PART I

THE CONCEPT OF THE ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS

CHAPTER 1

ABRAHAM AND AUTHENTICITY

REUVEN FIRESTONE

It is clear, of course, that the Abrahamic religions are designated as such because they identify deeply with Abraham, recognizing him as the first to arrive at the truth of monotheism and live out the ideal relationship with God. Whether known as Abraham, Avraham, or Ibrāhīm, he is the archetype of the stalwart religious individual willing even to abandon family and community in the journey to realize the truth of God. Yet while the Abrahamic religions all recognize his key role, each understands his nature differently. In Judaism Abraham is a Jew who represents unfailing obedience to divine law, while in Christianity he is the epitome of Christian faith. And in Islam Abraham was the first Muslim who submits fully and without reservation to the divine will. Abraham is known uniquely—and differently—in other religions as well. For Bahais he is the direct ancestor of Bahá'u'lláh confirming his prophetic authenticity. For the Latter Day Saint movement (Mormonism) he serves as the authority for believers' exaltation to return as joint-heirs with God. And in the Yazidi holy book, The *Kitêba Cilwe* or 'Book of Illumination', Abraham is steadfast even when thrown into a great fire by the evil Nemrud for insisting on the Yazidi vision of divine truth.

To all these and other religions as well, Abraham serves as an archetype or model, the ideal individual in communion with God and a vital symbol around which religious ideologies are constructed. But because the religions that revere Abraham differ, so do their Abrahams, and this has caused the meaning and significance of Abraham to be disputed between rival religions that contest their authority through his symbolism. Thus, not only does Abraham serve as a symbol of the common aspirations of the Abrahamic religions by his centrality in their sacred writings, he is also a source of disagreement and interreligious polemic, and a fulcrum for leveraging spiritual difference and claims to religious superiority.

Abraham as *Homo Religiosus*

Abraham's persona has come to assume cosmic proportions as the first and hence ideal representation of humanity in authentic and ongoing relationship with the divine. His story is that of the ideal religious person, the *homo religiosus*. Abraham is the first patriarch, the *av* in the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 17: 5; Deut. 1: 8, 6: 10; Josh. 24: 3; Isa. 51: 2, etc.), and his role as forefather is affirmed in all the Abrahamic religions. His very name *Avraham*, explains Gen. 17: 5, means that he will be 'the father of many nations' (*av hamon goyim*).

Key aspects of his nature are passed down to his progeny, that chosen sector of humanity in ongoing relationship with God through prophecy and divine teachings. According to the Hebrew Bible, those outside the Abrahamic genealogy who do not voluntarily join up with the community cannot be a part of its intimate association with God. Yet the notion of Abraham's cherished bond with God was so powerful and influential that it became a prototype for other, even competing communities by way of different lines of genealogical or spiritual descent, and his traits depicted in the Hebrew Bible became recurring topoi in subsequent sacred writings, sometimes in contradistinction to the biblical representations. All three post-biblical sacred writings of the New Testament, Quran, and Talmud contest the meaning of the Hebrew Bible Abraham and reconstruct his persona in the image of their ideal religious person. Subsequent contention over his spiritual inheritance became such a vital source of bitter religious polemic that the great medieval Jewish polymath, Moses Maimonides (d. 1204), could observe 'the consensus of the greater part of the population of the earth glorifying him and considering themselves as blessed through his memory, so that even those who do not belong to his progeny pretend to descend from him' (*Guide for the Perplexed* (Maimonides 1956) 3: 29).

Abraham in the Hebrew Bible

The earliest known source for the character of Abraham is the Hebrew Bible, which portrays him as the first to live in enduring relationship with God. Earlier figures such as Adam and Eve or Noah act within narratives that appear as specific landmarks in the unfolding of human history, but their relationship with God does not continue beyond a single narrative encounter. Abraham, in contrast, is the first biblical personage whose life extends beyond any individual incident in sacred history. He serves as the pivot upon which the divine focus turns from humanity as a whole to a specific group of people within the larger flow of history. God calls Abraham to go forth and follow his guidance; Abraham responds fully and without hesitation (Gen. 12). At that point the unfolding universal history of humanity with which the Bible begins actually comes to

an end. From that moment onward, human history is expressed only through its interaction with one particular sector of humankind, the family and progeny of the patriarch who recognizes God.

Exactly why Abraham is chosen for his pivotal role is not explicitly indicated in the Hebrew Bible, and that question later became an issue around which were formed competing claims for Abraham's persona by successive religious communities. For the Hebrew Bible, however, the issue is not what precipitated God's call but what came afterwards. Abraham always responded appropriately to the divine imperative. He was obedient. Even if not always convinced of the purpose or reasoning behind God's demands (Gen. 12: 11–20; 17: 12–17; 21: 10–14), Abraham chose to obey, and it is by virtue of this dogged obedience that he demonstrates his loyalty and trust in God and the divine promise. The biblical accounting of Abraham's loyalty is structured around a number of motifs or topoi, and these became contested among the religious communities that counted him as spiritual or genealogical forefather and progenitor.

Abraham as Founder of Sacred Sites

Abraham is the first biblical personage to establish sacred sites that become identified and revered by subsequent generations of believers. In Eliadian terms, Abraham is associated with hierophany, eruption of the sacred, by building altars in response to or in preparation for divine revelation. Thus Bethel ('The House of God') becomes identified via Abraham's altars (Gen. 12: 8; 13: 3), and the sanctity of Jerusalem itself originated, according to the Bible, through God's communication to Abraham at Moriah (Gen. 22: 2–9/2 Chron. 3: 1).

