

THE PÈRE MARQUETTE  
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ABRAHAM BETWEEN  
TORAH AND GOSPEL

JON D. LEVENSON

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## FOREWORD

The 2011 Père Marquette Lecture in Theology is the forty-second in a series commemorating the missions and explorations of Père Jacques Marquette, SJ (1637-75). This series of lectures was begun in 1969 under the auspices of the Marquette University Department of Theology.

The Joseph A. Auchter Family Endowment Fund has endowed the lecture series. Joseph Auchter (1894-1986), a native of Milwaukee, was a banking and paper industry executive and a long-time supporter of education. The fund was established by his children as a memorial to him.

### JON D. LEVENSON



Jon D. Levenson is the Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity School, where

he began teaching in 1988, having previously taught at the University of Chicago and at Wellesley College. In 1971, he received his bachelor's degree *summa cum laude*, from Harvard, where he majored in English. He then pursued doctoral work in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations in the same university, receiving his degree in 1975. In 2007, St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore awarded him an honorary doctorate of divinity.

Professor Levenson's work concentrates on the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, including its reinterpretations in the "rewritten Bible" of Second Temple Judaism and rabbinic midrash. He also teaches a seminar in the use of medieval Jewish commentaries for purposes of modern biblical exegesis and has a strong interest in the philosophical and theological issues involved in biblical studies, especially the relationship of pre-modern modes of interpretation to modern historical criticism. Much of Professor Levenson's attention centers on the relationship of Judaism and Christianity, both in antiquity and in modernity, and he has long been active in Jewish-Christian dialogue. In all his work, Jon Levenson's emphasis falls on the close reading of texts for purposes of literary and theological understanding. Within a stance of interreligious respect and openness to modern historical and comparative study, he seeks to elucidate the enduring religious meanings of

the foundational texts of Judaism, avoiding both the relegation of the authoritative documents to the past and an anachronistic projection of modern meanings into them.

Professor Levenson's books include *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (1985), *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (1988; second edition, 1994), *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (1993), *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (1993), and *Esther: A Commentary* (1997). His *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (2006) won a National Jewish Book Award and the Biblical Archaeology Society Publication Award in the category of Best Book Relating to the Hebrew Bible published in 2005 or 2006. His most recent book is *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (2008), which he wrote with Professor Kevin Madigan, also of Harvard Divinity School. Professor Levenson is currently at work on a study of the appropriation of Abraham into Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and a critique of the notion of an Abrahamic family of religions.

Robert M. Doran, SJ



# ABRAHAM BETWEEN TORAH AND GOSPEL

“La figure d’Abraham est plutôt source  
de désaccord que d’harmonie.”

Rémi Brague<sup>1</sup>

JON D. LEVENSON

## I

**T**he figure of Abraham is often said to lie at the foundation of three great religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As the story in the Hebrew Bible would have it, the Jewish people descends, in fact, from Abraham, through his son Isaac. Isaac was born to a mother who was ninety years old through a miracle by which God fulfilled his promise to the future patriarch and his infertile wife, Sarah (Gen 17:15–19; 21:1–8). It is thus not surprising that the patriarch has long been known in Jewish tradition as *’Avraham ’Avinu*, “Our Father Abraham.” The nature of the paternity in question is more complicated than modern

1 “Pour en finir avec trois monothéismes,” *Communio* 33:5-6 (Sept.-Dec. 2007): 63.

biological models can accommodate, however, for in traditional usage converts to Judaism, too, become descendants of Abraham; he becomes their Jewish father – again by a kind of miracle. In fact, the Talmud memorably terms Abraham “the first of the converts” (*b. Chag. 3a*), and he is seen to one degree or another as the model that all his descendants, natural-born or converted, should emulate.

In the case of Christianity, we find a similar pattern. As early as the New Testament itself, we find the apostle Paul writing that “those who believe are the descendants of Abraham” (Gal 3:7).<sup>2</sup> With this, Paul, like other early Christians authors, awards the gentile Christian the status of Abrahamic descent but also denies that coveted status to the non-believer, whatever his or her birth. This, needless to say, poses problems for Jews who have retained their religion and not subscribed to the gospel. Paul makes the note of exclusion explicit when he explains, “This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants” (Rom 9:8). In the same letter, though, the apostle to the gentiles backtracks a bit, and, pointing out that “I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham,” emphatically insists that “God has not rejected his people” (Rom

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2 Unless otherwise noted, the translations from the New Testament come from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

11:1–2). However exegetes may wish to sort out the ambivalence about the Jews that bedeviled Paul, his memorable term for Abraham, “the father of all who believe” (Rom 4:11),<sup>3</sup> stands in obvious continuity with the Jewish expression, *’Avraham ’Avinu*, “Our Father Abraham.”

In the case of Islam, the matter is more complicated. One reason is that whereas Jews and Christians hold the book of Genesis in common, neither that book nor any other biblical texts are scripture for Muslims. And though the Muslim scripture, the Qur’an, has dozens of references to Abraham (*’Ibrahim* in Arabic), many of the biblical texts about the figure in Genesis are missing there and many Qur’anic texts about him appear that have no parallel in Genesis. This alone renders the claim that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all Abrahamic more problematic than many who make it recognize and leads me to adapt George Bernard Shaw’s quip, “England and America are two countries separated by a common language.”<sup>4</sup> Judaism and Christianity, I would say, are two religions separated by a common Abraham, whereas the Muslim *’Ibrahim* is in important ways a very different figure. Or, to state

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3 I have changed the NRSV “ancestor” to “father” the better to reflect the Greek *patera* and the symmetry with the Hebrew, “Our Father Abraham.”

4 [http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/George\\_Bernard\\_Shaw](http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/George_Bernard_Shaw) (consulted October 18, 2009).

the point in other terms, Jews and Christians have often disagreed sharply over their interpretation of the Abrahamic narratives, as we are about to see, but Muslims disagree with both of them by putting forth not different interpretations of the same narratives but different narratives.

Another key difference between the biblical and the Qur'anic Abrahams is that in Genesis God makes promises and sets forth obligations that involve the patriarch's descendants. In Genesis 17, this relationship is described as "an everlasting covenant" and one to which the descendants of only one of Abraham's sons falls heir. Although Ishmael, Abraham's son by his wife Sarah's Egyptian slave, will become "a great nation," the covenant is with Isaac only, Sarah's son (vv 19–21).<sup>5</sup> The Qur'an, however, explicitly sets aside this key issue of Abraham's posterity. "I am making you a spiritual exemplar to mankind," God tells Abraham. "Abraham said: 'And what about my posterity?' He replied: 'My covenant does not apply

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5 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Hebrew Bible (except for those appearing in New Testament citations) are taken from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), reproduced in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). The translation will be abbreviated as NJPS (for New Jewish Publication Society version).

to evil-doers” (2:124).<sup>6</sup> Rather than the father of the promised and covenanted people, saints and sinners alike, the Qur’anic Abraham is a link in the chain of prophets that begins with Adam and culminates with Muhammad, “the seal of the Prophets” (33:40). Indeed, the Qur’an is explicit that “the people who are worthiest of Abraham are those who followed him, together with this Prophet and the believers” (3:68). “This Prophet” is, of course, Muhammad himself. Here, Abraham is not the father of the Jews or Christians; he is a forerunner of Muhammad and, like Muhammad, a paradigm for Muslims to imitate.

Since the questions that will occupy us this afternoon center on biblical rather than Qur’anic texts and on the implications of being a descendant of Abraham, the ensuing discussion will concentrate primarily Jewish and Christian sources, though readily acknowledging that some analogues to the debate at hand can be found in Islam.

## II

A major change in the conception of Abraham took place in Judaism late in the Second Temple period: Abraham the father of the Jewish people became Abraham the founder, or rediscoverer, of belief in the one, true God. Whereas the chapters about him

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6 Qur’anic translations are taken from Majid Fakhry, *An Interpretation of the Qur’an* (Washington Square, N.Y.: New York University Press, 2000).

in Genesis focus on God's promise of progeny, land, and blessing and give no indication that Abraham had any teaching at all, by some point in the second century BCE, he has become an active adversary of idolatry and the materialist presuppositions upon which it rests. Abraham has, in a word, become a philosopher, and with that came the notion that his vocation is of great import even to those who are not his posterity. The entire world needs to acknowledge and obey its divine creator and master, it was now taught, and, in fact, now all the world can join the family whom the creator has established to give him the testimony and service that are his due. The philosopher testifies to a higher truth and opens a portal by which outsiders can enter and dwell within it.

But what, exactly, do they accept when they enter? The Jewish philosopher Philo, living in Alexandria in the first half of the first century CE, writes that Abraham's great insight was to see that there was "a charioteer and pilot presiding over the world" (*On Abraham* 70).<sup>7</sup> This leaves the question of how one is to enter into relationship with that charioteer and pilot troublingly vague. The same can be said for a famous rabbinic legend that Abraham established an inn in which he would ask his guests to make the benediction, "Blessed be the Everlasting God / God of the World of whose bounty we have eaten" (*Gen*

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7 *Philo* (LCL 289; trans. F.H. Colson: Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1935), VI: 41.

*Rab* 54:6). Compared to the rich texture of the traditional Jewish or Christian life, these affirmations, however essential they may be, seem too thin to support a whole identity, too frail a skeleton on which to build a religious community or to sustain and nourish a life-changing insight. It is therefore not surprising to find that rabbinic tradition, too, could sometimes see in Abraham and Sarah missionaries converting men and women, respectively, to Judaism, and not simply to an abstract and nondescript monotheism. It will similarly not be surprising to see, as we soon shall, that Christianity found in Abraham a foreshadowing of the theological basis for the Christian life or that Islam, as we have seen, conceived of itself as the reestablishment of the faith of Abraham of which the Jews and Christians had lost sight. In sum, although both Christianity and Islam came to see themselves as the restoration of the pure Abrahamic religion after a long interruption, neither they nor Judaism represents the pattern of religious practice of the figure in Genesis.

