *faith* of Abraham. But here the author of the Gospel of John talks about people becoming or proving themselves to be the descendants of Abraham based on their *works*.

Then we have the Epistle of James, chapter 2, a text that sounds very much like Paul's exaltation of faith over works. Except for one thing: James insists that we must not separate the two.

¹⁸Indeed someone might say, "You have faith and I have works." Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works. ¹⁹You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe that and tremble. ²⁰Do you want proof, you ignoramus, that faith without works is useless? ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by the works. ²³Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called "the friend of God." ²⁴See how a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵And in the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by a different route? ²⁶For just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead (James 2:18-26).

Again, this is a position that sounds much like the rabbinic view, which Rudolf Bultmann thinks is horrible and very un-Christian. Yet it is sitting right there in the New Testament.

Finally, a text from John Chrysostom (347-407), Bishop of Constantinople, who wrote a group of homilies on Genesis. Generally, John Chrysostom is seen as an intensely anti-Semitic church father, full of fulminations against Jews and Judaism. That he was, but this makes it all the more interesting to see how he deals with these two verses: Abraham's faith making him righteous (Gen. 15:6) and Abraham observing the commandments of God (Gen. 26:5).

(10) But what is the meaning of "for the reason that he obeyed my voice and kept my commands, my orders, and my judgments"? I said to him, "Go forth from your country and your kindred, onwards to a land that I will show you", he left what he had and set off for an uncertain goal. He did not dally or delay; instead, with complete enthusiasm, he obeyed my call and carried out my commands. In turn I promised him things beyond nature, and, despite his despair on the score of age and the unsuitability for childbearing on the part of himself and your mother, he heard from me that his descendants would develop into such a great number as to fill the whole land, yet he did not become deranged in mind or lose faith. Hence, it was reckoned as righteousness in him to trust in my power and have confidence in my promises, thus proving superior to human limitations (*Homilies on Genesis* 51:10; Hill 1992, 61).

Here we have both verses, but notice the order of events: Abraham observes God's commands, and God makes promises and Abraham has faith in the promises, *having already observed the commands*.

Let me sum up what I have said thus far with a statement about the relationship of Judaism to Christianity based on the exegesis of these two verses, Genesis 15:6 and 26:5. The simple solution is that Judaism converts Abraham to Judaism by having him law-observant, and Christianity converts Abraham to Christianity by having him a man of faith apart from the works of the law. If we look more closely at a wider range of texts, however, we discover that both positions have some resonance in the other tradition: the faithful Abraham who inherits the world to come only because of his faith is found in Judaism, and the observant Abraham whose faith is combined with works, and whose works in some sense even precede his faith, is found in Christianity. There is a basis in Abraham not only for the Christians' freedom from the law, but also for respect for the Jewish pattern of faith and observance held conjointly. It would surprise the author of the Gospel of John or the Epistle of James, or John Chrysostom, to hear someone say this, but the range of interpretation of biblical verses and the uses to which Abraham has been put are indeed a source of great and not unwelcome surprise.

Abraham Among Jews, Christians, and Muslims

At this point, I would like to raise another side of this issue—the identification of specific religious communities with the figure of Abraham. The classical line one hears is that Abraham is the founder of three great religious communities: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Let us examine each claim in turn.

The notion of Abraham as the first Jew is very well known from various *midrashim*—rabbinic stories—in which Abraham is the first monotheist, the first person to recognize that there is only one God. For example, there is the story of Abraham's working in his father's idol shop. His father is out, an idol drops and breaks, and the world does not come to an end. Abraham puts it back together, his father comes home and does not even notice. Abraham realizes that the idol is just made of wood and stone. (Of course, any ancient Mesopotamian, Canaanite, or Egyptian knew perfectly well that the icon is made out of wood or stone; they did not totally identify the icon with the deity. The deity was present, manifest, maybe even incarnate in the icon, but the notion that they just worshipped wood and stone is an ancient polemic that Israelite prophets engaged in, in an attempt to make the competing religion look ridiculous.)

Or there is another story in which Abraham sees a house burning down. He says, "Is it possible that this house is burning, and the owner does not care? I have got to notify the owner that his house is

burning down." The idea is that the world is so corrupt, so full of sin and evil, that it is in effect burning down—and Abraham is the person who has to notify not only the owner, who is God, but also the people. Abraham is here a kind of prophet, as he is described briefly in Genesis 20 and as he becomes more emphatically in the Qur'ān.

