

Book Review

Abraham: One God Three Wives Five Religions. By Frances Worthington. : Bahá'í Publishing, 2011. xiii + 242 pages, including appendices, footnotes, bibliography, index.

ALEX GOTTDANK

Compared with a generation ago, it seems that fewer people today, even those brought up in a religious home, understand much of religious history. Indeed, many reach adulthood without having read any religious scripture. Of those who do, how many could articulate the significant contributions of the Prophet Abraham? Frances Worthington, in *Abraham: One God Three Wives Five Religions*, succeeds in providing not only a chronological depiction of Abraham's life but also a comprehensive narrative synthesized from a variety of scriptural and traditional accounts taken from Jewish, Christian, Moslem, and Bahá'í sources.

At the outset, Worthington laments the difficulty inherently faced in “[c]reating an exact timeframe for the events of Abraham's life . . . [for] His date of birth remains elusive” (9). She then proceeds to share the events of His life and the distinct role each family member played in the emergence of the first monotheistic faith on Earth, but not before asking her readers to grant her a bit of freedom as a historian and storyteller.

This book is not a work of fiction because I've remained within the bounds of what is indicated by a combination of scriptural text, historical data, and archaeological evidence. Nevertheless, for the sake of readability and just plain fun, the storyline is delicately dusted with the tasty spices of *probably* and *possibly*. (5)

One should not regard this declaration as suggesting that Worthington is anything less than dedicated to her craft as a historian, for she weaves scriptural, historical, and archaeological sources so extensively and

impressively that she exemplifies nothing but the highest degree of scholarship. What one appreciates about her work, though, is her willingness to explore the nature of the historical record with a keen eye that scans for the “probable” and “possible” spiritual implications and subtleties inherent in that record. In so doing, she creates a unique and more profound understanding of Abraham’s life than a mere retelling of the events would merit.

For example, she questions why the Bible names Abraham’s oppressor, Nimrod, when no historical record outside of scripture can be found of a king bearing that name ruling Mesopotamia at the time of Abraham. Like a detective eager to solve a mystery, she uncovers clues that link Abraham’s Nimrod to Noah’s great-grandson of the same name. She does this by examining what seems like an unrelated yet seemingly deplorable account of Noah’s naked drunkenness. Drawing upon biblical and Bahá’í passages suggesting a deeper meaning, she explains that Noah was not actually drunk but “intoxicated with the wine of the All-Merciful” (16) and that His nakedness symbolized being “stripped . . . of earthly desires” (17). His sons Shem and Japheth cover His nakedness with the “fresh garment . . . of their respect” (17) while His son Ham is appalled by and rejects his father’s nakedness (Abraham’s willingness to discard old attire—traditions, customs, beliefs—in favor of a new Revelation). Ham’s grandson Nimrod likewise rejects Abraham’s message and becomes “a ruler so cruel and ungodly that his name quickly degenerates into an epithet for anyone who is cruel, calculating, and unholy” (18), the very embodiment of the king whose namesake persecutes Abraham.

This is the kind of insight with which Worthington enriches our understanding of Abraham’s life. This is equally true when she relates both the physical and spiritual implications of other events in His life whether they be the appearance of a new star in the Mesopotamian heaven prior to His birth, or the moment when the young Abraham recognizes the impotence of manmade idols and sets out to prove this, in a most humorous manner, to His father. One also learns of the likely link between the shrines Abraham builds throughout Canaan and the famine that ensues thereafter. Worthington posits, “Can it be possible, therefore, that by describing a

famine descending on Canaan, scripture is hinting that Abraham's words are falling on deaf ears?" (66). We are also introduced to some of the possible meanings of the reported long lives of the ancient prophets and kings of the Bible, the many meanings of the story of Lot, the true nature and the symbolic essence of the divisive relationship between Sarah and Hagar, and how deftly Abraham secures a tomb in Hebron for Sarah at her passing.

Worthington particularly captivates the imagination when she reconstructs from several Jewish traditions how Abraham dispatched the commands of Nimrod to bow down before the gods of nature. Nimrod is clearly outmatched by Abraham's simple but cogent responses:

"I command you to bow down to fire!"

"Why not worship water that can extinguish the fire?"

"Then bow to water."

"Perhaps it would be better to worship the clouds that carry water as rain?"

"Very well. Bow down to the clouds."

"But wind is more powerful. It scatters the clouds."

"Fine. Bow down to the wind."

"Perhaps it would be better to bow down to a person who can endure the wind?" (28)

Nimrod, angered by Abraham's rhetorical responses, casts Him into the fire. Worthington asks, "Just what kind of fire was it?" (29). Notwithstanding the interesting and vivid literal depiction offered by the traditional accounts, she seeks to consider the spiritual reality of this fire and conveys Bahá'u'lláh's understanding that "the fires of envy and rebellion [were that which] were kindled against Him [Abraham]" (29).

As memorable as these stories are, Worthington's examination of the mystical nature of two incidents of Abraham's life merits special consideration. First, she negates the accusation that Abraham was a liar when He informed Pharaoh that Sarah was His sister, for Abraham was simply emphasizing His spiritual relationship to Sarah over any material relation-

ship.¹ Second, she clarifies the discrepancy between biblical and Quranic accounts regarding God's test of Abraham to sacrifice His son to God, identifying biblical evidence that supports the Quranic and Bahá'í accounts that Ishmael, rather than Isaac, was to be sacrificed. What's even more satisfying is that she conveys the wisdom and necessity behind God's asking for such a sacrifice in the first place.