What all this points to is one of the most peculiar aspects of Abraham in all three Abrahamic religions. On the one hand, all of them revere the man and find him paradigmatic for their own communities, each in its own way. On the other hand, the central action of God in each set of scriptures lies in a much later period. In Judaism, it lies with God's gift of the Torah on Mount Sinai in the time of Moses. In

Christianity, the central event of all human history lies with Jesus, with his teaching to some degree but even more with his redemptive death and his subsequent resurrection and ascension to his divine father (what New Testament scholars sometimes call “the Christ event”). In Islam, it lies with God’s dictation of the Qur’an, his highest and final revelation and the fullest and truest guide for human beings, to Muhammad through the medium of the angel Gabriel. The peculiar thing for Judaism and Christianity is this: Although on the plain sense of Genesis Abraham lives a life without the benefit of Sinaitic revelation or the Christ event, neither of these two traditions belittles him for it or sees him as a benighted pagan devoid of access to the highest truth, righteousness, or salvation. All to the contrary, both see him at least foreshadowing that truth in a major way and sometimes living it in all its rich detail.

### III

We have said that in Genesis Abraham has no teaching; he is a father and not a founder like the Buddha or Jesus or Muhammad. That he, like them, nonetheless becomes a paradigm to be imitated is therefore all the more unusual and interesting. One factor that facilitated the transition is the presence of a very few verses in the Abraham narrative of Genesis that allude to issues of normative behavior, thus tying the patriarch to the behavior expected of the family he

engenders. Our first example is from the monologue of God in which he gives his reason for sharing the anticipated fate of Sodom:

<sup>17</sup>Now the LORD had said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, <sup>18</sup>since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him? <sup>19</sup>For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is just and right, in order that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him." (Gen 18:17–19)

Here, the LORD seems to regard Abraham as a prophet, a role that he is explicitly said to hold only in Gen 20:7, and, as in that verse, his prophetic office seems to focus on intercession in the face of a calamity induced by the righteous God. In this passage, though, he cannot discharge his prophetic duty without becoming privy to God's counsel. That is what one should expect of prophets.<sup>8</sup> What is distinctive here is the correlation of Abraham's prophetic role with the promise that starts him on his journey, that he is to father a great and numerous nation and become a byword or medium of blessing for all the nations of the earth (Gen 12:1–3). The implication is clear: His destiny as father and, indeed, the originating promise of the whole narrative about him are intrinsically tied to the prophetic

8 Compare Amos 3:1–8, especially v 7.

role he and the promised nation are to exercise, a role centered on "doing what is just and right." The word translated "I have singled him out" (*yeda'tiv*) probably denotes covenant-making here,<sup>9</sup> but in this case it adds a note about God's rationale for entering into covenant with Abraham that we do not hear in the extensive covenantal narratives in Genesis 15 and 17. Whether this means that Gen 18:17–19 is a later insertion made under the transformation of Father Abraham into a religious paradigm in Second Temple Judaism, as some argue,<sup>10</sup> is immaterial to the point at hand. Either way, on at least this one point, the canonical text now authorizes a normative connection between the father's conduct and that expected of his descendants.

Another example appears in an oracle that Isaac receives after Abraham's death:

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9 H. B. Huffmon, "The Treaty Background of Hebrew Yada," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 181 (1966): 31 and H. B. Huffmon and S. B. Parker, "A Further Note on the Treaty Background of Hebrew Yada," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 184 (1966): 36-38.

10 Beate Ego, "Abraham als Urbild der Toratreue Israels: Traditionsgeschichtliche Überlegungen zu einem Aspekt des biblischen Abrahambildes," in *Bund und Tora* (ed. F. Avemarie and H. Lichtenberg; Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Alten und Neuen Testament 92; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1996), 25-40, here p. 33.

<sup>2</sup>The LORD had appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land which I point out to you. <sup>3</sup>Reside in the land, and I will be with you and bless you; I will assign all these lands to you and to your heirs, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. <sup>4</sup>I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven, and give to your descendants all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your offspring – <sup>5</sup>inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings.” (Gen 26:2–5)

This passage, too, is replete with echoes of the Abrahamic narrative that comes to an end in the previous chapter. The instruction to Isaac not to go down to Egypt in a time of famine (as 26:1 specifies) recalls Abraham’s less than ideally successful journey there in Gen 12:10–20. That God should promise the land, innumerable progeny, and blessing to the chosen son, as he had to the faithful father beforehand, stands to reason. What is curious, and highly revealing of future developments in the conception of Abraham, is the reason that these promises remain valid, given in the last verse (Gen 26:5) – that Abraham had been obedient to various categories of divine norms. The clause “inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me” unmistakably echoes the conclusion of the second angelic

address at the Aqedah (the Binding of Isaac), “inasmuch as you have obeyed Me” (Gen 22:18)<sup>11</sup> and underscores the point of that address, that Abraham’s obedience in his great test underlies those promises and Israel’s inheritance of them ever after. In fact, Gen 26:5 is arguably the only direct echo of Genesis 22 in the entire Hebrew Bible.

But what are we to make of the report in the same verse that Abraham kept the LORD’s “charge, commandments, laws, and teachings”? If we understand the report only within the context of Genesis itself, we can with some difficulty see it as describing Abraham’s obedience to the directives God gives him there, beginning with the command to “go forth” from his father’s house, continuing through the injunctions about circumcision and the expulsion of Ishmael, for example, and culminating in the Binding of Isaac.<sup>12</sup> The difficulty is that the four terms used are rather specialized and in the aggregate suggest various categories of law rather than the situational instructions given to a character in a story. In fact, the closest parallel to the list in Gen 26:5 appears in Deuteronomy, the biblical book that insists most centrally on the importance of keeping the LORD’s norms: “Love, therefore, the LORD your God, and al-

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11 I have departed from the NJPS rendering of Gen 22:18 in order to bring out the fact that the Hebrew wording is almost identical to that of Gen 26:5.

12 Gen 12:1; 17:9–14, 23–27; 21:12; 22:1–19.

ways keep His charge, His laws, His rules, and His commandments" (Deut 11:1). If we compare these two lists of four items, we find that three appear in common, with only "rules" (*mishpatav*) in Deut 11:1 or "teachings" (*torotav*) in Gen 26:5 preventing a perfect match.<sup>13</sup> The implication of this is that Gen 26:5 has sought to present Abraham as one who is meticulously observant of Sinaitic revelation, even though Moses and the Torah given through him have yet to be.

The depiction of Abraham as a Torah-observant Jew is one that will reverberate in Jewish biblical interpretation through the centuries, although, as we shall see, not without dissent. One question comes immediately to mind: How could the patriarch have observed norms that were not yet revealed in his lifetime? Here, a variety of answers was proposed. For

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13 I have handled the subject of Abraham's observance in Jon D. Levenson, "The Conversion of Abraham to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 3-40, and draw from it in this discussion. On this particular point, see pp. 18-21. Especially helpful to me have been Ego, "Abraham als Urbild," and Joseph P. Schultz, "Two Views of the Patriarchs: Noahides and pre-Sinai Israelites," in *Texts and Responses: Studies Presented to Nahum M. Glatzer on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday by His Students* (ed. Michael A. Fishbane and Paul R. Flohr; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 43-59.

the Book of Jubilees, a Jewish source from the middle of the second century BCE that is not in the Jewish canon, the answer is that many of those norms were known before the events of Sinai, so that figures in Genesis could adhere to practices unknown in the form of that book that we have. The feast of Shavu'ot (also known as Weeks, First Fruits, and Pentecost), for example, has its origin, according to Jubilees, in the time of Noah, had to be revived by Abraham, and was observed by Isaac and Jacob afterward – even though the first mention of it in the Torah as we have it appears in a law given to Moses generations later.<sup>14</sup> And just how was Abraham able to revive long-neglected practices? Here, Jubilees tells us that after the Angel of the Presence (the narrator of the book) had taught him Hebrew, which had been forgotten, Abraham took his father's books and began studying them.<sup>15</sup> In other words, just as in Jubilees Abraham revived the true worship of the one God in an age of idolatry, so did he revive the faithful observance of God's law in an age of widespread

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14 Jub 6:17–19; Exod 23:16.

15 Jub 12:25–27. See, more generally, Gary A. Anderson, "The Status of the Torah before Sinai: The Retelling of the Bible in Jubilees and the Damascus Covenant," in *Dead Sea Discoveries* 1 (1994): 1–29; Ego, "Abraham als Urbild"; and Bradley C. Gregory, "Abraham as the Jewish Ideal: Exegetical Traditions in Sirach 44:19–21," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70 (2008): 66–81, especially pp. 69–72.

deviant or non-existent practice. He was devoted to the book of God's law, even though in Genesis no such book is so much as mentioned. He was a man of Torah even before the Torah was given.<sup>16</sup>

Philo had a different view of how it was possible to keep the Torah before it was revealed:

In these men [that is, all the worthy figures of Genesis] we have laws endowed with life and reason, and Moses extolled them for two reasons. First he wished to shew that the enacted ordinances are not inconsistent with nature; and secondly that those who wish to live in accordance with the laws as they stand have no difficult task, seeing that the first generations before any at all of the particular statutes was set in writing followed the unwritten law with perfect ease, so that one might properly say that the enacted laws are nothing else than memorials of the life of the ancients, preserving to a later generation their actual words and deeds. For they were not scholars or pupils of others, nor did they learn under teachers what was right to say or do: they listened to no voice or instruction but their own: they gladly accepted conformity with nature, holding that nature itself was, as indeed it is, the most venerable of statutes, and thus their whole life was one of happy obedience to law. (*On Abraham* 5–6)

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16 For a list of passages in Jewish pseudepigrapha in which the Patriarchs observe the Torah, see Schultz, "Two Views," 45.

