

## Book Reviews

*Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* by Jon D. Levenson (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), xxv + 474 pages. Hb, ISBN (13): 9780691155692; Price \$29.95 / £19.95

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The subject matter of *Inheriting Abraham*, as the title itself reveals, is the “biblical narratives about Abraham and their appropriation into Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with the major emphasis falling on the Jewish material”. With these words, thus commences Jon D. Levenson, the author of the book under review, and he has justified it and done it fully, throughout the book. A result of Levenson’s – who is Albert A. Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard University – more than three decades experience of teaching and lecturing, is an incisive and deeply challenging account of the three Abrahams of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theology.

Although, the “oldest source” for the story of Abraham is in the biblical book of Genesis, but the narrative of same appears in the Christian holy book and in holy Qur’an as well; and thus, all these three major religions share a “common religious heritage” in the Prophet Abraham. The book demonstrating Abraham’s “distinctive role” in each tradition, delineates the points of concern between them and at the same time “boldly” challenges the view that he should “serve” only as a source of unity among the three traditions – a view-point that has become widespread in both scholarly and popular circles.

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Consisting of six chapters, the book argues that the “oldest source” for the story of Abraham is “in the biblical book of Genesis”, where it occupies about fourteen chapters or roughly twenty pages (p.1), and for proving this view-point, Levenson devotes first two chapters – “Call and Commission”, and “Frustrations and Fulfillments” respectively – on this discussion, in a very detailed way. He notes that as Judaism changed under the impact of fresh challenges and resources, the conception of Abraham changed as well, where he is known as “’*Avraham* ’*Avinu*, ‘Our Father Abraham’.” And as the father of the Jewish people, as puts forth Levenson in the very introduction, Abraham is “not simply their biological progenitor” but is also the “founder of Judaism itself—the first Jew” (p.3) Much richer and more variegated portraits of him emerge, along with new conceptions of his significance and his legacy. The evolution of the figure of Abraham in Jewish sources reflects the evolution of Judaism itself over the centuries.

In Chapter Three, “The Test”, the story of *Aqedah* – “Binding (or, *Aqedah*) of Isaac” and in Christianity the “sacrifice of Isaac” (p.66) has been discussed. Herein the author explores not only the various religious contexts in which the *Aqedah* – the episode which has been narrated in Genesis 22:1-19, which has been of “enormous significance in both traditions” and has “indirectly generated an important parallel in Islam as well” (*ibid*) – has been read but also this “modern assault” on the story itself and seek to uncover the deeper issues at work. Levenson reaches the conclusion that in the three Abrahamic religious traditions, “Abraham’s literal deed is not presented as something to be duplicated by those who revere his memory. This does not, however, render the story obsolete, as many in the modern world have wished to do.” (p.112)

In Chapter Four, “The Rediscovery of God”, wherein he puts forth that prophet Abraham, in sum, is “not simply a migrant”, but is also a “teacher of philosophy, open minded and eager”, who was committed to “convincing people everywhere of the truth of monotheism” (p. 127). In its final section, he turns towards the Islamic perspective/context of the Abraham’s position vis-à-vis faith, and basin his argument on the Qur’anic verse, 6:123 – which reads as: “Follow the Religion of Abraham, the upright, for he was not one of the polytheists” – Levenson says: “That ‘the religion of Abraham’ is Islam itself is clear in the Qur’an”. Levenson further argues that in this case, too, Genesis can indeed be remade in the image of Abraham, though they are reborn as members of his family, as they can be in Judaism. Rather they become Gentiles who practice

Abraham's religion of submission to God alone – now known as Islam. They become not Jewish – for they do not practice the Mosaic Torah – but Abrahamic” (p.137)

Moreover, the idea of Abraham's uncompromising opposition to idolatry carries over into rabbinic and later Jewish sources; and appearing prominently in the Qur'an as well, it becomes an important part of the common heritage of Judaism and Islam.

Chapter Five answers the question, “Torah or Gospel?” and in the final chapter, Chapter Six, Levenson attempts to answer one more important and complicated question, i.e., “One Abraham or Three?” In the last chapter he concludes, and by that way, he winds/ends up this book, with these words:

“For the question of who Abraham's heirs are [whether Jews, Christians or Muslims] and how they inherit his legacy in internal to each of these three related yet distinct traditions. Rather than inventing a neutral Abraham [who is beyond text, beyond tradition, and beyond history] to whom these three ancient communities must now hold themselves accountable, we would be better served by appreciating better both the profound commonalities and equally profound differences among them and why the commonalities and the differences alike have endured and show every sign of continuing to do so.”  
(p.214)

At the same time, Levenson is also careful about pointing out the “elucidation of historical context”, which for him, although is a great boon to interpretation, must not be allowed to distract us from seeking to identify and develop the larger theological claims that the texts made in their own time and that, for committed Jews, they continue to make today. And thus, he remains faithful and justifies as well, his claim, made in the end of his introductory chapter that the appropriate goal, then, is, on the one hand, to be open to instruction from history and aware of the cultural embeddedness of the texts about Abraham and, on the other hand, to be equally open to the transcendent and enduring religious messages these texts convey (see, p. 17).

Although the focus of this work is much on Jewish tradition, as pointed out by Levenson in the very beginning as well, than Christianity and Islam, and although there are many points where one can disagree and differ with Levenson, and therefore, there are much chances of rebuttal to his arguments, in the form of any book, booklet, or articles, *Inheriting Abraham* demonstrates Abraham's distinctive role in each tradition, while delineating the points of connection as well. He explores very deeply and insightfully, how Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have given unique distinctive interpretations to these narratives, often reimagining Abraham and his life in mutually exclusive ways, and he finds illuminating signs of profound and enduring theological divergences alongside the commonalities. In a nutshell, Written very well, argued delightfully, with deep insights, and pointing out both similarities and differences, among the three "monotheistic" or "Abrahamic" religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), *Inheriting Abraham* makes a superb contribution to our understanding and perception, opinion and insight, of the figure of Prophet Abraham.