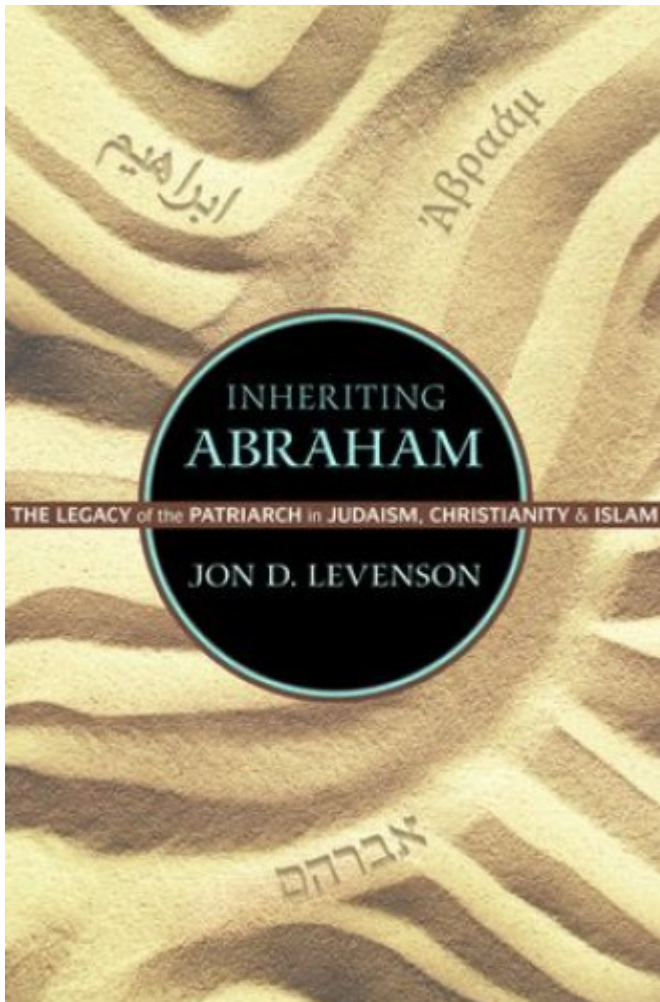


Inheriting Abraham, by Jon D. Levenson

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Inheriting Abraham

By Jon D. Levenson

Princeton University Press

As long ago as 1996, Jon Levenson wrote an important article, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism.” In that piece he reflected on the way in which the Hebrew Bible adjudicated the particularity of Israel and a reach beyond Israel to the

nations. In this book he takes up that same question in a different form, now with reference to the complex reality of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as coadherents in important ways to the biblical tradition, and specifically to the tradition of Abraham.

Although the book is of value for its shrewd probes of the Genesis narrative, Levenson has a very different interest in mind. His concern is the current notion that the three “religions of the book” are bound together by a common rootage in the figure of Abraham as “the father of faith.” That easy assumption was made popular by Bruce Feiler’s book *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*. The claim is also the subject of more serious theological reflection by a Roman Catholic scholar whom Levenson cites, Karl-Josef Kuschel.

Levenson shows that Kuschel is not evenhanded and that Christianity wins out. The same appeal to Abraham was featured, Levenson reports, by the Global Negotiation Project at Harvard. The target of Levenson’s book is the kind of easy, romantic ecumenism that assumes that common rootage is a basis for trust and solidarity across confessional lines. With tenacious urgency, Levenson shows that such an assumption is at best simplistic, and the implication of his book is that the assumption is a distortion and misconstrual of grave proportions.

Levenson’s counter to that assumption is the insistence that one can never understand Abraham simply as a figure in the book of Genesis, for these enigmatic narratives require interpretation. And as soon as one inquires about interpretation, it becomes clear, of course, that Abraham in interpretation comes embedded in a particular interpretive tradition, and that particular tradition is situated in a particular religious community with its own history and self-understanding. Thus the Abraham of Jewish tradition-and-community contrasts starkly with the Abraham of Christian tradition-and-community and the Abraham of Islamic tradition-and-community. It will not do, then, to disregard such resilient particularities. Even Kuschel observes that “Jews, Christians and Muslims are doggedly persisting in their exclusivisms.”

