

# Abraham, by Bruce Feiler

reviewed by [Wayne A. Holst](#) in the [May 3, 2003](#) issue

The daily accounts of the violence shattering the Holy Land make us wonder if Jerusalem's three religions will ever be able peacefully to coexist there. Bruce Feiler argues that Abraham, the first of the biblical patriarchs, can again become a defining, unifying and hopeful symbol for Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. Each of these religions has re-created Abraham in its own image to accomplish its own purposes. Now they must focus on him as their common father.

Feiler, the author of a recent bestseller, *Walking the Bible*--a blend of history, travel and religious and spiritual autobiography--uses a similar formula to paint this interfaith portrait. According to Feiler, 1,400 years after the rise of Muhammad, 2,000 years after the ascent of Christianity, 2,500 years after the origin of Judaism and 4,000 years after the birth of Abraham, the world's three major monotheistic religions are inching toward a posture of open--and equal--deliberation.

The book includes chapters on Abraham's birth and call; his offspring Ishmael and Isaac; the Jewish, Christian and Islamic peoples who have evolved from him; and, finally, his legacy. All we know about Abraham is found in the Bible, and science can neither prove nor disprove the biblical record. Fifty years ago pioneer biblical archaeologist William Albright declared, "There can be little doubt about the substantial historicity of the patriarchal narratives." Today most scholars agree that though Abraham may be a composite rather than an actual individual, he emerged from the Semitic tribes of the Fertile Crescent in the ancient Near East.

In telling his story, however, the Bible is concerned with much more than history. "It takes elements of history," Feiler says, "mixes them with elements of myth, and begins to mold them into a theme. . . . We must see [Abraham] not as something we can prove but as something we must believe, just as we see God. . . . God may have made humans in [God's] image; we humans made Abraham in our's. . . . [His] legends were not composed by God, but by God intoxicated people."

All three religions agree on Abraham's origins. God's call and Abraham's response, which confirmed him as the world's first monotheist, are the most universal

passages of the Abrahamic story. But the meaning of his life is interpreted differently in each of the traditions. Abraham is implicated in the conflict between his sons Ishmael and Isaac and thus becomes a man of terror as well as of peace.

Over a period of 4,000 years the story of Abraham developed from an oral into a written narrative. The result is a scriptural rendering both timeless and timely. At pivotal moments, Abraham is transformed from an ancient, shadowy figure into one perpetually alive. Unfortunately, textual codification brought with it the bane of fundamentalism.

Feiler concludes with a portrait of the modern Abrahamic legacy. There is not one Abraham, but a myriad of Abrahams. Feiler provides a road map for what has gone wrong among the religions and concludes that the idea that there can be one exclusive Abrahamic religion is dead. It is possible for each of the three traditions to draw Abraham to themselves but none can claim exclusivity or ascendancy. He urges members of the three religions to engage in serious interfaith dialogue--dialogue that deals honestly with faith differences and does not minimize them. As Feiler stands at the historic site of Abraham's tomb near tempestuous Hebron he recalls that the patriarch's sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him there in a symbolic gesture of solidarity (Gen. 25:7).

In spite of the current, seemingly intractable conflicts, Feiler is confident that the followers of Abraham can live together peacefully, because he knows the power of God at work in history. He needs Abraham as an anchor, he says. "This Abraham is not Jewish, Christian or Muslim. He is his own self. The father of us all."