Abraham's Community and the Divine Promise

Already in Haran, Abraham is chosen by God to become a great nation (Gen. 11: 31–12: 2), and the motif of special relationship between his family and progeny is repeated throughout the Bible. God blesses him, promises innumerable offspring that will inherit the Land of Canaan as an everlasting legacy, protection from the predation of foreign peoples, and assures him that he will be a 'father of many nations' from whose loins will spring kings. (Gen. 12: 1–3; 13: 12–17; 17: 1–8, 15–21; 22: 17–18)

Abraham as Obedient Servant of God

Abraham is the faithful servant who responds unswervingly to God's charge. When God commands him to leave his community for an unknown land he obeys, as he does in response to all divine directives. The nature of their relationship is epitomized by God's pronouncement initiating the eternal covenant, 'I am God Almighty. [If you]

walk before me you will be blameless' (Gen. 17: 1). The conditional nature of this declaration is often lost in translation. The pronouncement means that Abraham will be protected by God from the dangers of life if he responds to the divine imperative.[1] He is tested throughout the remainder of his life in the Bible for his obedience, yet he passes every trial. Finally and in response to fulfilling the greatest trial to sacrifice his future and the future of his family and clan with the offering of his last son, God proclaims, 'Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favoured one, I will bestow my blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed my command' (Gen. 22: 16–18).

Abraham as Covenantal Partner

The institution of covenant (Heb. *brit*) in the Hebrew Bible is complex and occurs in a variety of forms (Weinfeld 1971). In its most significant form it defines an eternal bond between God and Israel against which is characterized God's relationship with humanity in general. God first establishes an eternal covenant with Abraham and God promises him innumerable offspring and a specific land in which they will settle and thrive. It is subsequently ratified with the giving of the Law to the entire community of Israel at Mt Sinai and remains a referent throughout the Hebrew Bible.

The covenant first appears in relationship to Abraham in the enigmatic 'covenant between the pieces' of Gen. 15 when God promises him unlimited progeny. The covenant is 'cut' with Abraham using a play on words associated with his cutting of the sacrifice, and God promises his offspring the Land of Canaan. It appears again in chapter 17 along with a name change from Abram to Abraham, 'father of many nations' (verse 5) and a promise of great fertility and future royalty (vs. 6). God declares its eternality with the words, 'I will maintain my covenant between me and you and your offspring to come as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come' (verses 7–8). The sign of this agreement is ritual circumcision, another form of cutting and a kind of fleshy sacrifice (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990: 175) that is required among all of Abraham's male posterity forever. Not all of his progeny are included in the covenant, however, for God mysteriously limits it only to the line of Isaac: 'As for Ishmael . . . I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous . . . But My covenant I will maintain with Isaac' (Gen. 17: 20–1).

This *promissory* covenant obtains within the small Abrahamic family as God remains in ongoing personal relationship with the leaders of each patriarchal generation. Centuries later, with God's redemption of hundreds of thousands of Abraham's

[1] This translation reflects the ancient Near Eastern notion that one is protected by one's god(s) by supporting it through offerings and engaging in certain prescribed behaviours.

progeny from Egyptian bondage into an expanded tribal nation, the divine promise is reaffirmed (or extended) as an *obligatory* covenant with the entire People of Israel at Mt Sinai through the revelation of God's word (Weinfeld 1971: 1018). Submission to the personal intervention of God is thus succeeded by submission to the divine will through obedience to God's Law. Like the Abrahamic covenant, the Sinaitic covenant is affirmed ('signed') in the blood of sacrifice (Exod. 24: 3–8), and like Abraham, his heirs who uphold that covenant are God's 'treasured possession among all the peoples' (Exod. 19: 5). If they fail to live out the covenantal obligation, 'Yet even then . . . I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling my covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God' (Lev. 26: 44). The Abrahamic covenant is thus reaffirmed and expanded at Sinai. It never expires (2 Kings 13: 23; Ps. 105: 8–9, 42; 1 Chron. 16: 16–17).

Abraham as the Friend of God

In light of this special and ongoing relationship with the divine, it is not surprising that Abraham is referred to with special reverence in the Hebrew Bible. Like Moses and David, he is called on occasion God's servant (Gen. 26: 24; Ps. 105: 6, 42). Only Abraham, however, is God's 'love' or 'friend' (*ohavi*—Isa. 41: 8, 2 Chron. 20: 7).

Abraham in the New Testament

The New Testament emerges from within the paradigmatic sacred history of the Hebrew Bible and extends that history while simultaneously interpreting it to confirm its own particular sense of being with the divine. Regarding a similar relationship between the Written and Oral Torahs of Judaism, Susan Handelman (1982: 39) has observed that 'interpretation is not essentially separate from the text itself—an external act intruded upon it—but rather the *extension* of the text . . . a part of the continuous revelation of the text itself'. Abraham appears over seventy times in the New Testament, where the familiar motifs associated with him in the Hebrew Bible are extended to take on new meaning.

The Abraham of the Gospels

The Abraham of the Gospels (including Acts) seems not to differ significantly from the Hebrew Bible's representation. A new association is presented with the image of Abraham sitting in the heavenly Paradise (Matt. 8: 11–12, Luke 16: 19–31), a motif occurring also in other post-Hebrew Biblical Jewish literatures (*4 Macc.* 13: 17; *b. Kiddushin* 72b; *Pesikta Rabbati* 43: 4). Luke 1: 70–3 supports the continued veracity of the Abrahamic covenant and God's promise to Abraham's progeny.

