

## INTRODUCTION

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### Who Was (and Is) Abraham?

On the day when Our Father Abraham passed away from the world, all the great people of the nations of the world stood in a line and said, “Alas for the world that has lost its leader, and alas for the ship that has lost its pilot!”

—Talmud<sup>1</sup>

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. Readers who are unfamiliar with the story would be well advised to read it now, and in a modern, accessible translation.<sup>2</sup> When they do, they will see that it is the deceptively simple tale of a person to whom God, suddenly and without preparation, makes some rather extravagant promises. This childless man (whose wife is infertile) is to be the father of a great nation; he will become famous and blessed, in fact a source or byword of blessing for many; and his descendants will be given the land of Canaan, to which he is commanded to journey, leaving his homeland in Mesopotamia (today, Iraq) and his family of origin behind. Much of the drama in these early chapters of the story derives from the question, how will this man whose wife has never been able to conceive a child and is now advancing in years ever beget the great nation that is at the center of the promise? The wealth associated with that promise comes quickly, but the son who will be Abraham’s heir and continuator does not, and this casts into doubt both the reliability of the promise and the God who made it.

When at long last Abraham does gain a son, it is not through his primary wife, but, at her suggestion, through an Egyptian slave who serves as a surrogate mother for her mistress. The resolution is short-lived. For no sooner is Abraham’s ostensible heir (Ishmael) born than God makes the astounding promise that the infertile wife,

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Sarah, now eighty-nine years old, will give birth to the promised son after all, and that this son will inherit not only the promises of blessing and great nationhood, as does Ishmael, but, unlike Ishmael, the covenant as well. Much of the second half of the story of Abraham focuses on the relationship of these two sons (and that of their mothers as well), until finally Ishmael and his mother Hagar are removed from the household and Hagar procures an Egyptian wife for her son, confirming, as it were, the divine prediction that his would not be Abraham's prime lineage. That status has been reserved for Sarah's son Isaac, who is born not through the course of nature but through nothing less than a miracle. But this time, too, the happy resolution is short-lived, for soon after it is established that Sarah's son Isaac is the promised offspring, God again, suddenly and without warning, commands Abraham to sacrifice this child, the son he loves and on whom he has staked his life, as a burnt offering on an as-yet-unspecified mountain in a distant land.

And yet, once again, Abraham obeys God's inscrutable will. At the last minute, God interrupts the sacrifice, having determined that Abraham obeys even when that means acting against his own self-interest and paternal love. Isaac survives. Abraham, before he dies, succeeds in buying a gravesite for Sarah, his only acquisition of real estate in the land promised his descendants. He also arranges a marriage for Isaac within his extended family back in Mesopotamia, ensuring that the promise will not die in his generation but extend into the next, as Isaac and Rebekah succeed Abraham and Sarah as the progenitors of the special nation. The promise secured—and to some extent realized—Abraham passes away at a ripe old age, contented.

So much for Abraham in the Jewish Bible, the subject of our first two chapters and part of the third (and to be treated at greater length later in this introduction). What is too easily missed is that in the Jewish tradition, the Bible comes bundled with a rich body of interpretation that has grown over many centuries. This makes it inadequate to restrict a discussion of Abraham in Judaism to the figure who appears in Genesis. Rather, the story continued to grow even after the biblical texts became fixed, and expanded versions of the story in Genesis—along with some that seem to have no or only slight rooting there—became plentiful among Jews living under various forms

of Greek or Roman domination. In fact, as Judaism changed under the impact of fresh challenges and resources, the conception of Abraham changed as well. 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 the Jewish tradition, Abraham is known as *'Avraham 'Avinu*, “Our Father Abraham.” As the father of the Jewish people, he is not simply their biological progenitor (and, as the tradition would have it, the father of all who have converted to Judaism as well); he is also the founder of Judaism itself—the first Jew, as it were—and the man whose life in some mysterious ways pre-enacts the experience of the Jewish people, who are his descendants and who are to walk in trails he blazed. The major way in which they are to do so is by serving and worshipping the God whom, according to those postbiblical but still authoritative traditions, Abraham rediscovered. To this day, the Jewish liturgy speaks of God as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” referring in the last two phrases to the special son and grandson through whom, according to the biblical narrative, the Jewish people came into existence.