In the Bible, it would be difficult to call Abraham the founder of Judaism. He is more likely to be described, in genealogical terms, as the man singled out to be the father of a new and great nation. This notion of peoplehood, of a natural family descended from Abraham, is extremely important in Judaism. It is not, however, akin to modern concepts of racialism, because racially Abraham is no different from his brothers, and yet the chosen people derive from him, and not his brothers; membership in the holy community is from his line only. It is not a *biological* concept of genealogy, but it is a *natural family*. (Also, in the next generation, Isaac has twin sons—Jacob and Esau—and yet the family traces itself from Jacob and not from Esau.) Abraham is seen as the father of the Jewish people. He is also the man to whom the land is promised. And he is the man to whom the covenant is granted; circumcision is given to Abraham as a sign of this covenant for all time.

Many of these ideas involve the question of descent. As I mentioned above, however, Abraham has a problem: he is to be the father of a great nation, but he is not the father of anybody. His wife has been barren all her life, and now she is too old to have a child. What then should he do? There are several possibilities. One possibility, very alive in that culture, is to take another wife and have the child with her (the promise of descendants in Genesis 15 never specifies the matriarch). Or perhaps Abraham should simply have faith in God, and God will work a miracle and allow Sarai to give birth. This raises an interesting theological question: should we rely on miracles or not? Does faith mean that we depend on divine action, or that we do certain things ourselves in hopes of realizing the promise? This is a huge dispute within the whole history of Judaism and Christianity, which I shall again nimbly evade.

In chapter 16 of Genesis, after ten years and still no child, Sarai tells Abraham (or Abram, as he is called before chapter 17) to take her female slave, Hagar, and have a son through her. In this culture, a child born to a slave belongs to the master; thus the child will be legally Sarai's, though biologically Hagar's. Abraham does what his wife suggests, and they have a child, who is Ishmael. Then in Genesis 17 an amazing thing happens. God speaks to Abraham and tells him that he will have a child with Sarai after all.

¹⁵And God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. ¹⁶I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of people shall issue from her." ¹⁷Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?" ¹⁸And Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live by your favor!" ¹⁹God said, "Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac, and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come. ²⁰As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation. ²¹But my covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year." ²²And when he was done speaking with him, God was gone from Abraham (Gen. 17:15-22).

So the promise to Abraham is that there will be a child, a free-born child by his full wife (who is now called) Sarah: Isaac. Ishmael will not be disowned, he will be the father of a great nation, but the covenant, and thus the land promise, will not fall to Ishmael and his descendants but to Isaac and his lineage.

⁹Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. ¹⁰She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." ¹¹The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. ¹²But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. ¹³As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him, too; for he is your seed" (Gen. 21:9-13).

In the view of Genesis, not all Abrahamic peoples are equal. If we say that Abraham is the founder of these three great communities: the House of Israel, the Church of Jesus Christ, and the House of Islam, we are, of course, right. On the other hand, a text like this does not think these are *equal* options. The great question is, through whom does the Abrahamic descent come? Does it derive from Ishmael, or does it come from Isaac? This pattern of preferring the younger over the older son is one that we see time and time again in Genesis: Isaac over Ishmael; Jacob, the second-born twin, over Esau; Judah, the fourth-born son, is the father of the royal tribe; and Joseph, the eleventh of Jacob's sons, is preferred over his ten older brothers. This pat-

tern goes back all the way to Cain and Abel, where Cain just cannot accept the idea of this strange, gracious (or arbitrary) God who prefers Abel's sacrifice over his, and he finally murders his brother out of resentment (Gen. 4).

What happens when this pattern is brought into Christianity and adapted to the purposes of the Christian gospel? For the apostle Paul, there is no Bible except the Hebrew Bible, the collection that much later Christians would come to call the "Old Testament." If he is going to argue that something new has happened, he has to justify it in terms of the Jewish Scriptures. If we now have this community of Gentiles who claim to inherit the status of Abraham, or claim to inherit the relationship with God characterized by Abraham's faith, we have to deal with these stories in Genesis that treat the miraculous birth of Isaac and the not-so-miraculous birth of Ishmael. And that is what Paul is doing in the following passage:

¹⁵To give a human example, brethren: no one annuls even a man's will, or adds to it, once it has been ratified. ¹⁶Now the promises were made to Abraham and his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," which is Christ. ¹⁷This is what I mean: the law, which came four hundred and thirty years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. ¹⁸For if the inheritance is by the law, it is no longer by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise (Gal. 3:15-18).