John's understanding of Abraham as father (*av*), however, does not accept the biological relationship to be a sign of merit. Jews technically may be Abraham's descendants (*sperma Abraam*), but they are not necessarily true to him merely by claiming to be his children or because he is their progenitor. John 8: 39b: 'If you were Abraham's children, you would do as Abraham did . . . (*ei tekna tou Abraam este, ta erga tou Abraam epoieite*)' (Siker 1991: 136). Abrahamic ancestry becomes irrelevant in light of the Jews' purported desire to kill Jesus, for evil intention belies any value to genealogical status. On the other hand, Abraham's status as *av* remains important when Jesus' intimacy with the patriarch is referenced to win an argument: 'Your father Abraham was overjoyed to see my day; he saw it and was glad' (John 8: 56).

Acts 7 presents a recapitulation of Israelite history, including the covenant of circumcision and the divine promise of the land as an everlasting possession, which does not alter the image of Abraham as presented in the Hebrew Bible. It also refers to Jews as the 'stock of Abraham' (13: 26) and not in a disparaging manner, all part of the view of Luke-Acts that the mission of the church evolved from a limited group centred in Jerusalem into a worldwide and universal movement.

Matthew 3: 7–9 critiques Jewish claims that Abrahamic ancestry is a privilege when a group of Pharisees and Sadducees come to John the Baptist for ritual immersion: 'Vipers' brood! Who warned you to escape from the wrath that is to come? Prove your repentance by the fruit you bear; and do not imagine you can say, "We have Abraham for our father." I tell you that God can make children for Abraham out of these stones!' This likely reflects an internal Jewish argument over the merit that may accrue from one's righteous forebears, a notion in Judaism called *zekhut avot* ('merit of the fathers'), suggested already in the Hebrew Bible (Deut. 4: 37; 2 Chron. 6: 41–2) and developed in detail in rabbinic literature (Marmorstein 1920). Some Jews believed that descendants of the righteous patriarchs could be protected from the punishment that would normally result from sin (*b. Sotah* 10b; *b. Yoma* 87a, *b. Yevamot* 64a) while others believed that such merit had limited efficacy or was destined to come to an end (*b. Sanhedrin* 104a; *b. Shabbat* 55a: *me'ematay tamah zekhut avot*?).

The Abraham of the Epistles: Faith Trumps Obedience and Spirit Trumps Law

Abraham's persona and significance change markedly in the Epistles. In Romans 4, Abraham proves his merit not through his unwavering obedience but through his unwavering faith, and here we also discern a Christian response to the question of why God chose Abraham. Whereas in Genesis his faith is determined by steadfast obedience (Gen. 12; 15: 6; 22), Romans purposely sets forth faith as independent of acts. Romans also removes Abraham's intrinsic importance from the covenant of circumcision and the ensuing promise to Abraham's progeny.

> We have just been saying: 'Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness.' In what circumstances was it so counted? Was he circumcised at the time, or not? He was not yet circumcised, but uncircumcised; he received circumcision later as the sign and hallmark of that righteousness which faith had given him while he was still uncircumcised. It follows that he is the father of all who have faith when uncircumcised, and so have righteousness 'counted' to them; and at the same time he is the father of the circumcised, provided they are not merely circumcised, but also follow that path of faith which our father Abraham trod while he was still uncircumcised. (Rom. 4: 9–12)

Because Abraham's excellence in faith was proven before his circumcision and even before his first act of obedience, obedience to God's law cannot be the source of his merit (cf. Rom. 2: 25–31, 4: 1–22, etc.). His patriarchal role, therefore, obtains in relation to all who share his faith, whether or not they belong to the community of Israel that was identified through obedience to the divine command for circumcision (Collins 1985). Romans thus considers the Jewish claim of exclusive relationship with Abraham irrelevant, for anyone with faith—whether Jew or Gentile—may now claim a form of descent from father Abraham.

This leads to a major point of the Pauline writings, namely, that faith and spirit supersede the law, at least for Gentiles (Parkes 1979: 50–7). 'It was not through law that Abraham and his descendants were given the promise that the world should be their inheritance, but through righteousness that came from faith . . . The promise was made on the ground of faith in order that it might be valid for all Abraham's descendants, not only for those who hold by the law, but also for those who have Abraham's faith . . .' (Rom. 4: 13–16).

The passage goes on to equate Abraham's generic trust in God depicted in Genesis with the very specific Christian faith in the saving power of Christ:

> . . . no distrust made him doubt God's promise, but, strong in faith, he gave glory to God, convinced that what he had promised he was able to do. And that is why Abraham's faith was 'counted to him as righteousness' (Gen. 15: 6). The words 'counted to him' were meant to apply not only to Abraham but to us; our faith too is to be 'counted', the faith in the God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead; for he was given up to death for our misdeeds, and raised to life for our justification. (Rom. 4: 22–5)

Spiritual Lineage Trumps Genealogy

The Pauline writings argue against the Hebrew Biblical notion of tribal religion. In the ancient Near East, communities were organized around kinship, and every nation had its own national deity (1 Kings 11: 5; 2 Kings 11: 13, etc.). Anyone born into a community worshipped its national god and could no easier change her religion than change her family identity (Firestone 2008: 11–33). The notion of 'conversion' or switching from one religious belief system to another was unknown in the ancient Near East until the coming of Hellenism (Nock 1933), but by the time of Christianity's emergence the old notion of

tribal religion was waning. Graeco-Romans were seeking new forms of spiritual fulfilment and were joining with Jews of various sects including early Christianity, as well as developing other religious expressions (Gager 1985, Valantasis 2000, Burkert 1987).

