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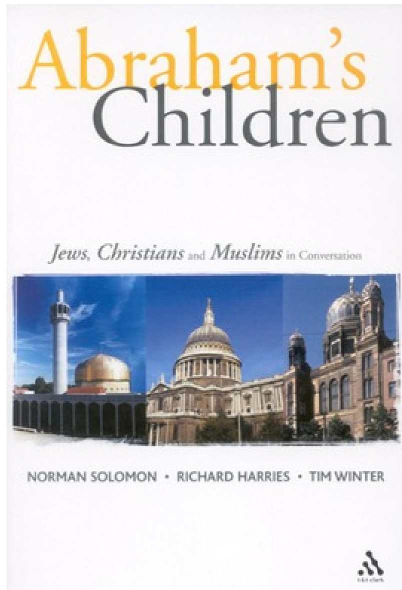

Solomon, Norman, Richard Harries, and Tim Winter, eds.

Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation

New York: T&T Clark, 2006. Pp. xiv + 338. Paper. $39.95. ISBN 0567081613.

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This collection of essays is the result of numerous interfaith trialogue meetings that took place in Oxford, England, over the course of several years (1992–2005). The Oxford Abrahamic Group typically met twice a year with the purpose of discussing various theological topics from Abraham to Muhammad, to gender, to life after death. A member of each of the Abrahamic traditions (Jewish, Muslim, Christian) presented a short paper, which was followed by "extensive discussion" (1). The format was said to be informal: meeting in a home, shared meals, frank discussion, and open exchange of ideas and opinions.

The list of contributors is weighty, though inevitably some will be less familiar to those in biblical studies. However, in addition to experts in the areas of Islamic and qur'anic studies, history and philosophy, systematics and theology, *RBL* readers will likely know contributors such as John Barton, Paul Joyce, and Alison Salvesen. The participants are principally (though not exclusively) academics from within the U.K., a point to which we will return. The tenor of all the essays is congenial, polite, convivial. Each chapter follows the same format: three papers on a chosen topic are presented in essay format followed by an essay tri-authored by the editors, all of whom are key figures in the dialogue and at times authors of the essays under discussion. Each concluding essay serves to summarize,

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comment on, and discuss the essays collectively, with some integration of viewpoints as a result. As will become clear in the conclusion below, this pattern has great potential but ultimately serves to be one of the largest weaknesses of the book.

At the risk of providing too much detail, in what follows I give an overview of each chapter, weighting my discussion to areas or themes that will be of particular interest to readers of *RBL*. Because of this, the initial chapters receive a more substantial treatment. Further, the extensive nature of the book (some thirty-six essays of varying perspectives) necessitates a full, thus somewhat lengthy, review.

After short introductions by the editors, the first chapter begins with Abraham. The pattern throughout the book is for the faith group with (generally speaking) closest ties to the topic to begin each set of essays; in this case Sybil Sheridan presents first, from a Jewish perspective. The essay explores Abraham through the Genesis stories, especially the call narrative and the Akedah, and then looks at Abraham in Jewish liturgy and his relationship with Isaac and Ishmael. She shows that, although Ishmael is never viewed as negatively as Esau in Jewish tradition, he is nevertheless not the son of the promise. Paul Joyce presents an insightful essay on Abraham from a Christian perspective. Interestingly, he begins with the New Testament and discusses its multiperspectival nature, spending time to investigate Abraham as a figure of "faith" (as opposed to "works"), before exploring Christian traditions up to the modern day, concluding with the author whose work on Abraham he favors, R. W. L. Moberly. Tim Winter's essay, from a Muslim perspective, is particularly informative for those outside of Islamic studies. If for nothing else (though there is much rich content within), the essay is helpful in its explanation of how the Qur'an often presents figures of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures as ideals, devoted figures of faith who are "stripped of their sins which supply, in the eyes of many, much of the richness and moral ambiguity of the Bible stories" (28). In one section Winter explores the Akedah with reference to whether divine commands are moral independent of God or whether they are moral because they are divinely commanded. He exposes the dominant Sunni view (the latter) before discussing Abraham's status in Islam. He concludes with the qur'anic dictum that there is no distinction between any of God's prophets (Qur'an 2.285), a point certainly in need of clarification in the light of, to take one example, Mawlid al-Nabi (Birthday of the Prophet) and its widespread practice.