A subtopic for Levenson is a running polemic against the Christianly fashioned notion that Judaism is a tradition of particularism and that Christianity is an offer of inclusive universalism. Against that, Levenson insists that Christianity is as particularistic and exclusionary as Judaism and has no more claim to universalism than that faith does. His dip into the epistle to the Romans exhibits Paul as exclusionary of Jews.

This double insistence on the situated particularity of Abraham and the exclusionary particularism of Christianity runs throughout the book. Levenson considers the Abraham text in Genesis and the ways in which it has been variously treated in these interpretive communities. He recognizes, of course, that these particularities fly in the face of Enlightenment criticism, even if particular interpreters (including Levenson himself) attend to critical issues within the context of the tradition. Thus he concludes:

The appropriate goal, then, is, on the one hand, to be open to instruction from history and aware of the cultural embeddedness of the text about Abraham, and, on the other hand, to be equally open to the transcendent and enduring religious message the text conveys. . . . One of the central claims of the biblical tradition about Abraham from the earliest we can probe is that the very particular, historical people known as Israel carries nonetheless a transhistorical, indeed, everlasting identity and messages.

The book also includes a walk-through of the Abraham narrative. Attention is inescapably paid to Genesis 12:3 and the difficulty of translating it. Following the medieval French rabbi and Talmudist Rashi, Levenson inclines to what I would call a minimalist reading of that text:

Abraham . . . shall become a byword of blessing. . . . To use modern analogies, it is as if someone were to say, "May you make money like Rockefeller!" or "May you dunk like Michael Jordan!"

The accent of the narrative concerns the requirement of an heir and the difficulty of securing one. Levenson is a fine reader of texts, and one can learn much from this discussion. He is attentive to the "unconditional" quality of the Abrahamic covenant, from which it follows that Abraham is pre-Torah. Except for circumcision, he does not embrace specific Torah obedience, though he is a man of radical obedience to God in the crisis narrative of Genesis 22.

The centerpiece of the book is an extended reflection on Genesis 22, the Aqedah, or binding of Isaac. Here Levenson returns to his work on that narrative in his fine book *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*. He offers a rich reflection on Jewish commentary on the text and observes how in Christian interpretation Jesus supersedes Isaac.

Subsequent chapters take up two important questions. First, in Jewish tradition Abraham morphs into a philosopher in the company of Philo and Maimonides, so that he is a teacher of the one true eternal God. Second, Levenson considers the interface of Gospel and Torah, which in Christian tradition is transposed into faith and works. He resists the Christian suggestion that in Genesis 22 Abraham is credited for his faith, for in fact the narrative exhibits his practical obedience. With reference to Paul and James, Levenson probes the ways in which New Testament texts attest to variations on faith and works. And he shows in considerable detail how it is that the several traditions generate very different Abrahams.

The continuing polemic in the book concerning Christian claims and Christian practices of supersessionism merit attention. Of course, it is hazardous for anyone to interpret the tradition of another from the outside. Although Levenson is careful and alert, at many points his rendering of Christianity strikes me as odd and foreign. For example, he reads Paul in Romans on Jews and gentiles in an exclusionary way that may be true to the literalism of the text but does not resonate with my sense of the Christian tradition. Just as Levenson relies on Jewish tradition to read scripture, so Christians have relied on Christian tradition, and Levenson seems not to notice the traditions of interpretation that have been important to many of us. Nonetheless, his polemic requires Christians to reflect on and notice how certain claims have had a pernicious effect in the world of power.

Levenson's book will be acutely sobering for those who favor easy accommodation between traditions. Of course, it can be argued that it is possible to move on and not be entrapped forever in old formulations. And no one has been more effective than Levenson in calling Christian interpreters to a more honest self-awareness. The work that remains to be done in the wake of this book is more difficult than has generally been recognized.

I judge that Levenson wants all of the particularities of tradition and community to be taken seriously. Such honest self-declarations are not inherently problematic. They become problematic only when they reach toward exclusion and domination, a temptation readily manifest in every one of these traditions. To be sure, Christianity has had much more practice at exclusion and domination than has Judaism, but the option is there for every tradition. The ecumenical conversation to be continued is among particularities. That amounts, as Levenson intends, to a dethroning of Christian monopoly. We are in a very different place now in such exchanges, and Levenson has helped us to arrive at that new place.