

ABRAHAM
Encyclopedia of World History
By Reuven Firestone

According to the Hebrew Bible, New Testament and Qur'an as well as their respective interpretive literatures, Abraham is the first human to realize and act out the divine will. Although foundational figures appear in literatures such as the Gilgamesh Epic that are more ancient than the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), these have been forgotten to history and only rediscovered through archaeology and the deciphering of dead languages. Abraham first appears in the book of Genesis and serves as the original human to affirm monotheism and to act on that affirmation. The symbolic meaning and significance of Abraham differs among the three great monotheistic religious systems.

Abraham's symbolic importance is first established in Genesis, where in biblical religion he epitomizes obedience to the divine will. He obeys God's command to leave his ancestral home for a foreign land (Genesis 12), to circumcise himself and his male offspring as part of God's covenant (Gen. 17), exile his eldest son Ishmael (Gen. 21) and finally, in his greatest act of obedience, raise up Isaac, his only remaining child, as a burnt offering (Gen. 22). In return for his obedience, God promises through the divine covenant to provide Abraham with a multitude of offspring and a land in which his progeny will live.

In the Christian Bible (New Testament), Abraham's significance lies in his unwavering faith. In Romans 4, Abraham's merit is associated less with obedience to the divine will than in his faith in God's ultimate grace. It is his faith that provides him the merit for God's having chosen him for the covenant in the first place, and the covenant becomes one of faith rather than obedience. Members of the divine covenant are, therefore, only those who demonstrate faith in the saving power of Christ (Galatians 4:21-5:1).

In the Qur'an, Abraham signifies human submission (the meaning of the word, Islam), to God (2:127-128, 37:103). Abraham rebels against idolatry (37: 83-99), fulfills God's commands (2:124), raises up and purifies the foundations of God's "House" in Mecca (2:125-132), and establishes his offspring there (13:37). Although the ancient Israelites and Christians and Jews predate the emergence of Islamic monotheism, they did not remain true to the divine covenants (5:12-14) because they refused to submit themselves fully to God's absolute unity (9:30). Therefore, "Abraham was not a Jew nor a Christian, but was an early monotheist (*hanif*), one who submits to God's will (*muslim*), not an idolater" (3:67). Abraham's importance is so firmly established in the foundation narrative of the Hebrew Bible that he cannot be ignored in subsequent scriptures. Each scripture, however, imbues a special quality to the person of Abraham and the meaning of his character.

The nature of Abraham's leadership is also depicted with some variety among the three Scriptures. The Abraham of the Hebrew Bible is a literary character with foibles and weaknesses who struggles to realize his role of lonely monotheist in an uncertain and overwhelmingly idolatrous world. When he fears for his own life, he is willing to risk the well-being of Sarah (12:12-13, 20:1-11), and he seems on occasion even to question God's promise (17:15-18). By the time of the New Testament, however, religious figures have taken on a more consistently righteous character: "When hope seemed hopeless, his faith was such that he became 'father of many nations,' in agreement with the words which had been spoken to him: 'Thus shall your

descendants be'....And that is why Abraham's faith was 'counted to him for righteousness.' Those words were written, not for Abraham's sake alone, but for our sake too: it is to be 'counted' in the same way to us who have faith in the God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead..." (Romans 4:18-24). And by the period of the Qur'anic revelation, the biblical prophets (among whom was counted Abraham) were considered free from error. Thus Abraham, as well as David and Solomon and a host of other characters are free of all doubt and epitomize a somewhat different prophetic image in the Qur'an. The strength of Abraham's intellect proves the true unity of God (Q.6:74-79) and Abraham never doubts the divine will nor God's goodness (Q.37:83-113).

While Abraham's role in world history is, therefore, mythic founder of monotheism, he symbolizes three different and often conflicting narratives. The competing and polemical narratives transcend the person of Abraham and bring in the other members of his family, including Sarah, Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael as well as other scriptural characters and institutions. Not only does each narrative serve to justify a theological position, it also serves as a polemic to argue against the theological and institutional positions of the others. This, in turn has served to justify and fuel ongoing intellectual, economic, political and military competition and conflict between the three monotheistic religious systems in history.

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