Apparently referring to Gen 26:5, Philo concludes his treatise on Abraham with these words:

... to these praises of the Sage, so many and so great, Moses adds this crowning saying, "that this man did the divine law and the divine commands." He did them, not taught by written words, but unwritten nature gave him the zeal to follow where wholesome and untainted impulse led him ... Such was the life of the first, the founder of the nation, one who obeyed the law, some will say, but rather, as our discourse has shown, himself a law and an unwritten statute. (*On Abraham* 275–276)<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the Abraham of Jubilees, then, Philo's did not learn the Torah from a book and, if he had, the philosopher implies, Judaism would have been the lesser for it. For since no book is accessible to everyone, a law dependent on a book fails to be universal and cannot mediate the will of the creator and governor of the universe. What is universal, though, is nature (Greek, *physis*), and it was from nature that Abraham learned the laws of God, as Philo sees it. Anyone who would declare the Jews parochial because of their particular observances (for example, the dietary laws or the laws governing circumcision or the Sabbath) need only consider that the first father of the Jewish people was able to infer those very practices from the "unwritten law," the law of nature, to which

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17 The translations from *On Abraham* are taken from *Philo*, Volume VI, pp. 7, 133, 135.

all peoples are accountable. What is more, Abraham became “a law and an unwritten statute” himself, not only an exemplification but also a veritable personification of the Torah. The unwritten law to which Philo refers, it must be noted, is not the same as the Oral Torah so central to Talmudic tradition, in which it appears as the binary opposite of the Written Torah. For the Oral Torah is learned from teachers and passed on from master to disciple over the generations, whereas for Philo the heroes of Genesis “were not scholars or pupils of others, nor did they learn under teachers what was right to say or do” but rather regarded “nature itself [as] the most venerable of statutes.”<sup>18</sup> That we of the later generations are, alas, unable to infer statutes from nature speaks to the necessity of the “enacted laws” of Moses’ book. Those laws themselves, however, are but instructions in book form of how to live lives like those of the pre-Mosaic heroes, those who were veritable “laws endowed with life and reason.” They were the Mosaic ideal before Moses. They were the ideal that Moses sought to make available to the world.

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18 Elsewhere, however, Philo does see Abraham as learning from a teacher and thus inferior to Isaac, who, as Ellen Birnbaum puts it, “acquires his self-taught knowledge from God.” See her book, *The Place of Judaism in Philo’s Thought* (Brown Judaic Series 290; Studia Philonica Monographs 2; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1996), 56–57. I thank Dr. Birnbaum for her expert advice on matters Philonic.

The rabbis of the Talmudic period continue this Second Temple tradition of the Torah-observant Abraham. In fact, they sometimes enhance it by stressing the comprehensiveness of his observance. The best-known example comes from a passage appended to a Mishnaic tractate.<sup>19</sup> The immediate context is the drawbacks of various occupations that a man might teach his son:

Rabbi Nehorai says: I would lay aside all the occupations in the world and teach my son nothing but Torah, for a man enjoys its reward in this world but its principal remains for the World-to-Come. But all the other occupations are not so. When a man falls into illness, old age, or adversity, and cannot engage in his work, what happens? He dies of hunger. But the Torah is not so. Rather, it

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19 For reasons to doubt that the passage is original to the Mishnah, see J. N. Epstein, *Introduction to the Mishnaic Text* (Heb.; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2000), 2:977. That there were apparently two ancient rabbis named Nehorai, one Tannaitic (that is, early) and one Amoraic (later) makes it difficult to know which one is associated with the passage about Abraham here, even if one assumes that Rabbi Nehorai is still the speaker. See Ch. Albeck, *Introduction to the Talmud, Babli and Yerushalmi* (Heb.; Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1969), 188. I have been much helped on these matters by a seminar paper by Yonatan Miller, "Abraham's Observance of the Law: Reconsidering the Rabbinic Evidence" (December 9, 2010) and thank Mr. Miller for his assistance.

protects him from all evil in his youth and grants him a future and a hope in his old age ... And thus it says about Our Father Abraham (peace be unto him!): "Abraham was now old ... and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things" (Gen 24:1). We find that Our Father Abraham practiced the whole Torah in its entirety before it had been given, as it is said, "inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings" (Gen 26:5). (*m. Qidd.* 4:14)

There are two words on which Rabbi Nehorai's midrash turns, "old" and "all." Abraham is the first man in the Bible to be described as "old,"<sup>20</sup> but he seems to suffer none of the degradations of old age, "dying at a good ripe age, old and contented" (Gen 25:8). He even takes a new wife, Keturah, with whom this extraordinarily agile senior begets another six sons.<sup>21</sup> With its report that "Abraham was now old ... and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things," Gen 24:1 recapitulates the first key word of the midrash and introduces the second, "all." Surely, this midrash seems to reason, a man who had no knowledge of Torah could not have been blessed in *all* things! (Another midrash reasons the same way about Abraham's

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20 Note the Talmudic statement that "until Abraham there was no old age" (*b. Metz.* 87a).

21 He is first described as "old" in Gen 18:11, in which Sarah is the first woman so described. Abraham's death notice is given in Gen 25:8, and his new family with Keturah is reported in Gen 25:1–2.

lack of a daughter and, in one variant, concludes that *bakkol*, Hebrew for “in all things,” was actually his daughter’s name).<sup>22</sup> Putting Abraham’s vigorous old age together with the report of his complete blessedness, as Gen 24:1, in fact, does, we come to the position that it was Abraham’s observance of Torah that brought about his exemplary golden years. And it was not just that he observed some commandments and experienced some blessing. Rather, to have been blessed “in all things” he must have observed “the whole (*kol*) Torah in its entirety (*kullah*).” Indeed, the midrash purports to find that in the very text of the Torah, which lists several categories of commandments that the patriarch observed: “Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings” (Gen 26:5). So interpreted, the plain sense wording of the biblical verse confirms the point of Rabbi Nehorai’s midrash – and Abraham’s maximal observance.

Rabbinic literature therefore offers more than a few examples of the patriarch’s observance of norms that would be revealed only later and that, in some instances, depend on historical events that have not taken place in his lifetime (thus pointing, incidentally, to the profound difference between the rabbinic and modern Western conceptions of historicity and chronology). We find him, for example, making unleavened bread for Passover, being appointed a

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22 *b. B. Bat.* 16b.

priest, instituting and reciting the morning prayers, and practicing the laws of ritual purity.<sup>23</sup> The question of how literally the rabbis believed this – like the question of how vibrant the very concept of literal interpretation was for them – is a matter of dispute. It can be argued that their goal in producing or transmitting such anachronisms was to give the practices in question what the historian of religion Mircea Eliade called “the prestige of origins.”<sup>24</sup> In that case, the goal is not so much to make a point about Abraham; it is to make a point about the importance and preciousness of the practices of the Torah by associating them with the ancient and revered first father of the Jewish people. Something similar may already have happened in Genesis itself, where God enjoins the practice of circumcision on Abraham and his offspring (chapter 17). In no other book of the Hebrew Bible, incidentally, is circumcision associated with him. If so, then rabbinic tradition, like Jubilees beforehand, can be seen as continuing a reconceptualization of Abraham as Torah-observant that began in Genesis itself.

How Abraham came into his knowledge of Torah is not a matter of great concern to the rabbis, so far

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23 For example, *Deut Rab* 1:25; *b. Ned.* 32b; *b. Metz.* 87a.

24 See Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 21-38.

as we can tell. One passage, however, does propose an answer:

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: No father taught him, nor did he have a teacher (*rav*). From where did he learn the Torah? Actually, the Holy One (blessed be He!) appointed his two kidneys to be like two teachers (*rabbanim*), and these would gush forth and teach him wisdom, as it is written, “I bless the LORD who has guided me; / my kidneys admonish me at night” (Ps 16:7). (*Gen Rab* 61:1)<sup>25</sup>

In this midrash, Abraham did not receive his knowledge of Torah from a book, as in Jubilees, nor from a teacher/rabbi of the previous generation, as the rabbis themselves usually claimed to receive it. Instead, he acquired it from God, who implanted it like a microchip in his kidneys (often the seat of thinking in ancient Israel), which would release their precious gift at night. As Philo had written about a century earlier, Abraham “listened to no voice or instruction but [his] own” – except that in Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s view Abraham’s own instruction flows from God’s implanting within him the equivalent of two rabbinic teachers and not from any ability to decode nature on his own.

And so we have come full circle. The Second Temple notion that Abraham kept the whole Torah, or

<sup>25</sup> I have rendered the word “kidneys,” in conformity with what I take to be Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s understanding. The passage is a midrash on Ps 1:2b.

major parts of it, before it was revealed to Israel at Sinai may possibly have brought about the insertion of the atypical verse that gives four terms for what he observed (Gen 26:5), and that verse came to provide a textual basis for the new theology of Abraham the man of Torah. This maximalist interpretation of the set of four terms was given its best-known formulation by Rashi, the great biblical and Talmudic commentator, who lived in northern France in the eleventh century CE:

Inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me

when I tested him.

*And kept My charge:*

The decrees for prevention of wrongdoing regarding the warnings which are in the Torah, such as incest of second degree, and rabbinical prohibitions regarding Sabbath observance.

*My commandments,*

Those matters which even if they were not written, would be worthy of being taken as commandments, such as the prohibition on robbery and bloodshed.

*My laws,*

Matters that the Evil Inclination seeks to refute, such as the prohibition on eating swine's flesh

and on the wearing of fabrics of mixed wool and linen, for which there is no reason, but (they are simply) the decree of the King and His law for His servants.

*And My teachings.*

This includes the Oral Torah, the laws (given) to Moses on Sinai.

(Rashi on Gen 26:5b)

Rashi begins with a point that would seem close to incontestable, that the clause “inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me” refers to the Aqedah where, as we have seen, essentially the identical language appears (Gen 22:18). He goes on, however, to find every category of Jewish law in the list – those that protect other elements of law (“charge”), those that can be rationally defended (“commandments”), those that seem irrational and pointless in themselves but must be observed as acts of obedience to the divine sovereign (“laws”), and even those that have no basis in the Written Torah but stand on the authority of rabbinic tradition alone (“teachings,” literally, “Torahs,” whose plural form is thus taken to indicate the presence of both the Written and the Oral Torahs). Abraham has become a man of Torah in all its senses.