That Abraham should have assumed such prominence is more than a little surprising, and for at least two reasons. The first is that so little of what the tradition instructs Jews to practice can be found in the biblical narratives about Abraham. Neither he nor anyone else in Genesis, for example, observes the Sabbath (*Shabbat*), a central focus of Jewish life from antiquity till the present. True, God “ceases” (Hebrew, *shavat*) from his labors on the seventh day of creation, but, as the Torah’s story has it, he does not disclose Shabbat itself or command any human beings to keep it until the time of Moses, long after the death of Abraham. The same can be said about the great bulk of the commandments of the Torah. The opposition to idolatry and the insistence on the one God who has created the world, the characteristic ethical and legal norms, the laws governing sacrificial worship, the dietary laws, the festivals—Abraham is involved with none of these, the single, glaring exception being circumcision. But in time all this changes, as Abraham the father becomes Abraham the founder as well—the man who heroically stands up for the one

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invisible and transcendent God, who created the world, guides and governs it through his providence, and gave the Torah and its commandments to the Jewish people.

To historians, this postbiblical reconception of Abraham as the founder of Judaism is, of course, problematic, and not simply because it fails to reflect the earliest surviving sources about him. To the modern historian, the whole concept of a single person founding a great religion is too simplistic to account for the complex cultural and social dynamics by which any religious tradition comes into being. There is ample room to reject the notions, for example, that the tradition Westerners call “Confucianism” was founded by Confucius and that Christianity was founded by the man its adherents called “Jesus Christ” (who was, in fact, an observant Jew). In both those cases, however, the putative founder is revered and viewed as a paradigm for the adherents to follow, and no later figure in the tradition even begins to equal him. The same can be said for the Buddha and Muhammad. Abraham as he appears in the Torah is arguably (but not indisputably) presented as worthy of reverence, but little of what he is reported to have done is directly amenable to imitation. On the basis of the biblical traditions, if the problematic title of “founder” must be invoked at all, Moses would seem to have a much better claim to it than Abraham.

This brings us to the second reason that the reconception of Abraham in Jewish tradition is surprising. It is not simply that in Genesis, Abraham does not teach what Moses is said to have taught; it is that he does not teach anything at all. In this, too, he distinguishes himself radically from other putative founder-figures, like the Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad. Genesis, like the entire Jewish Bible, is extraordinarily reticent about providing editorial evaluations of Abraham. The same reticence also partly accounts for the occasional willingness of the Jewish tradition to find serious fault with Abraham.<sup>3</sup> In this, too, Judaism seems radically different from the way most religious traditions treat their founders, who are regarded as models for emulation and, in the case of orthodox Christianity, as the very incarnation of God himself.

In the later part of the Second Temple period (roughly 200 B.C.E.–70 C.E.), when the latest compositions in the Hebrew Bible were

being finished, Judaism faced one of those challenges to its conception of Abraham alluded to above and found the resources to deal with it. The challenge lay in the advance of scientific thinking in the Greco-Roman world and the philosophical claims on behalf of naturalism with which it was associated. In particular, the discovery of mathematically predictable regularities inscribed in the motion of the heavenly bodies posed a formidable challenge to the traditional Jewish belief in a personal God who created the world (including the planets and stars) and actively governs it through his providence. As we shall see in chapter 4, one way in which Judaism sought to meet the new challenge was by finding in Abraham the man who had seen through astrology/astronomy (the two were not yet distinguished) and discovered the God who is above nature and not wholly immanent in it or constrained by it. The traditional absence of an icon of the Deity in Jewish worship lent itself to making a similar point. Whereas in the Abraham narratives of Genesis, there is no notion at all of idolatry or of false gods, late Second Temple Jewish literature exhibits an Abraham who, strikingly, not only intuitively grasps the non-corporeal nature of God but also sets himself courageously against the regnant idolatry. In the manner of biblical prophets like Elijah and Jeremiah, or of Jewish martyrs of the late Second Temple period itself, this Abraham is willing to witness to the highest truth with, if need be, his very life. This idea of Abraham's uncompromising opposition to idolatry carries over into rabbinic and later Jewish sources; it is familiar to many Jews today, some of whom are surprised to learn that there is not a word to that effect in Genesis. Appearing prominently in the Qur'an as well, it becomes an important part of the common heritage of Judaism and Islam.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are often described as the monotheistic religions, meaning those that insist there is but one God (though the one God of Christian tradition is believed to exist in three equally divine "persons"). Although in the Middle Ages the oneness of God becomes a focus of important philosophical reflection, monotheism among the Jews of biblical, Second Temple, and rabbinic times (the last period runs roughly from about 70 C.E. to 500 C.E.) was not focused primarily on the number of deities but on the transcendence of the true God over nature and humankind,