The essays on Moses are varied, beginning with Jonathan Gorsky, who explores Moses (from a Jewish perspective) through the eyes of the Samaritans, Philo Judaeus, and rabbinic Judaism. Particularly helpful is his discussion (through a story concerning Rabbi Akiva and Moses) on Torah and the development of oral tradition in Judaism. John Barton provides the essay on a Christian view of Moses, exploring Moses as mystic, liberator, and lawgiver. The latter topic dominates, and in many ways the essay serves to

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bolster the work of E. P. Sanders and others, arguing for a positive Christian reappropriation of Judaism against that of an outmoded, binary-opposed (particularly Lutheran), law-versus-grace view. Annabel Keeler's essay presents Moses (Musa) as Muhammad's predecessor, a prophet of Islam mentioned far more than any other in the Qur'an (56). She highlights Moses' role as lawgiver, though Keeler makes clear that his message, like that of Muhammad, is for the whole of humanity, not just one people (i.e., Israel). The chapter concludes with an editorial summary of each essay and, notwithstanding mention of one or two points of contrast, a discussion on those areas where the three traditions agree.

The third chapter, on Jesus, begins with Kallistos Ware, who brings an Eastern Orthodox perspective to the conversation. Resurrection is central to the Christian understanding of Jesus presented here, and Ware eschews a resuscitation view, noting the impossibility of Jesus' position as the risen Christ to be embraced or paralleled in Islam or Judaism. The essay is without pretense in its survey of topics from the idea of Jesus' deity to that of a second coming in the eschaton. Though rich in scope and detail, the essay will undoubtedly leave the Gospels scholar, particularly historical Jesus scholar, disappointed. The Jewish perspective presented next, by Sheridan, makes the bold claim that Jesus is of no interest to Judaism. Acknowledging that academia may possess some interest in the person of Jesus, she argues that ultimately "Judaism exists—or at least, thinks it exists—without reference to the person of Jesus, and that studies that show the opposite are rare and recent" (87). Despite this, Sheridan's essay explores the Jesus of rabbinic and modern Jewish literature, showing that most often the discussion is concerned with Christian *teaching* or *doctrine* rather than his person. Notwithstanding the recent surge of Jewish understandings of Jesus and participation of Jewish academics in Jesus studies, there is likely something to her pervading (at times overstated) thesis that the person Jesus "has made no impact at all on the beliefs and practices of the Jewish faithful" (97). The essay by Basil Mustafa, presenting Jesus from a Muslim perspective, argues for Islam's positive portrayal of Jesus. Though the Qur'an rejects "the doctrine of Jesus as the incarnation of God" (101), it nonetheless affirms Jesus as a Messenger of God, "the promised Messiah foretold in the Torah" (101), one born of a virgin, and in the narration of one Muslim authority, Muhammad has said: "'If anyone believes in Jesus son of Mary and then believes in me, then he will have a double reward'" (103).

The fourth chapter begins with a Muslim perspective of Muhammad, presented by Tim Winter. The essay is extensive in its treatment of the prophet as intercessor, personal guide, moral exemplar, and prototype of the mystic. Mention is made of Muhammad as "the perfect human being" (117), and topics range from the moral status of polygamy to the use of force and Muhammad's role as "the liberator of the whole of [hu]mankind, through liberation of the weak among them" (120). Keith Ward, author of the subsequent