#### IV

When we move from this Jewish trajectory to early Christianity, we find that although many of the

evocations of Abraham in the early church have no resonance at all with this particular tradition of the Torah-observant patriarch, they do reflect well other currents in the Jewish appropriation of Abraham. In the Letter to the Hebrews, for example, Abraham appears as a paradigmatic man of faith, obeying God's instructions when "he set out, not knowing where he was going," and by dint of that same faith enduring in that land, trusting in providence when the promise of progeny seemed absurd, and offering up Isaac in the sure conviction "that God is able even to raise someone from the dead" (Heb 11:8–12, 17–19). In other New Testament texts, to say that someone is with Abraham is the equivalent of saying he or she is in a blessed state after death.<sup>26</sup> Interpretations of this sort cannot be said to fall outside the orbit of Jewish thinking at the time. This is not at all surprising, since the Church retained the Hebrew Bible (to be reclassified as an "Old Testament" only late in its second century) as scripture and thus left itself open to the messages of that collection, quite apart from the distinctive Christian theology that was developing alongside it and increasingly adapting it.

In other instances, however, the gospel moves in a direction that, while not necessarily unparalleled in Jewish sources, markedly contradicts the general direction of Jewish theology in the period. One thinks, for example, of words attributed to John the Baptiz-

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26 For example, e.g., Luke 13:28–29 and 16:19–31.

er when some Pharisees and Sadducees (members of two contemporary Jewish sects), heeding his call for repentance, sought baptism at his hand:

<sup>7</sup>“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup>Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup>Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”  
(Matt 3:7–10//Luke 3:7–10)

The notion that descent from Abraham protects one from divine judgment is not general in ancient Judaism, although it is not hard to imagine that there were Jews who believed it. What is noteworthy here, however, is the extreme discounting of Abrahamic paternity and the correlative emphasis on good works in determining an individual’s fate. Although the passage is less than ideally clear, and it is hard to know how literally its supercharged rhetoric is to be taken, it seems to say this: Only “good fruit” enables escape from the impending day of wrath and the hellfire into which the unworthy shall be thrown. The election of Abraham is irrelevant.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Compare the passage from the Qur’an 2:124, quoted above.

A similar point, but with even more of rhetorical heat, appears in a dispute of Jesus with “the Jews” in John that is unparalleled in the other gospels:

<sup>39</sup>They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did,<sup>40</sup>but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did.<sup>41</sup>You are indeed doing what your father does.” They said to him, “We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.”<sup>42</sup>Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me.<sup>43</sup>Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word.<sup>44</sup>You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8:39–44)

Here, the key thing about Abraham is not whom he fathered but what he did. To the Jews’ claim that their father is Abraham, Jesus points to the discrepancy between their deeds and his. What precisely is meant by “what Abraham did” (*ta erga tou Abramou*, literally, “the works of Abraham,” v 39) is unclear, but the message is patent: “The Jews” ought to be doing the same thing. Indeed, the underlying notion is

that paternity is strictly a matter of behavior, so that those who act like “the Jews” cannot be of Abrahamic or divine descent but must instead be – and this charge has resonated through the centuries, sometimes with murderous consequences – the offspring of the devil.<sup>28</sup> In this passage, only those who heed Jesus and love him can have a divine paternity. The others fall outside the Abrahamic community and the grace of God alike.

## V

John’s term “the works of Abraham” could not be farther from the characteristic use of Abraham of the apostle Paul, whose letters predate all the gospels, at least in their current form. For, especially in his relatively early Letter to the Galatians, Paul was engaged in a fierce dispute with Christians who believed that being faithful to Jesus meant practicing Jesus’ own religion, which was, of course, some variety of Judaism and certainly entailed the observance of Jewish law – “the works of the law,” in Paul’s parlance.<sup>29</sup> In arguing the contrary position, that Christian identity (the vocabulary is admittedly anachronistic) does not require gentiles to practice the full comple-

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28 See Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943).

29 For example, Gal 2:16.

ment of Mosaic commandments, Paul faced formidable opposition.<sup>30</sup> Among his opponents were Jesus' brother James, and his key disciple Peter, both of whom, needless to say, knew Jesus well in the flesh. Paul, by contrast, never knew Jesus before the latter's death, and, by his own admission, in the early days of the new community he "was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it" (Gal 1:13). So, whereas James and Peter could base their apostolate on Jesus' own words and deeds, Paul based his on a claim that, as he put it, "God ... was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles" (v 15). What irritated Paul's opponents in Galatia (now in central Turkey) was his bold claim that Jewish law did not to any degree obligate the gentiles who came into the new community that was focused on Jesus. That claim seemed outrageous. For it contradicted not only the implications of Jesus' own practice but the Torah itself, most

30 The term "law-free" is usually invoked to describe Paul's gospel. Although it is conventional and useful to some degree, it is also seriously misleading. See Paula Fredriksen, "Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel," *NTS* 56 (2010): 232-52, especially p. 252: "The insistence that none other than the God of Israel be worshiped ultimately came from the first table of the Law. It was defining; it was non-negotiable; it was uniquely Jewish. For all of the reasons reviewed above, then, but most especially this one, the last way we should describe Paul's gospel to the Gentiles is to say that it was 'Law-free.'"

of which, after all, is centered on nothing other than the LORD'S revelation to Israel at Sinai.

It is precisely here that Paul found Abraham useful. For by the Torah's own report, Abraham lived several generations before Moses and the revelation at Sinai yet nonetheless found favor with God and had become a revered figure in Judaism. If Abraham did not carry out "the works of the law," then why would anyone think that those who become his descendants should do so? Indeed, as Paul read Genesis, Abraham showed an alternative – and better – way to win favor with God:

<sup>6</sup>Just as Abraham "had faith in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" [Gen 15:6],<sup>7</sup>so, you see, those who have faith are the descendants of Abraham.<sup>8</sup> And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you."<sup>9</sup> For this reason, those who have faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith. (Gal 3:6–9)<sup>31</sup>

The new translation of the Jewish Publication Society renders Paul's key proof-text here (Gen 15:6),

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31 I have changed "believe" (NRSV) to "have faith" throughout this passage to reflect better the nature of Paul's claim. What Paul thinks defines Abraham here is, needless to say, not the latter's opinions. The other long reflection on Abraham in the Pauline corpus is Romans 4.

“And because he put his trust in the LORD, He reckoned it to his merit.”<sup>32</sup> The verse marks the transition between Abram’s doubt about God’s promise that he will beget offspring and his mysterious trust in God’s prediction that his offspring will, in fact, be innumerable. Two and a half centuries before Paul wrote his Letter to the Galatians, however, some Jewish sources had already detached the verse from its immediate context in Genesis 15 and interpreted it as summary comment about the character of Abraham’s relationship to God, though pronounced only after he passed his great test, the Binding of Isaac (Gen 22:1–19).<sup>33</sup> Paul, similarly, detaches the verse from its narrative context, but, breaking with those Jewish precedents, he also finds in it a solution to the question he faced in Galatia, the question of the terms under which gentiles may legitimately

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32 It bears mention that because Gen 15:6 does not specify the subject of its second verb, it is open to a radically different translation: “And he put his trust in the LORD and reckoned it as righteousness to him.” On this rendering, it is Abraham who is doing the reckoning, trusting the LORD because he finds him to be righteous and his promise therefore reliable. See especially the commentary of Nachmanides (Ramban) on the verse. For a list of others who understand it similarly, see Ruth ben-Meir, “Abraham in Nahmanides’ Thought,” in *The Faith of Abraham: In Light of Interpretation throughout the Ages* (Heb.; ed. Moshe Hallamish et al.; Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003), 156.

33 Sir 44:20 and 1 Mac 2:52.

enter the family of Abraham. They do so, he claims, the same way the family of Abraham came into existence in the first place, through faith, not through the commandments of the Torah, which had not yet been enjoined. Indeed, as Paul reads the verse, it entails the further point that “those who have faith are the descendants of Abraham.” Whereas the Gospel of John sees the *works* of Abraham – “what Abraham did” (8:39) – as the identifying mark of the patriarch’s genuine descendants, Paul assigns the same role to the *faith* of Abraham. And this, in turn, enables the apostle to the gentiles to discover the mechanism whereby the repeated promise that other nations will be blessed in Abraham can be fulfilled.<sup>34</sup> The nations – or, as the translation above renders the Greek *ethnē*, the “gentiles” – are blessed when, having acquired a faith like Abraham’s, they also become his descendants. In Paul’s theology, it is through such faith that gentiles become Jews. They do not convert to Judaism, as that term is understood today, but they do change their identity so as to become descendants of Abraham – not through observance of the Torah but through faith.

In the whole history of biblical interpretation, there is perhaps nothing that has been more mis-

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34 Various forms of the promise appear in Gen 12:3; 18:18; and 22:18, though the wording of none of them corresponds in wording exactly to Paul’s citation in Gal 3:8.

understood than the intertwined topics of Paul's relationship to the Torah and to the promise to Abraham, and the consequences of that misunderstanding for Jewish-Christian relations have been catastrophic. In particular, we must correct two longstanding and still widespread misunderstandings of what Paul is actually saying.