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which are his handiwork and ultimately dependent upon him and his generosity. Importantly, there was also a pagan monotheism in the Greco-Roman world (“pagan” in this usage is not derogatory but simply designates someone whose identity did not in any way derive from ancient Israel). But the one God in whom the Stoic philosophers believed, to use them as an example, was not the creator of the world and did not transcend the natural order, as did the creator God of the Jews and the Christians (and later, the Muslims). At least just as important is the crucial fact, too often overlooked, that Jewish, Christian, and Muslim monotheism focuses not only on the one God but also on the special human community to whom he has graciously revealed himself and his will in sacred scripture—another aspect unparalleled in pagan (or, philosophical) monotheism.

In the context of Judaism, one thus cannot speak very long or very adequately about God without speaking about the people Israel, the people descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; conversely, one cannot speak very long or very adequately about the people Israel without speaking about the God of Israel. Something analogous can be said about Christianity and Islam, but not about pagan monotheism. In Second Temple and rabbinic tradition, Abraham is not just the man who rediscovered the one God; he is also, as in the Hebrew Bible, the forefather of the Jewish people, who, like him, are witnesses to that God.

The rise of Christianity in the first century of the Common Era posed a different sort of challenge to Judaism and elicited a different sort of response. In this case, the central issue was twofold: Which community today can lay just claim to the promises made to Abraham’s descendants, and what is that community obligated to practice? For the Christian apostle Paul, Abraham was “the father of all who have faith without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the father of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised” (Rom 4:11–12).<sup>4</sup> Here, the key thing is not birth but faith, and Gentiles and Jews—the uncircumcised and the circumcised—qualify equally for “descent” from Abraham if they have faith. That Abraham lived before

Moses's reception of the Torah and, according to Genesis, was pronounced righteous by God because of his faith proved to Paul, himself once a practicing Jew, that the commandments of the Torah were not necessary for a right relationship with God.

Even the *mitsvah* (commandment) of ritual circumcision, which Abraham and his descendants were categorically commanded to practice, was no exception, for, as Paul sees it, Abraham was pronounced righteous because of his faith *before* that commandment was ever given.<sup>5</sup> And so, ritual circumcision, a requirement for men converting to Judaism, would not be required of Christians at all. The faith of Abraham the Gentile made him righteous in God's eyes even before circumcision made him into Abraham the first Jew. In Paul's theology, the community for which Abraham served as a paradigm was thus a mixed group of Gentiles and Jews, a community created by God and founded upon faith in the gospel of Christ crucified and risen from the dead. It was, in other words, the Church, and so it remains in the minds of most Christians to this day.

The precise innovation brought about by the Jewish response to Paul's and kindred early Christian theologies is difficult to establish, since we cannot easily distinguish between a response to a Christian challenge and the natural unfolding of Jewish theology and biblical interpretation. (The current Jewish Bible, give or take a few books, was the only Bible the earliest Christians knew.) A good case in point is the issue of the dispensability of ritual circumcision for men of Abrahamic descent. When the Talmudic sages, who refer to the circumcision ceremony as inducting the boy into "the covenant of Abraham Our Father," also devised a liturgy that proclaims, "Were it not for the blood of circumcision, heaven and earth would not endure!" (Babylonian Talmud [*b.*], *Shabbat* [*Shab.*] 137b), were they responding to the contrary Christian theology; to long-standing, in fact pre-Christian, Gentile contempt for the practice; to the great emphasis the Torah itself places upon the ritual; or to some combination of these three possibilities? Whatever the answer, it is certainly the case that the rabbis refused to dispense with circumcision or to subordinate it or the rest of the *mitsvot* (commandments) of the Torah to faith.