Pauline writings critique the traditional markers of religious identity through a novel view of the constraint articulated within the divine promise expressed in Genesis 17. In Genesis 17: 15–20 God announces that Abraham will have a son through Sarah and pledges an everlasting covenant with this promised child, while rejecting Abraham's son born naturally (without divine promise) through Hagar. Romans comments, 'Not all the offspring of Israel are truly Israel' (9: 7). It is not Abraham's 'son born of nature' who is blessed, but rather the son 'born through God's promise' (9: 8). Romans 9 then identifies the 'natural born son' of Genesis with the Jewish people who claim genealogical kinship to Abraham, while the son of the promise represents the faithful who will benefit from the promise of everlasting life through Christ. As stated in Galatians 3: 7: 'You may take it, then, that it is those who have faith who are Abraham's sons.'

A similar notion is articulated in Galatians 4: 21–5: 1 where the 'natural born' son of Romans is the slave's son Ishmael 'born in the ordinary course of nature'. The free-born son Isaac, on the other hand, was born through God's promise. The former's slavery represents the old covenant of Sinai epitomized by the law while the latter's freedom represents the new covenant of the heavenly Jerusalem that represents the freedom of the spirit. The innovation of this interpretation is, like that of Romans, in the reversal of positions. The biblical Isaac no longer symbolizes the Jewish people but rather those 'born of promise' and representative of a new freedom. The rejected Ishmael on the other hand, the slave's son, represents the Jews. The discourse ends with an assurance directed to Gentiles: 'Now you, my friends, like Isaac, are children of God's promise, but just as in those days the natural-born son persecuted the spiritual son, so it is today. Yet what does scripture say? 'Drive out the slave and her son, for the son of the slave shall not share the inheritance with the son of the free woman . . . It is for freedom that Christ set us free' (Gal. 4: 28–5: 1). In Galatians 3: 16 the promise is narrowed to only one of Abraham's offspring, that being Christ, and concludes that believers in Christ receive the Abrahamic blessing: 'So if you belong to Christ, you are the seed of Abraham and heirs by virtue of the promise' (Gal. 3: 29).

While these Romans and Galatians texts carry the general sentiment of the New Testament, a different opinion is offered in James, which calls for faith in conjunction with acts.

> Was it not by his action, in offering his son Isaac upon the altar, that our father Abraham was justified? Surely you can see faith was at work in his actions, and by these actions his faith was perfected? Here was fulfilment of the words of Scripture: 'Abraham put his faith in God, and that faith was counted to him as righteousness', and he was called 'God's friend'. You see then it is by action and not by faith alone that a man is justified. (Jas. 2: 21–4)

The Covenant of the New Testament

The Galatians 4 passage examined previously associates Abraham's two sons with the two covenants of Sinai and heavenly Jerusalem and argues that the latter surpasses the former. The most complete articulation of this theme is found in Hebrews 8: 6–9: 26, where the new covenant (*brit ḥadashah*) of Jeremiah 31: 30–3 is identified as that of Jesus' ministry: 'But in fact the ministry which Jesus has been given is superior to theirs, for he is the mediator of a better covenant, established on better promises' (Heb. 8: 6). Jesus replaces the high priest in this thematic extension and offers himself in place of the old Temple sacrifices as the more efficacious in removing the stain of sin (Heb. 9: 11–14, 23–8): 'That is why the new covenant or testament of which he is mediator took effect once a death had occurred, to bring liberation from sins committed under the former covenant; its purpose is to enable those whom God has called to receive the eternal inheritance he has promised them' (Heb. 9: 15).

As with the promissory and obligatory forms of covenant 'cut' with Abraham and the Israelite nation in the Hebrew Bible, the new covenant of the heavenly Jerusalem is ratified in blood: '[Y]ou have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to myriads of angels, to the full concourse and assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of good men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, whose sprinkled blood has better things to say than the blood of Abel' (Heb. 12: 18–24).

The new covenant is eternal just as the old had claimed to be (Heb. 13: 20) and was inaugurated with blood like the other (Heb. 9: 15–22), but the sacrifice of Jesus is far more efficacious than the animal sacrifices of the old covenant (Heb. 9: 12–14). Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross parallels Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, but while Abraham's merit is found in his willing obedience to God's command even to destroy his own future through the sacrifice of his only remaining son, Jesus' merit lies in the atoning sacrifice fulfilled (cf. Gen. 22: 2/John 1: 18, 34, 3: 16; Gen. 22: 8/John 1: 36; Gen. 22: 13/John 1: 29, etc.). And while Abraham's merit in Jewish tradition could be drawn upon by his progeny when in need of divine grace, the even greater merit in Jesus' self-sacrifice accrues to all the true spiritual descendants of Abraham—those who believe in the saving power of Christ.

As in the Hebrew Bible, the Abraham of the New Testament is the first to know God, the recipient of the divine promise, the covenantal partner, and the unique 'friend of God' (Jas. 2: 23), but through a subtle manoeuvring of the Genesis paradigms he is separated from the Hebrew biblical trope of obedience and becomes the epitome of Christian faith. He remains the patriarch (*av*), but the relationship is defined spiritually rather than genealogically. This allows the founder of monotheism to represent Gentiles rather than Jews and argues that his merit (and that of Jesus who represents the fulfilled sacrifice) passes only to his true inheritors, those with faith in Christ.