The first misunderstanding results from a conflation of Paul's view of Torah-law with that of other New Testament sources. In the gospels, we hear Jesus thundering against the "scribes and Pharisees," who he claims, for example, "tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (Matt 23:23). Here, the assumption is that the observance of the Torah involves obsessive-compulsive behaviors, indifference to social justice, and hypocrisy, at least in the case of those against whom Jesus is preaching. But this is not at all Paul's view, and the idea that before "God ... was pleased to reveal his Son to [him]," the future apostle was somehow suffering psychologically under the grievous burden of the law has been effectively and repeatedly debunked.<sup>35</sup> Note that Paul has no problem writing that "the law

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35 Most memorably in Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 1976, 78-96. First published in English in *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 199-215. See also E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Compari-*

is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (Rom 7:12). To be sure, in his theology – very unlike that of rabbinic Judaism – the Torah and its commandments render a capital indictment but offer no possibility of acquittal. Since, however, in his thinking the defendants really are guilty, this indicates no imperfection in those norms and does not reflect negatively on the motivation of those who observe them.<sup>36</sup> As E. P. Sanders puts it, "Paul did not preach about men, but about God."<sup>37</sup>

The second misunderstanding maintains that Paul's dissatisfaction with the law had to do with his universalism, that is, his desire to bring all people to God. That the apostle to the gentiles harbored such an aspiration is beyond doubt; without it, he would have been an apostle to the Jews. The question, though, is why anyone would think that such an aspiration requires jettisoning the commandments of the Torah (or some subset of them). There is evidence that in ancient Judaism even before Paul wrote his letters, Abraham was seen as a missionary, converting people to the worship of the one, true, incorporeal God. Indeed, as we have seen, a passage

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*son of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 431-556, especially pp. 442-47.

36 On the Torah as offering a bill of indictment but no possibility of acquittal (available exclusively through Jesus), see Rom 5:12-21, for example.

37 Sanders, *Paul*, 446.

in the Talmud terms Abraham himself “the first of the converts” (*b. Chag. 3a*), probably because he is the first to undergo *berit milah* (ritual circumcision), as required of all male converts to Judaism. A Jewish aspiration to universalism, then, does not in the least suggest that some means other than conversion to Judaism must be found to incorporate gentiles into the Abrahamic family. Whatever caused Paul’s perfervid rejection of circumcision—at one point he expresses the hope that his Galatian opponents, the preachers of circumcision, “would castrate themselves” (*Gal 5:12*) – it was not his universalistic aspiration to convert the whole world to his religion. Like those opponents, he could have preached the necessity of circumcision to the gentiles. There is, in other words, nothing in universalism that points to Paul’s particular concept of the gospel and the obligations of the non-Jews in light of it. For that matter, there is nothing in universalism that points to Christianity (with whatever type of gospel) rather than Judaism itself. Someone who aspires to convert the whole world to his own religion could just as easily try to convert it to either of those two traditions.

I have been arguing against the idea that what motivates Paul’s recourse to Abraham and his correlative advocacy that the gentiles are not obligated by most of the Mosaic commandments is his universalist aspiration. There is, however, a counterargument to this, and to it we must now pay attention. The

counterargument centers on the fact that the norms of the Torah at issue for Paul are specifically those that separate Jew from gentile, those that demarcate, in other words, the Jews as a distinctive group – circumcision, dietary laws, and the sacred days (sabbaths and festivals). In the thinking of James D. G. Dunn, “the leading edge of Paul’s theological thinking was the conviction that God’s purpose embraced Gentile as well as Jews,” so that the target of his polemic was “nationalistic presumption” and “ethnic restrictiveness,” both of them thought to be characteristic of the Jewish understanding of Torah theretofore.<sup>38</sup> To do justice to God’s purpose, then, those community-defining practices would have to be jettisoned and a new people, neither Jewish nor gentile, would have to come into existence to testify to the God who transcended the unfortunate and unnecessary boundary between those two groups. To Daniel Boyarin, similarly, Paul is very much a figure of “the world of Hellenistic Judaism of the first century” who “was motivated by a Hellenistic desire for the One, which among other things produced an ideal of a universal human essence, beyond difference and

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38 James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 232, 248. In this discussion, I have been aided by John M. G. Barclay, “Neither Jew nor Greek’: Multiculturalism and the New Perspective on Paul,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark G. Brett; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 197-214.

hierarchy.”<sup>39</sup> In defining the Mosaic-Sinaitic moment as temporary and now superseded in a return to the Abrahamic, Paul thus swept away all those boundary-defining practices “in order that,” in his words, “in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal 3:14, reusing Gen 28:3–4). And it is faith, it will be recalled, not works or commandments, that in Paul’s thinking defined Abraham’s righteousness.

The problem with this line of thinking is that it dramatically underplays the importance of chosenness or election – the election of Abraham and the election of the Christian – in Paul’s theology. Paul may well have wished to put Jew and gentile on an even footing before God, as Dunn capably argues (though Paul sometimes wavers on this), but the apostle’s appeal to the Abrahamic promise suggests nonetheless something very different from the modern universalist’s dislike of nationalism, ethnicity, and boundaries. For Abraham is not an exemplar of “a universal human essence,” and Paul does not treat him as if he were. If there is such a person in Paul’s thinking, it is Adam, the universal human father, and Adam for Paul is a purely negative figure: He represents disobedience, sin, condemnation,

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39 Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 6, 7.

and death, and, as such, is the diametric opposite and foil of Paul's Christ.<sup>40</sup> Abraham, by contrast, is a man mysteriously singled out from universal humanity for a new, unprecedented, and unparalleled destiny, shared by no one, until, of course, the promise to him comes to apply to those descended from him, just as Jesus exemplifies a new, unprecedented, and unparalleled destiny, shared by no one until the promise fulfilled in him comes to benefit those who are in him (as Paul would put it), which is to say, the church. One cannot adequately grasp Paul's theology without reckoning with this simple but momentous fact: For Paul, the gentile Christian has abandoned the Adamic identity for the Abrahamic. He has left the universal identity associated with the sin-infected human essence and been recreated as one who attains righteousness in the sight of God on the basis of his faith, just as Abraham did in the Pauline reading of Gen 15:6.

Were Paul truly intent on transcending the difference between Jews and gentiles, would he have so stressed the man known as the father of the Jewish people? And would he have advanced the claim that those who believe in Jesus had, by that very act, become nothing short of descendants of Abraham? For by claiming the gentile converts had become the adoptive children of the first Jewish patriarch, Paul and similar early Christian figures tied the church

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40 1 Cor 15:20–22; Rom 5:12–21.

necessarily and irrevocably to the Jewish people and its scriptures, even as they distanced it from some of the Jewish practices that the Greco-Roman world found baffling and sometimes offensive, such as circumcision, the dietary laws, and the Sabbath. But Paul did not distance the church from one Jewish practice that baffled and often offended the Greco-Roman world. "Flee from the worship of idols," he urges the Corinthian Christians (1 Cor 10:14), and in upholding the peculiar Jewish refusal to worship gods other than their own and stoutly maintaining the uniqueness and exclusive claim of the God of Israel, Paul again showed that the mixed community of Jews and gentiles that made up the nascent Christian church did not correspond to "an ideal of a universal human essence, beyond difference and hierarchy." Rather, it represented the adoption of gentiles into the Abrahamic family. Paula Fredriksen puts it well:

Pagans-in-Christ are also from Abraham's lineage, since Abraham was the father of many nations (Gen 17.4; Rom 4.17); but they descend from Abraham *alone*, not also from Isaac and Jacob. Because of the Spirit, however, these pagans too are now sons, heirs to the 'promise' to Abraham: like Israel, they too can now call God 'Abba. Father'...

But this new kinship is not tantamount to 'conversion,' because these Gentiles are adopted not into Israel's family, but into God's, made such not *kata sarka* [according to the flesh] but *kata*

*pneuma* [according to the Spirit]. Put differently: redeemed Israel and the pagans-in-Christ together share the same heavenly father *kata pneuma*, but *kata sarka* they remain distinct.<sup>41</sup>

One of the reasons that Paul was so opposed to the gentiles' accepting the full range of commandments of the Torah remains to be mentioned. To be brief, Paul believed that the blessings that the Torah promised were conditional; they required one to keep the commandments. "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse," he wrote to the Galatian communities; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law' (Gal 3:10, citing Deut 27:36). Now, within the framework of rabbinic thinking, too, those who fail to observe the commandments are in trouble, but they can and should remedy their failure through genuine repentance and (if available) atonement through sacrifice, especially on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). For whatever reason

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41 Fredriksen, "Judaizing the Nations," 243-44. Fredriksen (p. 243, n 27) notes that Rom 9:7 might suggest that the "Gentiles-in-Christ" are also descended from Isaac. The point, nonetheless, stands that it is Abraham, the father of many nations, rather than Jacob/Israel, the father of the one chosen nation, on whom Paul focuses and into whose lineage he thinks the Spirit of Jesus has grafted the gentiles.

– and scholars vigorously debate the reason<sup>42</sup> – Paul did not think those methods could work and instead saw the death of Jesus as a vicarious, sacrificial act that effected the transition from curse to blessing, as the Torah could not. In Paul’s mind, this is closely connected with the blessing upon the gentiles prominent in the promise to Abraham in the Torah. As he puts it in the same passage in Galatians:

<sup>13</sup>Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” – <sup>14</sup>in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:13–14, citing Deut 21:23)<sup>43</sup>

Here, Paul presents the Christ-event as a restoration of the Abrahamic order of things, after the interrup-

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42 See, for example, Sanders, *Paul*, especially pp. 474–511; Dunn, *Jesus, Paul*, 215–41, and the same author’s *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (London: A&C Black, 1993), especially pp. 168–80; and Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, 136–43.

43 Paul’s understanding of Deut 21:23 is intended to advance his claim that the crucifixion of Jesus absorbed the curse of the law and thus opened up an avenue to blessing. NJPS renders these words (from a law that forbids leaving the corpse of an impaled person on the stake overnight) thus: “For an impaled body is an affront to God.” Paul picks up the phrase “the blessing of Abraham” from Gen 28:4.

tion caused by the revelation of the Torah, with all its norms and the curses that come with them. The blessing on the nations that was promised to Abraham finally comes about, and with it a return of the way of life that Abraham exemplified – a way of life based in faith in God but without most of the norms of the Torah. Moses and his laws are, so to speak, a parenthesis between the faith of Abraham in the distant past and its restoration in the early Christian community, only recently formed. By appealing to Abraham, Paul enables Jesus (as he understands him) to trump Moses.