In addition, Worthington does a masterful job of tracing the development of monotheism over time from the "less concrete" to the "more ethereal" (143), from "worshipping the visible and limited" to worshipping the "unseen and unlimited" (26) and the "indivisible" (143). She shows how many polytheistic societies had the seed of monotheism planted within them because they believed one god reigned supreme above all others. Abraham capitalized on this concept, for His "task as a Messenger of God was not to reject or displace El [the all-powerful god of the Semites] . . . with a new god. It was, rather, to enlarge mankind's spiritual understanding of the infinite Godhead" (60). In this context, Worthington examines the possible link between El and four names for God in the Bible: Elohim, Elyon, El Ro'i, and El Shaddai. She extends this connection to Islam whereby the name for God in Arabia, El-llah, becomes Allah in the time of Muhammad. Even in the Aramaic language in which Jesus spoke, Elah was one name for God.

Another major aspect Worthington addresses is the covenant God makes with Abraham. The covenant is multi-fold. God promised that He would make Abraham "a great nation" (43) and "a father of many nations" (91), that "all peoples on earth" would be blessed through Him (43), that His seed would be "as the dust of the earth" (77), and that His family would be given "all the Land of Canaan" (91). One then appreciates the significance of how the covenant is sealed by Worthington's explanation of the Hebrew idiom "cutting a covenant" (78) and by the requirement God gives to Abraham and His male kin to circumcise their foreskins to demonstrate their fidelity to this covenant. She later extends the implica-

1. See also Michael Sours, *Preparing for a Bahá'í Christian Dialogue: Understanding Biblical Evidence*, pp. 143–44.

tion of circumcising one's foreskin to the circumcising of one's heart and soul from worldly desires as conveyed by both Jeremiah and Jesus.

The spiritual influence of this covenant on the succession of Prophets is clear as Moses and Christ descend from Abraham through Sarah; Muhammad and the Báb through Hagar; and Bahá'u'lláh from both Keturah and Sarah. With the aid of statistical genetics, Worthington then lays out a unique perspective, which convincingly demonstrates that not only are Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh descended from Abraham but so is nearly every person living today. It appears that, as His name implies, Abraham truly is the "father of a multitude" (90) both physically and spiritually.

As compelling as this evidence is, some might be disappointed that only simplified genealogical charts depicting the direct lineal descents from Abraham to Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh were included instead of detailed ones. Of course there are reasons for this.

In the case of Christ, although clues derived from scripture imply a direct link from Christ to Abraham through His mother Mary—for scripture indicates Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, was a Levite descended from Aaron, Moses' brother—it does not provide the details of that lineage. Second, although two genealogies of Christ exist tracing Him back to Abraham, neither traces Christ's "biological inheritance," for they both derive from Joseph, and even these genealogies don't agree and "take different routes to get there" (157).

In the case of Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi affirms Bahá'u'lláh's direct lineage to Abraham, but Worthington does not clarify whether an actual lineal chart exists today. She does point us to Balyuzi's *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory*, where one learns that Bahá'u'lláh's half-brother, Hájí Mírzá Ridá-Qulí, "told Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl . . . that the Núrí's possessed a genealogical table tracing their line back to Yazdigird the Sásánian [king]." ² This is important, for Yazdigird was related to Chosroes I, a descendant of King Cyrus of Persia, whose wife was Rahab. Rahab was the daughter of Salathiel, who is documented as a descendant of King David and Abraham

2. See H. M. Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory*, p. 11.

in the first chapter of the Gospel According to Matthew.³ Balyuzi's account further describes Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl's role in compiling Bahá'u'lláh's lineage back to Yazdigird. Unfortunately, Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl conveyed that this compiled work "was lost when he and a number of other Bahá'ís were arrested in Tihrán in the early months of 1883."⁴ A summary of Balyuzi's explanation of this connection along with any information from the Bahá'í World Centre regarding the existence or nonexistence of such a chart existing today would have been a welcome addition to the book.

Nonetheless, Worthington faithfully achieves her goal of presenting a fresh look into the life of Abraham from a Bahá'í perspective. She does this with an ease of expression that makes the book a fast, insightful, and thoughtful read. More importantly, through exhaustive research, she seamlessly weaves the rich source of traditional accounts so beautifully with scripture as to leave us with a profound portrayal of the majestic figure of Abraham, His divine character, and the iconoclastic role He played in establishing monotheism in the world. Indeed, her spiritual acuity discerns the true importance of the events of His life: His joys and sorrows, His tests and victories, His Spirit. One can imagine that her account will be cherished for years to come, especially by those with a keen interest in our religious past.

WORKS CITED

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3. See also Phil Turner, *The Ancestry of Bahá'u'lláh*, Appendix B of *Every Eye Shall See: Bible Evidence for the Return of Christ* (Gary L. Matthews), and the Gospel According to Matthew 1:12 (Read backwards from verse 12 through verse 2).

4. See H. M. Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory*, p. 11.