Abraham in the Quran

The Quran lays out its messages with no obvious chronology and without discrete parts that can be identified as legal, narrative, homiletic, and so forth. Units within and between chapters tend to be more compact than those of the Hebrew Bible or New Testament, and motifs may appear in seemingly disparate loci (Neuwirth 2006, Watt and Bell 1970). The Quran, therefore must be treated as a single unit. Second only to Moses in number of appearances, Abraham is one of the more familiar biblical figures to be found in the Quran and appears more than one hundred times in some twenty-five chapters. He is often included in formalized lists of monotheistic prophets (2: 136, 140; 3: 33, 84; 4: 163; 12: 38; 19: 58; 33: 7; 38:45; 57: 26, etc.), but his role as the first person to realize the truth of monotheism and to live in relationship with God finds particular significance, perhaps because it serves as a prototype for Muhammad's religious conversion and leadership.

The Quranic Abraham discovers the unity of God through the power of his own thinking. He is the first to realize monotheism through reason. References to his reasoning out monotheism are organized around three themes. In one he proves the futility of celestial worship and the necessary existence of a primary cause (Q. 6: 74–83). In another he demonstrates the ineffectuality of idol worship by personally destroying his people's graven images (Q. 19: 41–50; 21: 51–71; 37: 83–99). And in the third he either argues against the pointlessness of idolatry or publicly refused to take part in the folly (Q. 26: 70–104; 29: 16–17; 43: 26–8; 60: 4; cf. Ginzberg 1937: I. 191–8, V. 211–12).

Abraham Reasons God's Unity

As with the New Testament, the Quran offers a rationale for God's choice of Abraham, but rather than absolute faith we find rational arguments supporting the unity of God (citations in paragraph above). Abraham is steadfast and unwavering in the face of argument, imprisonment, and even attempts on his life. A true monotheist, he is faithful while resolute in his reasoning that deduces the existence of God through rational thought. These aetiologies, like virtually all narratives or narrative references in the Quran, are not placed within a particular chronology in relation to other stories, yet they are considered by Islamic tradition as having occurred prior to God's dealings with Abraham. The Quranic Abraham stories are thus read with an eye to the biblical chronology, and this chronologizing became formalized through genres of scriptural interpretation that are read in conjunction with the text of Islamic scripture.

Abraham Builds the Meccan Sanctuary

To this Islamic image of Abraham as the first monotheist is added a parallel to his biblical role as the founder of sacred sites. In the Quran, however, Abraham is

associated with Arabian rather than Israelite geography, thereby expanding his biblical function by bringing him into an Arabian context (Firestone 1991; 1992). In Q. 2: 125–7, Abraham establishes the sacred Kaaba in Mecca in response to God's command. He purifies it, prays that it become an area of safety, raises up its foundations with his son Ishmael, ensures that it be a shrine dedicated to the one God, and proclaims the requirement to make pilgrimage to it (Q. 3: 95–7; 14: 35–7; 22: 26–7).

Ishmael's involvement in erecting the foundations of the Kaaba is connected with a prayer that their descendants become a Muslim nation.

> We covenanted Abraham and Ishmael [saying]: Purify My house for those who circumambulate, are engaged [with it], and bow and prostrate themselves. . . . And when Abraham and Ishmael were raising up the foundations of the House [they prayed]: Our Lord, accept [this] from us, for You are the Hearer, the Knower. Our Lord, make us submitters to You (*muslimayn laka*) and our progeny a nation submissive to You (*umma muslima laka*) . . . .' (2: 125–8)

This reflection on Abraham's Ishmaelite descendants exhibits a sentiment similar to the Hebrew Bible in establishing a biological genealogy of relationship with Abraham. But this rendering privileges Ishmael over Isaac and pre-dates later attempts in Arabic literature to focus the merit of Abraham in the line of Ishmael, the progenitor of the Arab tribes from which Islam would spring (Firestone 1990: 61–79, 135–51).

Abraham as Muslim

Abraham's role as original monotheist is expressed through the use of the terms 'religion of Abraham' (*millat ibrahīm*), 'pre-Islamic monotheist' (*ḥanif*), and the qualifier that 'he was not an idolater' (*wamā kāna min al-mushrikīn*) (Watt 1979; Rubin 1990; Rippin 1991). These three expressions tend to be strung together, as in Q. 3: 95 when revelation is directed to Muhammad with the words, 'Say: God speaks the truth, so follow the religion of Abraham, the pre-Islamic monotheist. He was not an idolater' (see also Q. 16: 120, 123; 22: 78). This description may be found also in contexts which are defensive of Islam or outright polemical. In Q. 6: 161, for example, Muhammad is directed by God in the following way: 'Say: My Lord has guided me on a straight path, a right religion, the religion of Abraham the pre-Islamic monotheist. He was not an idolater' (cf. 12: 38) (Bell 1960: I. 133). More obvious polemical uses of this description may be found in 2: 130: 'Who dislikes the religion of Abraham other than those who fool themselves?' or 2: 135: 'They say: Be Jews or Christians [to be] rightly guided. Say: But rather, the religion of Abraham the pre-Islamic monotheist. He was not an idolater.'