## VI

The post-biblical Jewish notion that Abraham was a missionary converting people to Judaism entails the notion that the converts accepted the commandments of the Torah and the rites associated with conversion, which, in the case of males, include circumcision. Those who become Jews, that is, join both God's family and Israel's. They become Jewish in spirit and in flesh alike. Whether Paul ever knew of and respected such a process of conversion is unknown. Either way, we now see that what he has done is to open up a different means of incorporating gentiles into God's family and Abraham's, a process that he thinks is brought about exclusively by the Spirit acting on those with faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ; it cannot, he pointedly and repeat-

edly insists, be brought about by observance of the laws and commandments of the Torah. In the background of this Pauline theology lies the promise to Abraham that he would be “the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:4), even though the Torah and its norms had not yet been given, as we have seen. But in its background also lies the already ancient Jewish expectation that at the end-time the gentiles, without ceasing to be gentiles, would renounce their idolatry and embrace the worship of the God of Israel alongside the people Israel.<sup>44</sup> Believing that the end-time had arrived and that the messiah himself had already come, Paul saw in the gospel a way – the *only* way – to bring about that very scenario.

I have already noted that among the points that are maddeningly unclear in Paul’s theology is the relationship between the new community, which is the church, and the old community, which is the Jewish people apart from the church.<sup>45</sup> At times, especially

44 See, for example, Isa 2:2–4; Zech 14:16–21; and Ps 86:9.

45 In recent decades, the classical Christian view – that Paul sees the Torah in only negative terms and sought to replace it altogether with the gospel – has receded in the world of professional biblical scholarship (less so elsewhere). On this, with special reference to Abraham, see Jeffrey S. Siker, “Abraham, Paul, and the Politics of Jewish Identity,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 16 (2009): 56-70. There is much of value in the so-called “new perspective” on Paul, especially in its placement of his thinking within the culture of Judaism as it stood in his

in his extended meditation on the subject in Romans 9–11, Paul insists, for example, that to his “kindred according to the flesh ... belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the [Temple] worship, and the promises [as well as] the Patriarchs” (Rom 9:3–5). But just after this ostensible ringing affirmation of the continuing election of the Jews comes a claim that it is the spirit alone, and not the flesh, that determines who really is Israel:

<sup>6</sup>It is not that the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, <sup>7</sup>and not all of Abraham’s children are his true descendants; but “it is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you” [Gen 21:12]. <sup>8</sup>This means that it

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time and its dismantling of simpleminded stereotypes about Judaism and the Jews. Some scholars, however, go so far as to interpret Paul as finding no fault with Judaism at all but simply wanting to open up an equivalent path for gentiles, so that Judaism and Christianity are simply variations of the same religion directed at different social groups. See, for example, Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987) and John Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). My own view is that this latter claim is too extreme. Paul saw the gospel as the only path to salvation for Jews and gentiles alike and did not believe that the Torah and its norms were an acceptable equivalent for anybody. On this, see Jeffrey S. Siker’s review of John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*, in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 41 (1983): 63–65, and his “Abraham, Paul,” 67–68.

is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants. (Rom 9:6–8)

However these and many similar contradictions in Paul on this subject might be resolved, it seems likely that Paul did not expect the problem to last long. Given his expectation of an imminent return of Jesus and the concomitant end to the current world order, the likelihood is that he thought the widespread failure of the Jews – hard-hearted, disobedient, and unbelieving – to be persuaded by the gospel would soon be reversed, and God would grant Paul’s own “prayer ... for them to be saved” (Rom 10:1). But they would be saved the same way Abraham was pronounced righteous, as Paul would have it – by faith apart from the commandments of the Torah. Without the restoration of that Abrahamic path to righteousness, long eclipsed by the Torah and its commandments, the incorporation of gentiles into the “blessing of Abraham” would never come to be, and it would be as if the messiah had never come.

## VII

Our discussion of the variant relationships of Abraham to the Torah lends itself to a contrast of Judaism and Christianity that is as familiar as it is convenient. The contrast is between a view of Abraham, on the one hand, as the man who, in the words of a famous

text now found in the Mishnah, “practiced the whole Torah in its entirety before it had been given” and, on the other hand, as the man whose faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness,” apart from any commandments of the Torah, even the commandment of circumcision that was enjoined upon him before anyone else. The same contrast easily becomes generalized into a depiction of Judaism as focused on law and ethics – the deed, not the creed, as it is often said – and Christianity as focused on faith, theology, and subjective experience.<sup>46</sup> Whatever limited applicability this handy contrast has, it ought, alas, to recall nothing so much as H. L. Mencken’s quip, “There is always an easy solution to every human problem – neat, plausible, and wrong.”<sup>47</sup>

To understand why it is wrong for Christianity, one need only consider the great emphasis non-Pauline traditions in early Christianity place upon the deeds that one does and not simply on faith alone. In the Gospel According to Matthew, for example, how one has treated the weak determines whether

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46 The contrast was most memorably and most brilliantly developed by Leo Baeck. See his *Judaism and Christianity: Essays by Leo Baeck* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), chapter 3 (“The Faith of Paul”) and especially chapter 5 (“Romantic Religion”).

47 H. L. Mencken, “The Divine Afflatus,” reprinted in *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (ed. H. L. Mencken: New York: Knopf, 1949), 443. The essay was originally published in the *New York Evening Mail*, Nov. 16, 1917.

his ultimate destiny is “eternal punishment” or “eternal life” (25:46). And, then, of course, there are the famous words ascribed to Jesus in the Gospel According to John: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (14:15). Although the commandments in question are not those of the Mosaic Torah (despite some overlaps, of course), these texts and many others like them do speak to the high estimation of commandments, deeds, and obedience in early Christianity in a way that one would not expect from the familiar but overdrawn contrast just mentioned. In the New Testament, Christianity does not at all reduce to faith alone or consistently imply that good works are not important for salvation.

Another New Testament document, the Letter of James, insists most explicitly on the importance of good deeds (“works” in the parlance of Christian theology), and it does so by citing none other than Abraham, and in a way that contrasts strikingly, and surely not coincidentally, with Paul’s use of the patriarch:

<sup>20</sup>Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? <sup>21</sup>Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup>You see that faith was active along with works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. <sup>23</sup>Thus the scripture is fulfilled that says, “Abraham had faith in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteous-

ness" [Gen 15:6] and he was called the friend of God.<sup>24</sup> You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone ...<sup>26</sup> For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead. (James 2:20–24, 26)<sup>48</sup>

The contrast with Paul's use of Gen 15:6 is obvious. What is not so obvious is that the unknown author of the letter depends on that aforementioned Jewish tradition in which the verse was thought to apply only *after* Abraham had passed his great test, the Binding of Isaac. This enables the letter-writer to attribute Abraham's being reckoned as righteous to a deed, specifically his obedience to the divine command to sacrifice his beloved son. With this, the author seeks to prove that works are essential and faith is flimsy without them. To be sure, the works in question are not the commandments of the Torah, and James is not addressing the identical question that exercised Paul – the halakhic (i.e., legal) question of what norms should apply to a gentile who comes into the Abrahamic family. Rather, the author of James is addressing an extrapolation of Paul's po-

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48 I have departed from the NRSV translation of Gen 15:6 in order to bring out the use made of it in this passage. The idea of Abraham as the "friend" (or lover) of God is taken from Isa 41:8. My discussion of the Letter of James draws upon my essay, "The Akedah in Four Traditions," in a forthcoming volume edited by Murray Haar, with the permission of the publisher (Wipf and Stock).

lemic that included *all* works in the indictment – an extrapolation, by the way, that appears again and again in Christian tradition, into our own time.

The interpretation of the Aqedah in James 2 does not draw solely on an antecedent Jewish understanding of Gen 15:6 as coming into effect only after Abraham had proven willing to obey the painful divine command to offer up his beloved son. It draws also upon the core Christian story of the passion, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. Consider that last verse: “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead” (James 2:26). Today’s reader would be more inclined to liken faith to the spirit, and works to the body. After all, is not faith something invisible, found deep within, and are not works physical actions done by embodied persons? Indeed, the notion that works are physical but faith spiritual correlates nicely with a hoary anti-Jewish polemic, in which the Jewish people and the religion of the Torah are described as carnal but the church and its gospel as spiritual. It is too little noticed that James makes the opposite equation: Faith alone is a dead body and works are the spirit. Those who seek to live their lives by faith alone are spiritually deadened and thus in urgent need of the enlivening force of works. For it is works that provide life to the dead body. Now, given the centrality of the proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection in early Christianity, it should be clear that James’ invocation of the

Binding of Isaac has a close association with his understanding of the Christ-event.<sup>49</sup> The implication is clear: What enables the Christian to participate in Jesus' resurrection is precisely the powerful enlivening force unleashed by works. Works not only make faith real and complete; together with faith, they do what faith alone cannot do: They resurrect the dead.

If this Christological thinking indeed underlies our passage, how then does the Binding of Isaac advance its argument? I suspect the author of James understood the Aqedah in a manner like this: Abraham, whose faith never wavered, proceeded to act in a way that would normally have resulted in the death of Isaac. In other words, to all appearances the father was about to transform his beloved son into a "body without the spirit," a corpse. Amazingly, the actions he took, up to and including his reaching for the slaughterer's knife, brought about the reverse transformation, so that the son whom we – and perhaps he as well – had given up for dead lived again. Like Jesus leaving his tomb, Isaac got up from the altar that would have been his funeral pyre, and Abra-

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49 *Contra* Edward Kessler, who, in an otherwise insightful book, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004), remarks that James evidences no "association between Genesis 22 and salvation through Christ" (p. 61).

ham's faith, rendered complete by works only now, has at last been reckoned to him as righteousness. Only then, only after he had chosen obedience to God's command over the life of the son he loved, did Abraham earn the title "friend [or, lover] of God." His sacrificial act, like sacrifice in general, had proven powerful beyond imagining. It had transformed death into life.