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essay from a Christian perspective, makes it his aim to dispel negative Christian assessments of Muhammad, in one place stating that those in his tradition "must repent and ask for forgiveness for their stupidity and spitefulness" (125). While his aim is noble and there is much that is astute here and needs to be heard, his reluctance to admit any disparity in Christian-Muslim portrayals of Muhammad taints the essay and in many ways exemplifies a problem with much of the interfaith dialogue presented (a point to which we will return). Norman Solomon's essay, from a Jewish perspective, immediately admits that with regard to Muhammad, "There is no Jewish view" (132). Solomon takes the reader through various (scarce) references to Muhammad in Jewish literature before examining the rabbanite Jew Netanel ibn Fayyumi's work (acknowledging Muhammad's claim to prophecy), which, he argues, has had little influence in Jewish thought. Solomon notes modern Jewish interest in the West but attributes this more to the secular academic context in which it arose than to theological concern. He concludes by arguing, however, similarly to the editors' summary essay, that despite this general lack of interest, persons of other faith traditions need to move away from perceiving Islam as "a rival or usurper with a competing claim to exclusive truth, but as another manifestation of the infinite self-revelation of God" (139).

The remaining chapters shift in focus from "Foundations of Faith" to "Resources for the Modern World." In chapter five the authors explore the "Image of God in Humanity." From rabbinics to Levinas, Solomon emphasizes the worth of each individual in Judaism, according to the principle *imitatio Dei*. Salvesen travels through various biblical texts, in the Old and New Testaments, then leads the reader through patristic and later interpretation to conclude with a reflection on human relationships and their relation to the inner workings of the Trinity. Yahya Michot shows that according to the Qur'an nothing is in the likeness of God; God is wholly other, yet he is the one who gave humans form. It might be best, he argues, to consider Muhammad as the human with the highest of callings, and in essence Islam would be "*imitatio Muhammadi*" (174).

In chapter 6 "Pluralism" is explored, and authors now familiar to the reader, Solomon, Ward, and Winter, supply the main contributions. Solomon's essay is particularly helpful, and he provides a much-needed discussion of Noahide law in addition to an array of other topics. Ward expounds what he calls "the main orthodox view," inclusivism, yet this description is certainly suspect outside of a Western liberal context. Though he aims to cover all positions fairly, his treatment of exclusivism is too brief and in many ways inadequate; given that he spends much time in dialogue with John Hick's pluralism, it is unfortunate that he indicates no awareness of the important exchanges between Hick, Alston, and Plantinga (see *Faith and Philosophy* 14.3 [1997] and Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief* [Oxford University Press, 2000]). While I would favor Ward's view, his treatment all too often asserts this position as a matter of fact, or the overwhelmingly

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dominant one (except for a few misguided evangelicals), to such a degree that one might wonder why anyone in Christian history ever sent missionaries or presented the gospel to others at all. Tim Winter's following essay, on the other hand, presents an evenhanded case, showing that although other religions may point to truth, they ultimately fall short; quoting from J. McAuliffe's work, he states, "In no way, then, does biblical Christianity remain a fully valid 'way of salvation' after the advent of Muhammad" (208).

The essays on "Gender" (ch. 7) provide important, thoughtful contributions from Sheridan (Jewish perspective) and Marcus Braybrooke (Christian perspective), both of whom present something of a middle ground in issues from feminism to homosexuality. Winter's essay helpfully addresses a range of issues and again is evenhanded; however, readers will undoubtedly be disappointed in his decision not to review the provisions of the Sharia with regard to gender equality; further, his treatment of female imams, and the idea that the lack thereof is of little concern to women activists (240), is certainly in need of revision after the Wadud prayer in New York. The chapter on "Environment" (ch. 8) presents essays from Solomon, Ware, and Islamic thinker Lufti Radwan. The latter author's essay tends toward theory, while Solomon provides a breath of fresh air with a practical treatment of real issues from animal rights, to population control, to nuclear power, to conservation. Ware provides something of a *via media*, including a discussion on the relationship between resurrection and redemption—for humankind *and* the environment.