Indeed, in a number of places in rabbinic literature, we find Abraham practicing other mitsvot as well, even those undisclosed until after his death. “Thus,” a rabbinic text reports, “we find that Our Father Abraham practiced the whole Torah, in its entirety, before it was given” (Mishnah [*m.*] *Qiddushin* 14:4). It is tempting to view this as a response to Paul’s insistence that the case of Abraham shows the Torah and its commandments are not necessary and that it is faith that determines who belongs to the people of God and who does not. This may well be so, though, as we shall see in chapter 5, the idea that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob observed the Mosaic Torah is also pre-Christian. The rabbis continued this idea but did not originate it. They also challenged it on occasion.

Islam (which arose in the seventh century C.E.) focuses on Abraham more than does either Judaism or Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Like Christianity, it seeks to detach Abraham from the flesh-and-blood Jewish people. But there is an extremely important difference between the Christian and the Muslim cases. Christianity has historically taught that descent from Abraham is essential; it differs from Judaism in holding that one becomes a descendant of Abraham through Christian faith and not through natural birth as a Jew or conversion to Judaism. Islam, on the other hand, beginning in the Qur’an itself, has taught that descent is insignificant. Abraham, in other words, is not the father of the believing community—neither “Our Father Abraham” nor “the father of all who have faith”—but rather a link in the chain of prophets that begins with Adam and culminates in the greatest of all prophets, Muhammad. As we shall see in chapter 6, the Qur’an conceives of Abraham as submitted to God (Arabic, *muslim*) and believes that those worthy of him are the followers of the man he foreshadowed, Muhammad, “Seal of the prophets” (33:40).<sup>7</sup> Alongside Abraham the Jew and Abraham the Christian (or at least the man who foreshadowed Christian faith), we thus must also reckon with Abraham the Muslim, or, to put the same point differently, with the Muslim claim that Islam is the restoration of “the religion of Abraham” (Qur’an 2:135), a religion long distorted and misinterpreted by Jews and Christians alike.

Given these conflicting interpretations of the supposedly common figure, the claim that Abraham is a source of reconciliation among



the three traditions increasingly called “Abrahamic” is as simplistic as it is now widespread. Historically, Abraham has functioned much more as a point of differentiation among the three religious communities than as a node of commonality. The assumption that we can recover a neutral Abraham that is independent of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—yet authoritative over them—is, as we shall see in chapter 6, quite unwarranted. Any argument that the Abraham of one of these three religions is the real Abraham will necessarily be fatally circular and privilege the scriptures and traditions of the very religion it seeks to validate. Thus, our concentration on the Jewish Abraham in this book implies no claim that the rival Abrahams of Christianity and Islam lack a parallel integrity of their own. On the contrary, the distinctive character of Abraham in Judaism—and to a large degree the distinctive character of Judaism itself—can be best understood through an honest and nonapologetic comparison and contrast with Abraham as he appears in the other two traditions now conventionally termed Abrahamic. It is surely the case that Jews, Christians, and Muslims have more in common than most of their adherents recognize, and one important item they have in common is a tendency to reflect on the figure of Abraham as he appears in their respective collections of authoritative literature. But those collections differ, the Abraham who appears in each of them is distinctive in important ways, and, although interreligious concord is devoutly to be desired, the patriarch is less useful to that end than many think.

The separation of Abraham from the subsequent history of the Jews and Judaism that Christianity and Islam brought about has, over the centuries, served as a sign of a potent challenge to traditional Jewish identity. In response, the Jewish tradition, building on certain clues in Genesis itself, has connected Abraham’s experience to that of the people Israel over the centuries. Thus, when he is instructed to take a certain set of animals to use in the covenant-making ceremony, a midrash (an imaginative rabbinic interpretation of biblical verses) sees the animals as symbolizing the sequence of empires that ruled over the Jewish people, culminating in Rome, which dominated in the rabbis’ own time.<sup>8</sup> The implication is that the covenant with Abraham will outlast those who have triumphed over his descendants

(including the increasingly Christianized Roman Empire), and the Jewish people will outlive each of their vanquishers and reclaim the land that God solemnly covenanted with their father to give them.

Another midrash relates to the near-sacrifice of Isaac—the Aqedah, or “Binding,” as it is known in rabbinic literature. The midrash dwells on a verse that has God showing Abraham the Temple: “built, destroyed, and rebuilt” (*Genesis Rabbah* [*Gen. Rab.*] 56:10). Developing a late biblical identification of the mountain in the land of Moriah,<sup>9</sup> on which the Binding took place, with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, this midrash makes Abraham a sign of eventual Jewish restoration but only after unspeakable travail—travail that he already pre-enacted.