The latter example is striking in that it sets up the religion of Abraham against the claims of Jews and Christians. Abraham is established in the Quran as the original and pure monotheist, steadfast and upright. He is also associated with a divine covenant (Michel 1983). His heirs, however, do not automatically reflect Abraham's monotheistic perfection. In 2: 124, for example, God appoints Abraham to be a leader for the people

after he passes the divine test, but when Abraham asks about the status of his progeny he is answered: 'My covenant does not include sinners.' In a similar passage, God says: 'We have given the Book and the Wisdom to the family of Abraham, and We have given them a great kingdom. Some of them believed in it and some turned away from it. Hell is sufficient for their burning' (Q. 4: 54–5).

As noted above in relation to Q. 2: 128, Abraham and Ishmael pray that they and their progeny be 'submitters' to God. The biblical patriarchs are neither Jews nor Christians according to the Quran but, rather, 'small-m *muslims*'—not modern Muslims of today, of course, but nevertheless individuals who submit to God. They represent a kind of pure and primordial, uncorrupted monotheism that is distinct from the inadequate institutionalized forms of religion known to the Jews and Christians: 'Do you say that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes were Jews or Christians? Say: Do you know, or God? And who is worse than one who hides the testimony that he has from God. God is not ignorant of what you do' (2: 140).

In an even more striking passage the Quran argues:

> O People of the Book, why do you argue about Abraham when the Torah and Gospel were not revealed until after him? Have you no sense? Are you not those who argue about what you know? So why do you argue about what you do not know? God knows, but you know not. Abraham was not a Jew nor a Christian, but rather a pre-Islamic monotheist (*ḥanif*), a *muslim*, and not an idolater. (3: 65–7)

Here as in the previous examples, 'small-m *muslim*' does not refer directly to the institutional religion of Islam that would arise later, for it is clear that Abraham preceded the revelation and the last and quintessential prophet of Islam by millennia. But the use of that term is nevertheless significant because it makes him a primordial monotheist and separates him from the less than adequate religiosity and piety of Jews and Christians who claim Abraham as their patriarch and progenitor. The passage continues: 'The best of humankind with regard to Abraham are those who have followed him and this prophet, and those who believe. God is the Guardian of the believers. Some of the People of the Book would love to lead you astray, but they only lead themselves astray though they are not aware' (3: 68–9).

Abraham and Covenant

The issue of covenant in the Quran is complex and merits independent treatment (Firestone 2011). Two words are generally used, *mithaq* and *ʿahd*, and they are in some cases used interchangeably. There is mention of a *mithaq* with the prophets (3: 81; 33: 7), with the People of the Book denoting the Jews of Muhammad's own day (3: 187; 7: 169), with Christians (5: 14), and with unspecified people (13: 20, 25), but the overwhelming majority of references are to the ancient divine covenant with the Children of Israel (2: 27 [?], 2: 63, 83, 93; 4: 154; 5: 7, 12, 70). The Children of Israel as a collective break the covenant, however, and only a few remain true to the divine command. The covenant

referred to here is that of Mount Sinai and the context as provided in the Quran occasionally parallels a formulation found also in Jewish midrash: 'And We made your covenant and We raised up above you the mountain [saying]: Take hold firmly of what We have given you and hear/obey' (2: 93; see also 4: 154, and cf. Ginzberg 1937: III. 92 and VI. 36).

The other common term for covenant is *ʿahd*, which is used when God directs Abraham and Ishmael to purify God's House (2: 125). In the preceding verse, God informs Abraham, 'My covenant (*ʿahdi*) does not apply to wrongdoers, an oblique reference to the Abrahamic covenant (*brit*) known from Genesis 17. As with this example, Quranic references to prior covenants may note how they were invalidated by the sins of those who had been a part of the covenant, a position that we have observed above was also expressed in the New Testament (Heb. 8: 6–9: 26) and which is at variance with the standard Hebrew Bible depiction in which the covenant will not be broken despite the sins of Israel (Lev. 26: 42–5; Isa. 54: 9–10, 59: 21). The Quran includes Christians among the sinners: 'And those who say: "We are Christians", We made their covenant but they forgot a part of what they were reminded [through revelation]. So We incited enmity and hatred between them until the Day of Resurrection, when God will tell them what they have done' (Q. 5: 14). The Quranic position holds that, because neither the Children of Israel nor the Christians kept proper faith with God, the prior covenants are no longer valid except among a small remnant of believers identified as those few Arabian Jews and Christians contemporary with Muhammad who accepted the message of the Quran that he brought. A parallel occurs in Romans 11: 1–7, where it is proclaimed that only a remnant among Israel remains 'chosen by the grace of God' (Rom. 11: 5)—that is, those who do not reject the new message of Christianity.

Similar to emerging Christianity, emerging Islam establishes its position in the contemporary religious economy through the use of familiar authenticating religious topoi. By managing or exploiting the classic motifs of Abraham and covenant established by earlier scripture, emerging Islam claims authenticity and legitimacy while simultaneously critiquing the practice if not the essence of the establishment traditions. Notwithstanding the blanket critique of prior monotheisms, the Quranic Abraham bears a greater resemblance to his namesake in the Hebrew Bible than in the New Testament. Abraham tends toward obedience, law, and ritual as he prays to be shown the requisite ritual obligations (2: 128, 14: 40), announces others (22: 27), and is associated with four of the five required pillars of Islam (witnessing the one God and the prophethood of Muhammad (2: 129), prayer (2: 125–9), giving alms (22: 78), and the pilgrimage (22: 26-7)). He submits entirely to the will of God—the meaning of the term *muslim* that is so closely associated with the patriarch (2: 128–32, 136; 3: 67; 37: 103, etc.).