In James 2:20–26, the author of this New Testament letter has propounded an interpretation of Abraham that makes of him a paradigm not only of faith, as Paul's had done, but, more importantly, of obedience in works in well. In so doing, he has cast doubt on the very dichotomy of faith and works, holding that someone who has one of these but not the other is incomplete, the way a body or a soul alone is incomplete, less than a full person. And by attaching this theological claim to the Binding, with its rich resonance in the foundational story of Christianity, the author of the Letter of James argues forcefully against the attempt to define Christianity as the religion of faith and grace, with deeds as secondary implications only; that definition, he insists, is untrue to the gospel itself.

But is there on the Jewish side an equivalent undermining of the familiar contrast between the two religions? Is there a Jewish understanding of Abraham that sees him as *not* having "practiced the whole

Torah in its entirety before it had been given” but exemplary nonetheless?

### VIII

We can begin to answer that question by turning to the Talmud. There we discover that the interpretation of Abraham as one who observed the entire Torah is presented, like so many ideas in that great collection, as only one position in an argument and not simply as a final and uncontested truth. Alongside this tradition of the fully observant Abraham, which we may label “maximalist,” there was another tradition that saw him as observing far fewer, a position we can call “minimalist.” Thus, whereas the early third century authority Rav taught that “Our Father Abraham fulfilled the whole Torah,” citing as evidence the end of Gen 26:5 (“inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings”), his colleague Shimi bar Chiyya retorts, “I can say it applies only to the seven commandments.” Here, the reference is to the seven norms that rabbinic tradition thought applied to universal humanity, Jews and gentiles alike – the requirement that laws and courts be established and the prohibitions on idolatry, murder, sexual immorality, blasphemy, theft, and eating a limb taken from an animal that has not been

slaughtered.<sup>50</sup> Another voice then enters the Talmudic debate to ask about circumcision, which is not one of these seven universally obligatory norms but is explicitly enjoined upon Abraham, and observed by him, in Genesis 17. To this, Shimi bar Chiyya, or someone taking his position, concedes the addition of this one commandment, but this still leaves Abraham with but eight commandments, far fewer than the 613 that traditionally make up the full complement in the Torah. The exchange ends with a question that implies that Shimi bar Chiyya's minimalist position does not do justice to the full list of norms given in Rav's proof-text in Gen 26:5 (*b. Yoma* 28b).

Although this Talmudic debate ends with the impression that Rav's maximalist interpretation of Abraham's observance won out, the argument, in fact, continues throughout subsequent Jewish tradition. Since we gave Rashi's exegesis of Gen 26:5b as our exemplar of the maximalist view, it is only fair that we cite his grandson, Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, known as Rashbam; northern France, ca. 1085–1174), as the great exponent of the opposing opinion:

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50 See *b. Sanh.* 56a. Rabbinic literature actually evidences the existence of a more diverse and contentious argument over time than the notion of the Seven Noahide Commandments, despite its eventual normative status, can accommodate. On this, see Marc Hirshman, *Torah for the Entire World* (Heb.; Tel Aviv: Hakkibbutz Hameuchad, 1999).

*Inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me*

Concerning the Binding of Isaac, as it is written, “inasmuch as you have obeyed Me” (Gen 22:18)<sup>51</sup>

*and kept My charge:*

Such as circumcision, as it is written about it, “And as for you, you shall keep my covenant” (Gen 17:9)

*My commandments,*

Such as the commandment about the eight days [until the father performs circumcision on the son], as it is written, “As God commanded him” (Gen 21:4)

*My laws, and My teachings.*

According to the essence of its plain sense, [it refers to] all the commandments that are [generally] recognized, such as the laws against robbery, sexual misdeeds, and coveting, and the requirement for legal order, and the laws of hospitality. All of these were in force before the Torah was given, but they were [then] renewed and explicated to Israel, and they made a covenant to practice them.

(Rashbam on Genesis 26:5b)

To Rashbam, then, the key verse refers not to the totality of Jewish law, but only to those elements in it that Abraham could have intuited on the basis of

51 Gen 22:18. I have changed the NJPS wording so as to bring out Rashbam’s point about the use of the identical Hebrew phrasing.

his natural reason, augmented by the one norm he received through special revelation, the commandment of *berit milah*, or ritual circumcision. That those norms that he knew through natural reason, as any gentile could and should, later became part of God's revelation to Israel on Sinai does not imply that Abraham already knew or practiced the whole Torah before it was given. All it implies is that some of the norms of the Torah are rationally discernible and universal in their application. Having observed those commandments, circumcision, and the special directions that God gave him (especially the commandment to sacrifice Isaac), Abraham abundantly proved his compliance with God's will, so far as he could know it.

At first glance, the minimalist position has an affinity with Paul's notion that Abraham's righteousness was the result of his faith, not his practice of the commandments of the Torah. For Paul and Rashbam would have agreed that the example of Abraham testifies to the theoretical possibility of finding favor in God's eyes without the benefit of the whole corpus of commandments, traditionally numbered in rabbinic tradition as 613. This possibility ceases to be theoretical when one considers the crucial fact that in the Hebrew Bible, God gives the Torah to Israel alone, and not to the gentiles. If finding favor in the eyes of God ("having a portion in the World-to-Come," as the rabbis would put it, or "being saved," to

use the Christian parlance) required observance of the full complement of the commandments, then no gentile could ever reach the goal. The rabbinic tradition in its broad outlines did not take that extreme position; it did not offer a Jewish counterpart to the Christian doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, "no salvation outside the Church." Thus, while it is not so unusual in Jewish religious circles today to hear the commandments of the Torah praised for their supposedly universal and humanistic character, the classical Jewish tradition does not see the vast majority of them as applying to universal humanity or claim that gentiles can have a portion in the World-to-Come only if they cease to be gentiles. The commandments in their totality are God's special gift to the Jewish people, rather, and the Jewish people alone are privileged to have them and obligated to practice them. That Abraham, privileged and obligated in other ways, did not know of the 613 commandments thus in no way undermines the main lines of rabbinic theology.

A closer look, though, reveals important differences between Paul and the rabbinic position that is exemplified by Rashbam. For Paul, the Abrahamic material becomes important because of his belief that Jesus was the messiah and the concomitant claim that the end of time had just arrived, when the gentiles would not only be brought to faith in the God of Israel, as the Jewish Bible had envisioned,

but even grafted into Abraham's lineage. The Pauline Abraham, in other words, is essentially a gentile who serves as a model that other gentiles can imitate as they come into a proper relationship with the true God. In Rashbam's case, it is doubtful that he thought of Abraham as a gentile at all, since the patriarch had become circumcised (a rite of conversion to Judaism) and had broken with idolatry, as the post-biblical Jewish tradition, like Islam, stresses. Nor is faith in his view the most important thing in Abraham's example. Rather, Rashbam (and the rabbinic tradition behind his comment) thought that the key to finding favor with God for Jews and gentiles alike is the commandments. That is precisely why, according to the dominant rabbinic doctrine, the good people of all nations can have a "portion in the World-to-Come." The gentiles have a few commandments, and the Jews, many, but for both groups obedience, and with it salvation, is possible. The exemplary practice to which our key half verse, Gen 26:5b, refers has to do, then, not with the quantity but with the quality of the patriarch's obedience. Contrary to Rav and Rashi, it does not entail the maximalist view of the ancient patriarch's obedience. In the minimalist reading that Shimi bar Chiyya and Rashbam uphold, it simply tells us that Abraham was scrupulously attentive to the divine commandments as they existed in his time. And in his time, they were limited to those norms that obligated all

humanity and to those that God had announced to Abraham alone through special revelation.

Another rabbinic text moves in a rather different direction. It, too, underscores the continuity between Abraham and Sinai, in a way, but – and this we have not seen so far – it also insists on the superiority of the Sinaitic moment over the Abrahamic. The Jewish people are like the man they call “Our Father Abraham,” it tells us, for both observe God’s commands. The difference is that the Jews have more opportunity for obedience, since they live on this side of Sinai. Appropriately, the text in question is a midrashic sermon for the occasion of Shavu’ot, or Weeks, the holiday that rabbinic tradition associates with the giving of the Torah (in the Hebrew Bible it is a first-fruits festival only).

The biblical passage for the sermon is from the tribute to the “capable wife” in Prov 31:10–31 (familiar to Jews today from its recitation at the Sabbath table on Friday night), specifically the verse that quotes her appreciative husband’s own words of praise:

Many women have done well,  
But you surpass them all. (Prov 31:29)

In its midrashic application, the verse is taken to refer to a succession of generations during which the available commandments gradually grew. Thus, Adam, the first of the “many women” (as it were),

had six of those seven universal commandments, to which a seventh, the prohibition on eating a limb from an animal that has not been slaughtered, was given to Noah. The commandment of circumcision gave Abraham eight, and Isaac, as the first person to be circumcised at the ideal time, on his eighth day, thus had nine. The prohibition upon eating “the thigh muscle that is on the socket of the hip” was enjoined upon Jacob, making ten. Finally, Jacob’s son Judah recognized an eleventh, the requirement that the surviving brother of a man who dies childless provide him an heir through his widow. All of these individuals “have done well,” in the words of the biblical text, “but you,” the sermon goes on to say, “at Sinai were commanded 613 commandments, 248 positive ones and 365 negative ones.” In other words, the superlative wife addressed in the second half of the verse is Israel standing at Sinai, or, as one version of the midrash reads, “the generation of Moses, which was commanded [the 613 commandments]” (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 12:1). She has been given the totality of which her impressive predecessors, including even Abraham, knew only a part.<sup>52</sup>