The story of the Aqedah is the subject of chapter 3. We turn to that episode now because it points to a critical dimension of the development of Jewish reflection on Abraham that is too often missed. It is not the case that as new challenges arose, the Jewish tradition responded to them by merely rejecting the new thinking out of hand and restating the old theology. Rather, the new challenges prompted Jewish thinkers to delve deeper, probing and adjusting the contours of their own tradition. The Aqedah represents a case in which a passage that is almost never referred to again in the Hebrew Bible grew in importance in the late Second Temple period and became central to the theology of the rabbis in the first several centuries after the birth of Christianity. Was this last turn just the natural continuation of an evolutionary process? Or was it a response to the Christian story of the father who was willing to sacrifice his beloved son and the son who was willing to lay down his own life in obedience and love—a story that had itself developed in part with the Aqedah as a template?

As so often in the relationship of Judaism with Christianity (and later with Islam as well), we are not dealing with a straightforward instance of mother-religion and daughter-religion, but rather with complex patterns of dependence and mutual influence in traditions that change over time. Whatever the case may be with regard to the Aqedah, the fact remains that this text, though commonly and indeed drastically misinterpreted today, is extremely important for understanding the role Abraham plays in Judaism—and for understanding Judaism itself. Something similar can be said about the

important role of this same highly enigmatic and brilliantly narrated story in Christianity and Islam. Against these traditional readings, in modern times there has emerged an interpretation of the Aqedah that sees in Abraham not a man who passed the most demanding of tests but rather one who failed it by his willingness to murder an innocent person in response to a voice that could not possibly have been God's. In chapter 3, we will explore not only the various religious contexts in which the Aqedah has been read but also this modern assault on the story itself and seek to uncover the deeper issues at work.

So far, we have spoken of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as if they all have a common Abrahamic legacy, but with some important differences along the way. One difference, so far unmentioned but very fundamental, divides the first two traditions from the third.

However much Judaism and Christianity may diverge, they agree on the canonical status of Genesis. With the rendition in that book of the story of Abraham, the question of which son and grandson inherit the patriarchal promise is acute. Is the son Ishmael or Isaac? Is the grandson Esau or Jacob/Israel? From the biblical standpoint, then, the Muslim dismissal of this issue of chosenness or election seems absurd. But Jews and Christians need to remember that Islam does not regard Genesis as canonical scripture, a status that the Qur'an holds uniquely. So, although the Qur'an exhibits wide and deep indebtedness to the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (and affirms respect for the antecedent scriptures), as well as to postbiblical Jewish and Christian traditions, it omits passages that Jews and Christians consider essential, and it encompasses materials those two communities lack.

Nonetheless, it remains fair to say that the Jewish response to Christianity served the Jews against the challenge of Islam as well. For, despite the enormous differences between them, both challengers sought to detach Abraham from the Jewish people, and in the face of both challenges, the Jewish people in the aggregate clung stubbornly to the man they called Our Father Abraham.

The competition among Jews, Christians, and Muslims over the question of which community is truly Abrahamic, fascinating as it may be in itself, clearly leaves a sour taste in the mouths of many Westerners.

For, the thinking goes, how can we hope to understand Abraham before we have recovered the historical individual from the millennia of traditions that have accumulated around his name, progressively obscuring his identity and co-opting him for various agendas? To the modern Western mind, with its characteristic suspicion of tradition and its keen sense of historical change, the real question is not how this figure has been appropriated in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam over the centuries but rather, “Who was the *real* Abraham?” Without answering that all-important question, so the thinking goes, we have no basis to assess the relative value of those appropriations.

