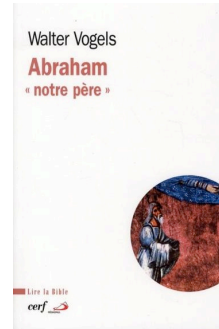


**Abraham “notre père”, by Walter Vogels**

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This simply and attractively written book provides a nice introduction to the figure and story of Abraham as it is found in Genesis and developed in the later Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. The book is aimed at a readership that knows little about the topic and presents only a small selection of the material available, as the author often reminds the reader. The author is primarily a biblical scholar and also a Roman Catholic priest.

Chapter 1, “Abraham dans la récit biblique,” presents the account of Abraham as a man of faith as found in Gen 12–25, noting the various inter-connections within the text and stressing God’s promise of blessing, posterity and land.

Chapter 2, “Abraham dans la tradition juive,” discusses Abraham as he appears in the later parts of the Hebrew Bible, the Apocrypha and other writings of late BCE and early CE centuries, but with relatively little use of the rabbinic midrash and later writings. The author sees this material as stressing the obedience of Abraham. Among the additions to the story noted are Abraham’s attack on his father’s idols, the claim that Abraham obeyed the Mosaic law before its time and a more active part for Isaac in the account of the Aqedah (the “binding” of Isaac, Gen 22). The challenge presented by the Holocaust to the traditional interpretation of the Aqedah is mentioned. The version in which Isaac actually dies, discussed by Shalom Spiegel in *The Last Trial*, is not mentioned.

Chapter 3, “Abraham dans la tradition chrétienne,” presents Christian views of Abraham as found in the New Testament, later apocryphal writings, and the Church Fathers. Much of the New Testament continues the earlier Jewish views of Abraham, but Paul breaks with the tradition by insisting that Abraham was justified by faith, not works. Later ideas make the promise to Abraham apply to Christians rather than Jews, claim that Abraham was saved by Christ, often make Abraham’s three visitors the Trinity, and see the sacrifice of Isaac (Aqedah in Jewish usage) as prefiguring that of Christ. If some Jewish writings present Abraham as an observant Jews before Moses, many Christian writings present him as a Christian before Christ.

Chapter 4, “Abraham dans la tradition musulmane,” first presents a biography of Abraham (Ibrahim in Muslim usage but the author uses the form “Abraham”) as it can be derived from the relevant passages in the Qur’an, which does not give a continuous account. The Qur’an stresses Abraham’s struggle with idolatry, mentioned in some later Jewish sources but not in the Bible, and states that his religion was Islam, to which he was returning. The hadith and other Muslim writings (the author relies mainly on al-Tabari’s *History*) develop the Qur’anic picture with details about his birth and his attack on idols, the expulsion of Ishmael (Isma’il) and rebuilding of the Ka’ba. The Qur’an does not say which was the son to be sacrificed. For a long time the tradition was divided between Isaac and Ishmael and the author gives two versions of the story, one featuring Isaac and the other Ishmael. (Although justified historically, I think most Muslims today would object to this “balanced” treatment.) The author makes no mention of the important “Stories of the Prophets” genre of literature (admittedly this does overlap considerably in contents with other genres). Comparably with the Jewish and Christian cases, Muslims see Abraham as the perfect Muslim before Muhammad.

Chapter 5, “Abraham dans l’art,” turns to a different and very significant sort of material. After a brief discussion of the significance of art and iconography, the author catalogues and briefly describes a large number of works of art, mainly paintings but also sculptures and bas-reliefs. Most of these are modern Western Christian works, but some earlier Christian work is included as is material from early synagogues and modern Jewish artists. A couple of modern films are also discussed. Unfortunately, there are no illustrations and the comments are hardly adequate without them, but at least the reader is made aware of these works and can research them if he or she chooses.

The author leaves until chapter 6, “Abraham et l’histoire,” his discussion of modern biblical criticism and its implications. Given the subject and nature of the book, I think this is the appropriate place for it. The author introduces Wellhausen’s documentary hypotheses (but only describes the “J” document!) but underlines the strength of memory in the pre-literary period of transmission. He then turns to archaeology and quotes W. F. Albright to the effect that the biblical accounts of the patriarchs accurately depict the culture of their time and thus have a historical basis. He summarizes the later objections to this view but does not accept them. He argues that if the stories had originated close to the time of the final editing of the biblical texts, as many critics conclude, the patriarchs would be pictured as obeying the Law

as found in the Bible, but they are not so depicted (he refers to R. W. L. Moberly in connection with this argument). He concludes, as did Albright, that Abraham was a historical figure although not all the stories about him are true. Finally, he divides the stories into three categories: those that may be accepted as historical, those that cannot be so accepted, and those that are at the level of faith and not susceptible of proof (e.g., that God called Abraham to leave his country). The last are the most important and speak to the faith of the reader. This chapter will undoubtedly seem to many overly sketchy, but there is hardly space for a longer treatment. It will also seem to many, and to me, as too conservative. I do not find the argument summarized above convincing. Those who edited the Biblical texts presumably accepted the biblical view that the Law came to Moses, and so could have produced stories of patriarchs who did not follow the Law. Also, according to the critics, the biblical Law reached its final form only with the final editing of the texts, so that not long before that there were presumably Israelites who did not know or did not accept this Law.

The last chapter, “Abraham dans la dialogue interreligieuse,” begins by discussing the Pope’s visit to the Holy Land in 2000 and his comments to various religious leaders (here I think is the one point where the author shows his Catholic colors). He then discusses ways in which Abraham as depicted in Genesis can be a model for contemporary dialogue, especially in his tolerance of people of other religious beliefs and his avoidance of violence. While interesting, this chapter does not deal with what the title suggests (at least to me). Apart from the Pope’s visit there is no mention of the contemporary movement for dialogue. Muslims would presumably object to the author’s choosing the Abraham of Genesis as the model for dialogue, which he does, apparently unreflectively, on the grounds that all other versions are based on it. For Muslims the Qur’an is the basic version, of which others are either corruptions or interpretations.

As mentioned above, this is an introductory treatment, valuable mainly for those who know little or nothing about the topic. I think that most readers of this review will find chapters 1 and, especially, 6 too sketchy for their needs but may profit from the other chapters. The author rightly limits the material he presents although I would like to have seen a little more modern material in chapters 2 to 4 (e.g., at least a passing reference to Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*). The author is clearly at his weakest in dealing with Islamic matters, not only in terms of knowledge (not surprising since he is a biblical scholar) but also in terms of the ability to appreciate Muslim con-

cerns. It is to be hoped that this book will find a translator since there are many in the English-speaking world, not necessarily scholars, who would profit from it.

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