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52 The textual variant is found in an interpolation into the Safed manuscript. See Bernard Mandelbaum, *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 5722/1962), 203. The biblical passages from which the midrash adduces the commandments operative before Sinai are Gen 2:16; 9:4;

In this text, too, universal humanity is in no way faulted; everybody, symbolized by the universal fathers Adam and Noah, has commandments and has therefore “done well.” But the Jewish patriarch Abraham has done better, surpassing them with his additional commandment of circumcision, even as Isaac, Jacob, and Judah all surpass the generations before them. The process comes to its climax, though, only at Sinai, when the full complement of commandments is given to the whole Jewish people. By contrast, the Jewish tradition that saw Abraham as practicing “the whole Torah in its entirety before it had been given” already found the ideal in their first patriarch, imagining that he anticipated the climactic moment (Sinai) in his own lifetime generations before Moses. Paul, too, had seen Abraham as the ideal, proof positive of the irrelevance of Torah law to salvation. In this midrash on the “capable wife,” however, the pattern breaks. Now Abraham no longer stands at the climactic point; he is no longer the apex of the process. The climactic moment, rather, is Sinai, and the ideal is the generation of Moses when the Jews received the reality that was only partially anticipated in earlier times, including Abraham’s. Here Moses, as it were, trumps Abraham – though without any implication that the pre-Mosaic generations were bereft of the knowledge of God and

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17:9; 21:4; 32:33; and 38:8. For a list of parallels to this text in rabbinic literature, see Schultz, “Two Views,” 51.

his will or the possibility of salvation. The gentiles (Adam and Noah) and the pre-Sinaitic Jews performed God's commandments, but God has graciously enabled his people Israel to do better.

We began this section of our discussion by addressing the question of whether rabbinic tradition presents any alternative to the maximalist interpretation in which Abraham "practiced the whole Torah in its entirety before it had been given," and we quickly found that indeed it does. In some rabbinic texts, Abraham is presented as practicing only a few commandments (although those few are defined as the totality of known norms). In this view of the patriarch, what seems to matter most is not the quantity of norms available but the spiritual disposition of those who practice them. As a Talmudic rabbi says in a related context, "It is the same whether one does much or one does little, so long as he directs his heart to Heaven" (*b. Ber.* 5b).<sup>53</sup> On this principle, people who observe with great obedience the few norms open to them would surely welcome more commandments, were they to be made available. In that way, the paucity of commandments that Abraham kept (according to the minimalist interpretation) in no way invalidates the likeness between him

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53 "Heaven" in this saying is a euphemism for God. The immediate context here is the study of Torah. The same statement, with the same underlying theology, appears in *b. Men.* 110a in the context of sacrificial donations.

and Israel at Sinai, when “All the people answered as one, saying, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do’” (Exod 19:8). Had Abraham stood at Sinai, he would, on this reading, have been eager to accept all that the LORD spoke there, too, just as, according to Gen 26:5, he obeyed the LORD and kept his charge, his commandments, his laws, and his teachings in his own lifetime. In this way, like the maximalist interpretation, the minimalist one renders the gap between Abraham’s religion and that of his Jewish descendants immaterial.

We found a somewhat different view, however, in the midrash on Prov 31:29 (“Many women have done well / But you surpass them all”) that we just examined. In that text, quantity does matter. Gentile humanity, represented by Adam with six commandments and Noah with seven, did well, but the fullest revelation comes into being only in the generation of Moses, when the whole Torah is finally given to the Jewish people. Abraham with eight commandments did well, but Israel at Sinai, with all 613, still surpassed him. The question of intention does not arise here; presumably, “directing [one’s] heart to heaven” is essential, but the actual deeds – and the number of available opportunities to do them – make an important difference nonetheless. And not only is that the difference between the gentiles, with their few commandments, and the Jews, with their many; it is also the difference be-

tween Abraham and the continuing Jewish people, for whom he was a model in his own time (he did well) but not the ideal model today, when Israel has been charged, and graciously given the wherewithal, to surpass him.

With this last version of the minimalist interpretation of Abraham's Torah observance, the debate with the Pauline current in early Christianity takes another shape. The great contest between Christianity and Judaism about which of them most resembles Abraham – which group is made up of his true descendants – has here been derailed, at least on the Jewish side. No longer is Judaism trying to present itself as the more Abrahamic of the two. Whereas for Paul, the Abrahamic model – the model of faith reckoned as righteousness – overrides the Mosaic moment, the rabbinic theology underlying the midrash on Prov 31:29 moves in quite the opposite direction. Now, the ideal is the generation of Moses, for which Abraham is but a dim, though commendable, foreshadowing. The paradigm is not Abraham pronounced righteous while still ritually uncircumcised and in that sense more a gentile than a Jew. It is, rather, the Jewish people encompassed by the full complement of commandments and thus joyfully serving the God who, in his boundless love for them, has given them his Torah.

In a deeper sense, though, Paul and the rabbis are speaking to different situations. For Paul, the over-

riding issue is the incorporation of gentiles into the community worshipping the God of Israel, now that the messianic advent has superseded Sinai as God's highest revelation. (That Islam would later claim to have superseded Christianity, absorbing Jesus into the chain of prophets consummated in Muhammad, is one of the greatest ironies of history.) As we have seen, essentially two things motivated Paul: the biblical oracles predicting a universal turn to that God at the end of time and his conviction, widespread among the first generation of Christians, that the end had indeed arrived and the great things promised were about to come to fruition in his own lifetime. In the situation in which Paul thought he stood, then, to turn to Moses and the commandments of the Torah made little sense, because, for one thing, even those biblical oracles did not envisage the whole world converting to Judaism. They did not, to give a telling example, imagine that all the men on earth would become circumcised. Nor, to cite another reason, would it make sense to prefer the distinctly Jewish figure of Moses over the man to whom it had been promised, as Paul understood Genesis, that "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you."<sup>54</sup> Thus did Abraham, the man of faith but few

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54 Gal 3:8.

commandments (or none), trump Moses, the man of Sinai.

## IX

Earlier, we showed that the convenient contrast between a Christianity focused on faith and a Judaism focused on deeds does not do justice to the diversity and complexity of Christian thought, even in the restricted sample of the New Testament, in which Paul's letters are found. For early Christian literature, like Christian literature of every generation, does not lack an emphasis on good deeds and a warning about the dire consequences of bad ones. And it was even capable of interpreting Abraham as proof that the deed, and not just faith, was indispensable (James 2:20–26). But what about the other half of that convenient contrast? Was the classical rabbinic tradition capable of emphasizing Abraham's faith, or did it only focus on his deeds, however few or many they thought them to be? Indeed, one early midrash provides a striking answer:

And so you also find that our father Abraham inherited both this world and the World-to-Come only as a reward for the faith (*'amanah*) that he had, as it is said, "And because he put his trust (*he'emin*) in the LORD, He reckoned it to his merit" (Gen 15:6). (*Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Beshallah 7*)

This midrash goes so far as to attribute Abraham's high status in this world and the next precisely to his faith, and it does so by citing Paul's favorite proof-text. The difference is that, like the New Testament Letter of James, this text refrains from setting faith and works against each other. And so, we again find the familiar and convenient contrast between Judaism and Christianity overdrawn. Not only can the Christian tradition in the aggregate commend works and see Abraham as justified by his deeds, but Judaism can commend faith and see Abraham's inheritance of both worlds as dependent on it. There is, to be sure, a difference of emphasis, at least in the aggregate, but the starkness of the familiar and self-serving contrast (whether intended to serve Christianity or Judaism) cannot be sustained. As is often the case in the comparative study of Judaism and Christianity, the major note in each tradition is at least a minor one in the other.

## X

In modern times, many people have found Paul's faith-centered rather than law-centered strategy for the incorporation of gentiles attractive, for it seems inclusive and accepting, unlike the Jewish notion of a chosen people whom God singled out to be his own special possession, with special obligations – the 613 commandments. As we have seen, however,

this is a dangerous misreading of Paul, for whom descent from Abraham (and not from Adam) is the key point and in whose mind the gentiles without Christian faith – and thus without Abrahamic lineage – are doomed.<sup>55</sup> Whereas Judaism characteristically speaks of the dichotomy between the Jewish people and the nations, Christianity thus speaks of the dichotomy of church and the world. Neither, as we have had repeated occasion to note, speaks of a natural, undifferentiated humanity as the ideal (hence, the all-importance in Christianity of being baptized, becoming regenerated in Christ rather than Adam, or, in familiar evangelical parlance, “being born again”). In the case of Paul, and to a very large extent the entire subsequent Christian tradition, the cost of this supposed universalism has been, at the very least, a drastic downgrading of the status of Judaism, and especially the status of Torah-observance. Paul’s stress on God’s supposed reckoning of Abraham as righteous through faith without works (even the single commandment of circumcision) is part of that same argument, but so is the Jewish depiction of an Abraham who “practiced the whole Torah in its entirety before it had been given” as well as the claim that though he (and other pre-Sinaitic figures) did well, the Jews, now with the whole 613 commandments, “surpass them all.” Since Abraham is “Our Father” for Jews and “the father of all who

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55 See, e.g., 1 Cor 1:18.

believe” for Christians (Rom 4:11),<sup>56</sup> it was inevitable that these two Abrahamic communities would divide on what exactly it was that he represented and prefigured. Was it Torah or gospel?

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56 I have again changed the NRSV “ancestor” to “father” the better to reflect the Greek *patera* and the symmetry with the Hebrew, “Our Father Abraham.”

THE PÈRE MARQUETTE LECTURES IN THEOLOGY

- 1969 *The Authority for Authority*  
Quentin Quesnell
- 1970 *Mystery and Truth*  
John Macquarrie
- 1971 *Doctrinal Pluralism*  
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**Editorial Address:**

Dr. Andrew Tallon, Director  
Marquette University Press  
Box 3141  
Milwaukee WI 53201-3141  
phone: (414) 288-1564  
email: [andrew.tallon@marquette.edu](mailto:andrew.tallon@marquette.edu)  
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