The final chapter, on "Life after Death," presents essays from Solomon, Richard Harries, and Michot. Solomon explores issues from reincarnation to bodily resurrection and includes a reflective "Personal View." Harries's essay from a Christian perspective is thorough and includes a few surprises; judgment, heaven, and hell are carefully explored, and despite his obvious reservations, Harries cautions that when "faced by the sheer evils of the twentieth century in the Holocaust, the purges of Stalin, the genocide of Pol Pot, the ethnic cleansing in Rwanda, to mention just a few, we need to be wary about any easy talk of forgiveness" (305). Michot's essay from a Muslim perspective also addresses head on thorny issues such as hedonism, paradise, and sexual encounter in the afterlife. His treatment shows the great significance of life after death for Islam, and despite need for clarification in areas, the essay provides a helpful synopsis.

The book comes to an abrupt end with the editors' summary essay on "Life after Death." There is no conclusion. Despite the fact that the entire collection was introduced as something of a "window" into the dialogue that took place over the years by the Oxford Abrahamic Group, the reader is left with little as to where all of this has led. My point here leads to a fuller critique, to which we turn.

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It is tempting to say that the essays range in quality, as most collections do, but that would perhaps be too simple. As noted throughout, there is much in this collection that shines, and the book overall serves as a good overview and introduction to the Abrahamic faiths. In reading the book, however, I could not help but regularly recall the subtitle of the book: *Jews, Christians and Muslims in Conversation*. It became increasingly clear that the title could or should have been *Moderate, Western, Academic, Jews, Christians and Muslims in Conversation*. In some ways this is not a criticism so much as it is an observation. There is a warning in the introduction to this effect (2–3); that is, the views presented are not necessarily representative or neutral, and the point is well taken. The problem, however, is that at times the authors of individual essays do not make this clear enough, and in places the essayists present their position as the dominant or pervasive view. It may be one with which most Western academics agree, but it may also be rather unrepresentative of each faith group's practitioners. There are exceptions to this rule to be sure, and I have tried to note these in the course of the review.

One can nitpick over the choice of topics (Where is Israel, land, fundamentalism, scripture, democracy, free speech, or violence/just war?), but this may simply point to the need for a second volume. There is, however, a more appropriate problem to note here: the book's format. Although effort was made to provide something of a commentary and discussion on each chapter topic (through concluding essays by the editors), these discussions tend simply to repeat the ideas of the essays (in places annoyingly so) with what I can only describe as integration as a final goal. Again, there are exceptions, but missing is the "extensive discussion" mentioned in the book's introduction, the lively exchange one can only imagine these papers would have birthed. The reader is given the impression that the papers gave way to polite exchanges of "Yes, good point," when there must have been much more conversed. Admittedly, the editors never promise to capture the full ethos or expression of the meetings, but it would have been helpful to have something more of the exchange represented.

The largest problem with the book, to my mind, is conveniently represented by the book's cover image (see above). The decision to place side-by-side Regent Park Mosque, St Paul's Cathedral, and Berlin's Neue Synagogue shows something of the philosophy of the dialogue contained in the book. The dialogue in this collection tends to emphasize similarities, at times reaching or stretching to find them. It probably involved some effort to find places of worship from each tradition that bear such clear affinities; after all, Christian and Jewish places of worship typically do not have domes like mosques. But in presenting each Abrahamic faith as places of worship with domes, the fuller, richer, and more representative images of steep roofs, square steeples, and stained glass have been excised. The scope of this review will not permit a full critique of this form of dialogue; instead, I point the reader to the work of Jon Levenson and others (see, e.g., "How Not to

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Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *Commentary* 112.5 [2001]: 31–37; and "Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Jon D. Levenson and Critics," *Commentary* 113.4 [2002]: 8–21). Levenson rightly argues that real dialogue occurs when each faith group works through its most particularistic faith claims together with the other. While agreement on religious ideas may be the outcome in certain instances, this cannot be achieved in every case, lest important tenets for each group be downplayed, ignored, or compromised. A real value of this book is its convivial nature, something from which we can all learn, but there are real limitations too.

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