The covenant of Abraham, in Paul's reading, was not conditional but was promissory—it was a covenant of grace. Therefore it has a certain characteristic that is not subsumed under the category of law: it does not have requirements that one has to fulfill, as Jewish law does. That covenant descends to people through the promised offspring of Abraham, and the promised offspring of Abraham can only be one person. It cannot be the whole Jewish people, because that term *sperma* in Greek (Hebrew *zera'*) is morphologically singular. Therefore Paul reads it as semantically singular. As a plain sense reading of the verse in Genesis, this is exceedingly weak, for the word *zera'* or *sperma* is a collective noun—a noun that may refer to more than one person. Paul's technique of reading it as referring to only one person because it is technically singular is, however, well-known in Jewish exegesis and used to good effect there.

Some would say there is an Isaac typology here in this passage, that Jesus is presented in the mode of Isaac. I think in this text we have an instance of something more radical and more problematic,

supersessionism rather than *typology*. Isaac is never mentioned here. In this text, the point is that the promised son of Abraham is Jesus: Isaac has been *replaced* by Jesus.

Paul makes another use of the Isaac-Ishmael material in our next text, also from Galatians. Here he is confronting churches he claims to have founded in Asia Minor, who are now encountering Christian apostles who say that Gentiles have to observe Jewish law; they do not automatically inherit the status of Abraham, but have to become law-observant. To put it in anachronistic terms, these preachers claimed one had to be first a practicing Jew before one became a Christian. This is a theology that had much resonance in early Christianity, as we see in the Epistle of James and some parts of the Gospel of Matthew. But Paul regards it as false and calls these people false teachers.

²¹Tell me, you who desire to be under law, do you not hear the law?

²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. ²³But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise. ²⁴Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ²⁵Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. ²⁷For it is written,

“Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear;
break forth and shout, you who are not in travail;
for the children of the desolate one
are many more than the children of her that is married.”

²⁸Now we, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now. ³⁰But what does the scripture say? “Cast out the slave and her son; for the son of the slave shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” ³¹So, brethren, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman (Gal. 4:21-31).

“We,” meaning “we Christians,” or perhaps “we Christians observing the law-free gospel,” are the true sons of Abraham—the sons of the free woman, Sarah. The Jews, or at least the Jewish-Christians, who are associated with Sinai, and therefore with Hagar, and therefore, in turn, with slavery, are doing the wrong things.

The key point is Abraham’s faith—a faith apart from the works of the law—and that is a boundary between these two communities, Judaism and Christianity. Paul does not want these two things mixed up with each other; he does not want the so-called “Jewish-Christian” option. As I mentioned above, this sometimes leads to misconcep-

tions about the differences between Judaism and Christianity: that Judaism is a religion of works-righteousness, and Christianity is a religion of faith, or salvation by grace. This is quite absurd, but still quite common, despite the fact Jews who recite the classical Jewish liturgy affirm every day, "We have no deeds to plead on our own behalf."

In the following passage from the ancient Jewish *Pirqê Avot* (Sayings of the Fathers), we see a rabbinic understanding that is quite different from Paul's.

[A]nd it says, "And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables" (Ex. 32:16). Read not *charut* (graven) but *cherut* (freedom), for no man is free but he who labors in the Torah. But whoever labors in the Torah shall be exalted, as it is said, "And from Mattanah to Nachaliel, and from Nachaliel to Bamot" (Num. 21:19) (*Pirqê Avot* 6:2).

Notice that what we have in this rabbinic text is almost the diametric opposite of Paul's remarks in Galatians 4:21-31, where the Torah and Sinai are associated with enslavement. Here Sinai is one of the stations on the way from enslavement in Egypt to freedom in the land, and only through the acceptance of the gift (*mattanah*) of the Torah do the Jewish people achieve genuine freedom and exaltation to "Bamot," "high places."

Here we see a large dichotomy between Judaism and Christianity, presented in terms of the difference between the promised son, born outside the course of nature through divine intervention, and the son born within the course of nature through surrogate motherhood. This is also deeply connected to the question of how one lives one's life—with Torah, or with the Gospel, as Paul understands it.

But these are not the only two options: Torah and Gospel. Now I want to speak briefly about Islam, and the Qur'anic interpretation of Abraham and the Abrahamic message. Consider the following passage from Sūrah 3:65-74:

⁶⁵O followers of the scripture, why do you argue about Abraham, when the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed until after him? Do you not understand?

⁶⁶You have argued about things you knew; why do you argue about things you do not know?

GOD knows, while you do not know.

⁶⁷Abraham was neither Jewish, nor Christian; he was a monotheist submitter. He never was an idol worshipper.

⁶⁸The people most worthy of Abraham are those who followed him and his prophet, and those

who believe. GOD is the Lord and Master of the believers.

⁶⁹Some followers of the scripture wish to lead you astray, but they only lead themselves astray, without perceiving.

⁷⁰O followers of the scripture, why do you reject these revelations of GOD though you bear witness (*that this is the truth*)?