The question, it turns out, is considerably more complicated than most people think. One reason is that we have no contemporaneous references to Abraham whatsoever,<sup>10</sup> despite the discovery of thousands upon thousands of documents from the ancient Mesopotamian, Syro-Palestinian, and Egyptian cultures in which Genesis reports him to have lived. To be sure, the recovery of those long-lost cultures over the past century and a half has enabled us to understand many aspects of Genesis much better than we did, though in a way that also challenges interpretations provided by the postbiblical traditions. Forty years ago, American scholars (Europeans tended to be more skeptical) often thought they could accurately date Abraham to the first half of the second millennium B.C.E., when names and legal institutions appear that are reminiscent of some in the patriarchal narratives. Beginning in the 1970s, this line of thought received a solid drubbing, as scholars pointed out that the names and institutions in question, even when properly interpreted (as had not always been the case), tended to be more general and more enduring than had been assumed.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, evidence from the ancient Near East (including other biblical evidence) and from the field of anthropology has increasingly suggested that the quest for the historical patriarchs may be a wild goose chase. “Abraham,” “Isaac,” and “Jacob,” so the reasoning goes, may have been names of tribes or tribal confederations whose experiences over the centuries came to be expressed in stories about their putative ancestors. If so, “Abraham” may have been analogous to the American “Uncle Sam” or the English “John Bull” (whose activities have similarly become the objects of tales). In any event,

even if Abraham was a “real” individual, he seems to have left a vastly smaller impression on his contemporaries than the ongoing traditions of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims (including biblical traditions) later imagined. Indeed, the very idea that he had a connection with those subsequent traditions—even those of biblical Israel—is open to doubt in the minds of most historians who seek to be intellectually honest.

To many religious traditionalists, of course, these findings of historical research matter not a whit. To them, the mere fact that their respective scriptures tell us of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob means these men must not only have existed but must also have done what the canonical narratives say they did.

In the Jewish case, such an affirmation of historical accuracy often goes beyond the biblical accounts, incorporating the midrashim of the Talmudic rabbis into the historical picture as well. This stance produces the figure of an Abraham who preached monotheism, destroyed his father’s idols, survived lethal persecution by an idolatrous king, and, what is more, practiced the whole Torah—both the Written (biblical) and Oral (rabbinic)—before it was given on Sinai or otherwise made publicly available. In the Christian case, an analogous traditionalism of roughly the same period yields, for example, an Abraham who talked with Jesus.<sup>12</sup> In Muslim tradition, it produces an Abraham who, together with his son Ishmael, purified the *ka’ba*, the building in Mecca that is the holiest site in Islam, for proper worship.<sup>13</sup> This sort of traditionalism fits well with the high esteem for tradition (one’s own, but not that of others) and the weak or non-existent sense of historical change characteristic of pre-Enlightenment thinking everywhere.

The modern suspicion of tradition, especially on questions of scripture, draws added strength from the slogan of the Protestant Reformation that theology should be governed *sola scriptura*, “by scripture alone,” and not by the accumulated teachings of the Church over the centuries. Applied to our subject and detached from Protestant theology, this idea leads to the claim that the exclusive key to the “real” Abraham is Genesis itself, and not later elaborations of its narratives, no matter how hallowed or even authoritative they have become. But tradition is not so easily eliminated, and, in the case

of biblical literature, what was thrown out through the front door has quietly reentered through the back. In particular, the assumption that the oldest narratives about any person or event must convey authentic historical information has been cast into grave doubt. In the case of the Abrahamic narratives in Genesis, the current consensus among historians is that the material dates to the first millennium B.C.E. (some of it even to the second half) and is thus centuries removed from the supposedly historical figure it renders. To reconstruct the traditionary process that predates these literary compositions is at best exceedingly speculative and impossible to do with any certainty.

In sum, scripture is itself partly a product of tradition. Anyone inclined to doubt that new material about a revered figure like Abraham could come into existence in a religious tradition and be readily accepted need only consult the examples cited above from Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism, as well as Christianity and Islam, to grasp how general that process is. What is not so general—and, in fact, almost limited to the modern West—is the familiar idea that the significance of a foundational figure is limited to the historical period in which he or she lived and is undermined by introducing new, historically implausible material. The profoundly antitraditional idea that the “real” Abraham is the original Abraham undercuts all three traditions and, effectively, leaves us with no Abraham at all.

Modern biblical historians have likewise challenged another familiar idea—the notion that the biblical text is unitary and therefore lacking the internal diversity characteristic of tradition everywhere else. Even a cursory reading of the Abraham story in Genesis reveals features that suggest either that the received text made use of diverse and not altogether consistent sources or that massive interpretive imagination is necessary to provide the astute reader with a sense of narrative harmony. For example, in Genesis 21, as Abraham expels Ishmael and his mother Hagar from his household at his wife Sarah’s insistence, he seems to place his son on Hagar’s shoulder, along with some food and water, and send them on their way (v. 14). When the water runs out in the desert, the distraught mother leaves her son

under a bush and moves some distance away, saying, “Let me not look on as the child dies” (v. 16).