The Quranic Abraham also appears in narratives familiar from the Hebrew Bible. He is the original monotheist covenanted with God (2: 124–5) founder of sacred sites, and as in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, he is God's friend (4: 125). But while the Quran establishes Abraham's piety and monotheism, it also disengages him from Jews and Christians. The Quranic Abraham warns his people to be pious and true

to God (29: 16–17), charges his children to be *muslims* (2: 132) and prays that his heirs will pray to God as he does (14: 40), but the impiety of most of his descendants and followers invalidated their membership in previous covenants (37: 113, 2: 27, 2: 93, 4: 155, 5: 13–14, etc.).

The new divine revelation thus enables both pagans and the People of the Book to return to the pristine monotheism of Abraham (as well as other great prophetic personages): 'We have inspired you [Muhammad] with revelation just as we inspired Noah and the prophets after him. We gave divine inspiration to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron and Solomon, and we gave David psalms' (4: 163). 'Who is better in religion than those who surrender themselves to God while being good and following the religion of Abraham the pre-Islamic monotheist? For God took Abraham as a friend' (4: 125).

Abraham in the Oral Torah

Judaism, like Christianity, emerged out of the cultural and religious mélange of late antique Palestine (Boyarin 1999, Schwartz 2001, Cohen 1999, Schafer 2012). A number of forms and expressions of Judaism competed for dominance during this period, and rabbinic Judaism only became truly ascendant around the sixth or seventh centuries CE. Of particular interest here is its claim to a revelation in the Oral Torah that is distinct from the Hebrew Bible but read in conjunction with it. Like Christianity and Islam, Judaism's theology, ritual practice, organizational structure, and leadership differs fundamentally from that of biblical religion.

Unlike Christianity and Islam, however, rabbinic Judaism never officially declared its Oral Torah a new revelation. On the contrary, it placed the origin of this revelation in exactly the same time and place as that of the Written Torah of the Hebrew Bible. In place of a new revelation, it developed the retroflective idea of a spoken revelation given simultaneously with the written revelation at Mount Sinai. Unlike the revelation rendered into a written scripture, this part of the divine message remained in oral form for many centuries, only to be recorded hundreds of years after the redaction and canonization of the Hebrew Bible.

According to the Oral Torah itself, it was passed down orally by Moses to his successor Joshua, who in turn passed it to the tribal elders, the prophets, and eventually the rabbis (*Mishnah Avot* 1.1). When it was finally reduced to writing, it became known collectively as 'Talmud', meaning literally, learning or study. The term may apply to a specific collection known as the Talmud or it may also apply to a larger library of rabbinic literature including a collection called 'midrash', and it is the latter sense of Talmud or Oral Torah that is used here.

The Oral Torah is not unlike the New Testament and Quran in that it derives much of its authority from an intimate topical and literary association with the Hebrew Bible. The Oral Torah's retrovision characterizes the nature and self-concept of Judaism, for

unlike Christianity and Islam, Judaism did not view itself as a new movement but as the authentic continuing expression of biblical religion. It nevertheless appropriates the Abraham and covenant motifs and infuses them with new meaning. A number of other roughly contemporary Jewish texts do the same, but they fell out of the Jewish canon and cannot be considered here despite the fact that they include important material on Abraham (Sandmel 1956; Moxnes 1980; Stone 1972; Siker 1991: 17–27).

Abraham's Merit Passes to his Children

As in the Quran, the rabbinic Abraham was the first to recognize God (*Gen. Rabbah* 38.13; 39.1, 3; 64.4; *b. Nedarim* 32a, etc. Cf. Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* 1.156, 7.8; *Jubilees* 21.3; *Apocalypse of Abraham* 4.6). Appearing in a variety of narratives as a true monotheist even before his divine call to leave the land of his birth, he shows the futility and emptiness of idolatry while proving the reality of the true Creator-God of history, and his merit devolves upon his children: 'Happy are the righteous. Not only do they acquire merit, but they bestow merit upon their children and children's children to the end of all generations' (*Yoma* 87a). Abraham's progeny are royalty because they inherit the royal status of their princely father Abraham for his intimate relationship with God (*b. Sukkah* 49b, interpreting Song 7: 2 and Ps. 47: 10).

Potential counter-claims by Christians or Muslims to be spiritual or genealogical inheritors of Abraham are disqualified by condemnation of Abraham's other son Ishmael and his grandson Esau, the progenitors according to later rabbinic Judaism of the religious communities of Islam and Christianity.[2] Christian and Muslim claims to have inherited the mantle of monotheist exemplar from biblical monotheism are countered repeatedly through an exegetical process that parallels the scriptural arguments put forth in the New Testament and Quran. A classic representation of this schema may be found in *Sifrei Devarim* (*Ha'azinu* 7), which responds to Deut. 32: 9: *For the Lord's portion is His people*:

> This is comparable to the case of a king who had a field which he leased to tenant farmers. The tenant farmers began to take and steal from it, so he took it back from them and gave it to their children. But they became worse than the first [tenant farmers]. [When] a son was born to the king, he said to them: Get out from my [land]. You cannot stay in it. Give me back my portion so that I may declare it [to be mine]. In the same way, when our father Abraham came into the world, there issued from him the refuse of Ishmael and the sons of Qeturah. When our father Isaac came into the world, there issued from him the refuse of Esau, the chiefs of

[2] On Ishmael's evil ways, see *Gen. Rabbah* 53.11, *Exod. Rabbah* 1.1; *PRE* 30 (66b), 31 (70b), etc. On Esau's evil ways, see *Gen. Rabbah* 61.7, 63.8, 11–14; *Exod. Rabbah* 1.1; *PRE* 29 (66a–b), 39 (93b–94a). The traditions condemning Ishmael and Esau emerged certainly before the emergence of Islam and may have developed also before emerging Christianity when Esau was associated with the pagan Roman Empire, but the Hebrew legends remained a convenient internal means for Jews to counter the claims of their monotheistic competitors.