⁷¹O followers of the scripture, why do you confound the truth with falsehood, and conceal the truth, knowingly?

⁷²Some followers of the scripture say, "Believe in what was sent down to the believers in the

morning, and reject it in the evening; maybe some day they will revert.

⁷³"And so do not believe except as those who follow your religion." Say, "The true guidance is GOD's guidance." If they claim that they have the same guidance, or argue with you about your Lord, say, "All grace is in GOD's hand; He bestows it upon whomever He wills." GOD is Bounteous, Omniscient.

⁷⁴He specifies His mercy for whomever He wills; GOD possesses unlimited grace.

Here we see the notion that Abraham lived before both the Torah and the Gospel, before Judaism or Christianity. He was therefore neither Jew nor Christian, but a submitter—a *Muslim*, a practitioner of 'islam, at this stage not yet the name of a religion. He practices self-submission, self-surrender; he is an honoured figure in a line of prophets that includes Moses and Jesus, but culminates in the seal of the prophets, Muhammad. In this passage, we get a sense of Muhammad confronting in Arabia Jews and Christians engaged in the sort of disputes we have discussed already, and saying, "Can we not get beyond this and admit that Abraham was neither Jewish nor Christian; let us get back to the essence of what he was." He employs a new term, one that we do not find in the Torah or the Gospel: a *submitter*. It is through absolutization of this new idea of "submission" ('islam) that the Muslim scripture attempts to relativize Judaism and Christianity, Torah and Gospel. But to traditional Jews and Christians, Torah and Gospel cannot be reduced to a common denominator of submission to God. Islam, too, offers a novel appropriation of Abraham and, like Judaism and Christianity, is not the restoration of the pristine Abrahamic religion.

The last text we shall look at is also from the Qur'an (2:124-132):

¹²⁴Recall that Abraham was put to the test by his Lord, through certain commands, and he fulfilled them. (God) said, "I am appointing you an imam for the people." He said, "And also my

descendants?" He said, "My covenant does not include the transgressors."

¹²⁵We have rendered the shrine (*the Ka'aba*) a focal point for the people, and a safe sanctuary. You

may use Abraham's shrine as a prayer house. We commissioned Abraham and Ismail: "You shall purify My house for those who visit, those who live there, and those who bow and prostrate."

¹²⁶Abraham prayed: "My Lord, make this a peaceful land, and provide its people with fruits. Provide for those who believe in GOD and the Last Day." (*God*) said, "I will also provide for those who disbelieve. I will let them enjoy, temporarily, then commit them to the retribution of Hell, and a miserable destiny."

¹²⁷As Abraham raised the foundations of the shrine, together with Ismail (*they prayed*): "Our Lord, accept this from us. You are the Hearer, the Omniscient."

¹²⁸"Our Lord, make us submitters to You, and from our descendants let there be a community of submitters to You. Teach us the

rites of our religion, and redeem us. You are the Redeemer, Most Merciful.

¹²⁹"Our Lord, and raise among them a messenger to recite to them Your revelations, teach them the scripture and wisdom, and purify them. You are the Almighty, Most Wise."

¹³⁰Who should forsake the religion of Abraham, except one who fools his own soul? We have chosen him in this world, and in the Hereafter he will be with the righteous.

¹³¹When his Lord said to him, "Submit," he said, "I submit to the Lord of the universe."

¹³²Moreover, Abraham exhorted his children to do the same, and so did Jacob: "O my children, GOD has pointed out the religion for you; do not die except as submitters."

Notice the high status of Ishmael (Ismail) here, with no mention in this verse of Isaac (though Isaac is often mentioned in the Qur'ān). In the Qur'ān, we find not the triad of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as in the Bible and rabbinic literature, but the tetrad of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob, in that order.

Concluding Remarks

All three of these monotheistic religious communities celebrate Abraham and call him father. They associate him with belief in One God, with radical faith in God and with a willingness to surrender to Him. All three of these communities insist on the worship of the One God, and obedience to His commands, rather than mere reliance on one's own conscience. They all speak of holiness and service, not just justice and fairness at the horizontal level, but of self-consecration and worship, as well. But which community is the heir of Abraham? The inevitable question of how one is to appropriate the legacy of Abraham necessarily divides the three communities into three distinct groups: the House of Israel (the community of Torah); the Church of Jesus Christ (the community of the Gospel); and finally the House of

Islam (the community of submitters to the One God). On the one hand, Abraham can be found at the foundation of all three communities, and yet, on the other, the three communities differ in what they understand the legacy of Abraham to be, and how one lays claim to it. Good relations among the three great monotheistic faiths require a heightened awareness both of the commonalities and the differences.

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