All this makes a great deal of sense if Ishmael is a baby or a toddler, but according to the chronological information Genesis provides, he is actually well into his teens! For he was thirteen when the miraculous birth of his brother Isaac was announced, and Isaac has now already been weaned.<sup>14</sup> It is no easy thing for a mother to carry her teenaged son on her shoulder on a trek into the desert or to leave him crying under a bush with certainty that he will not move away.

From the standpoint of modern historical scholarship, the answer to this problem is that we are dealing with diverse sources that may not know of each other and that were combined by an editor (redactor) who did not feel free to eliminate the inconsistencies by dropping or changing his sources.<sup>15</sup> A traditional answer to the same problem, though, appears in a midrash that tells us that Sarah had cast the evil eye on Ishmael (whose age is there given as twenty-seven), rendering him too ill to walk on his own.<sup>16</sup> The midrash may seem fanciful and intrusive, but without it, the smoothly unitary quality of the narrative vanishes, and we are left with differing narratives—even differing Abrahams.

The same sort of resolution of the text as we now have it into antecedent sources can be invoked to explain a host of other curious features of the Abraham narratives, especially texts that seem to be doublets. It explains, for example, why Abraham twice passes his wife off as his sister, why God twice (and under different names) makes a covenant with him, why explanations of the origin of Isaac’s name appear twice (once in relation to the father and once in relation to the mother), and why, for that matter, Hagar and Ishmael are twice expelled.<sup>17</sup> Contrary to what is sometimes asserted, the goal of these historical-critical explanations is not to atomize the text as an end in itself but, instead, to understand better the process by which the text over time came to assume the shape it now has. The identification of sources (or source criticism, as the activity is called) is in the service of reconstructing the history of the religion of ancient Israel. In the case at hand, the goal is to reconstruct the earliest surviving literary traditions about the figure of Abraham by putting the biblical



evidence we have into chronological order. When we do so, we see that the growth of the Abraham tradition is actually internal to the book of Genesis itself; it is not the creation of postbiblical Jewish (or Christian or Muslim) figures who were insufficiently attentive to the text of Genesis.

To many Jewish traditionalists (and not a few traditional Christians as well), historical-critical analysis of the Pentateuch is unacceptable on principle, since, by impugning the traditional doctrine that the author of those books is Moses, it undermines the divine origin of the five books and treats them merely as contingent products of human culture. This objection, on the one hand, is based on some confusions and misunderstandings, but, on the other, does raise an important point too little attended to by historical scholars.

The first confusion is the identification of Mosaic authorship with divine revelation. It implies that God could not speak through other individuals as well, in a more complicated historical process of revelation than the traditional image suggests. Yet the historical evidence, unknown until modern times and thus unavailable to those who formulated the doctrine of Moses's authorship, now points to the need to develop a model of revelation that can deal with the new challenge.<sup>18</sup> A second confusion is the assumption that the classic (i.e., premodern) Jewish tradition adhered without dissent to the doctrine of Mosaic authorship of the Torah, an assumption that cannot withstand scrutiny.<sup>19</sup> On both these points, traditionalists miss the mark.

The important question to which they do properly point, however, is this: How do we perceive God within, and receive instruction from, texts that we interpret only as artifacts of human culture? Within the paradigm of the historical-critical scholar of religious literature, there is no immediate need to face this issue. Indeed, biblical scholars who are not only secular themselves but utterly uninterested in normative theological questions have become a familiar presence in recent decades.<sup>20</sup> By treating only the historical dimension of the text, they imply, whether intentionally or not, that the larger, transhistorical meanings either do not exist or are not of central importance.

From the perspective of the classical Jewish tradition, however, holiness pervades all the authoritative texts, even those openly acknowledged to have human authors who were teaching, at one level, within

the limits of their historical culture. The elucidation of historical context—surely 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. An analogous point about the Christian and Muslim traditions can be easily made.

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. As we are about to see, one of the central claims of the biblical tradition about Abraham from the earliest we can probe it is that the very particular, historical people known as Israel carries nonetheless a transhistorical, indeed, everlasting identity and message.