> Edom who were worse than the first. When Jacob came, however, no refuse issued from him. Rather, all of his sons were fit like him, as it is said (Gen. 25: 27): *And Jacob was a perfect man* (ish tam), *dwelling in tents*. From where [do we learn] that [God] declares Jacob [and all his progeny] to be His? As it is said (Psalm 135: 4): *For the Lord has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel.*

Abraham was a Jew

The Abraham of the Talmud epitomizes the rabbinic Jew by acting entirely in conformity with the Judaism of the Oral Torah by observing rabbinic customs found explicitly in the Talmud but not clearly articulated in the Hebrew Bible. 'Abraham knew even the laws of the *'eruv* of courtyards' (*Gen. Rabbah* 64.4). 'No one ever occupied himself with [the observance of] commandments as did Abraham our father' (*b. Nedarim* 32.2). He instituted the morning prayer as well as the laws of wearing fringes (*tzitzit*) and the daily donning of phylacteries (Ta-Shma 1973). 'We have found that Abraham our father fulfilled the entire Torah [that is, both Written and Oral] even before it was given, as it is said (Gen. 26: 5): *because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings*' (*m. Kedushin* 4.14).

The Covenant with Jews Endures Forever

Countering the claims of the New Testament and later the Quran, the Oral Torah repeatedly expresses the notion that the biblical covenant endures through the Jewish people. *Deut. Rabbah* 8.6, for example, interprets Deut. 30: 11 to claim that Abraham's descendants remain the sole recipients of the divine promise. '[*Surely this commandment which I enjoin upon you this day . . .*] *is not in the heavens . . .* Moses said to Israel: Do not say: Another Moses will arise and bring us another Torah from heaven.'

In the following passage, a parable is offered in relation to Deut. 7: 12 [*And if you obey these rules and observe them carefully*] *the Lord your God will maintain the covenant and the love*. Despite the tragedy of the destruction of the Temple the biblical covenant with the Jewish people was never broken. A crown will yet be placed on the head of Israel, who will be returned to intimate relationship with God epitomized by the Abrahamic covenant. Abraham bequeathed precious stones to Israel that were gladly matched with God's own. The future will bring a redemption that will confirm and vindicate Judaism.

> Rabbi Shim'on ben Halafta said: To what may [the message of] this [verse] be compared? To a king who married a noble woman who brought for him [into the marriage] two precious stones. So too, the king matched her with two precious stones. The noble woman lost hers, so the king took back his. After some time, she was able to set herself straight and brought back the two precious stones, whereupon the king brought back his. The king said: all of these will be set into a crown that will be laid unto the head of the noble woman. Thus you find that Abraham gave his children two precious stones, as it is said (Gen. 18: 19): [*Abraham*] *will*

> *command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice* (*tzedakah umishpat*). So too, did God match them with two precious stones: love and mercy (*hesed verahamim*), as it is said (Deut. 7: 12) *the Lord your God will maintain the covenant and the love . . .* [But] Israel lost its own [contribution], as it is said (Amos 6: 12): *. . . for you have turned justice into poison weed and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood*. So too did God take His back, as it is said (Jer. 16: 5): *For I have taken away My peace . . . mercy and compassion*. Israel was able to set itself straight and bring back the precious stones. From where [do we know this]? Thus is it written (Isa. 1: 27): *Zion will be redeemed with justice and her repentant ones in righteousness*. God too brought His back. From where [do we know this]? Thus is it written (Isa. 54: 10): *For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken, but My kindness shall never move from you nor My covenant of friendship be shaken—said the Lord who takes you back in love*. When [Israel] restores its own, and the Holy One gives His own, the Holy One will say: All of these will be set into a crown that will be laid onto the head of Israel, as it is said (Hos. 2: 21–2): *And I will betroth you to Me forever, I will betroth you to me with righteousness and justice, and with goodness and mercy, and I will betroth you with faithfulness; then shall you know the Lord*. (*Deut. Rabbah* 3.7)

Conclusion

Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each engaged in a re-envisioning of the biblical Abraham in order to demonstrate the validity of its religious expression against the claims of others. The biblical Abraham was 'Christianized', 'Islamized', and 'Judaized' because of his importance as *homo religiosus* in popular religious discourse. He is the quintessential monotheist, religious founder, and human in unique personal and ongoing relationship with God. He epitomizes human partnership with God through covenant. He represents the religious ideal. It is no surprise that he becomes a contested symbol claimed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims as representative exemplar of each religion. To Christians he is the epitome of faith in God, to Muslims he exemplifies submission to God, and to Jews he fully lives out God's commandments. But these Abrahams are different from one another, and the claims for exclusive representation became polemical and elitist, inviting counter-claims that naturally develop into tense relationships of contention and strife. A comparative analytical reading of the sources reveals the great power of symbols and the human and institutional desire to claim ownership of them.

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