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Henry Hanoch Abramovitch is associate professor in the Department of Medical Education in the Sackler School of Medicine at Tel Aviv University and founding President of the Israel Institute of Jungian psychology. Here he brings psychological perspectives to bear in an exploration of the personality, achievements, and impact of the patriarch Abraham. The review edition was published by Libertary (now www.booktrope.com) and is an expansion of Abramovitch’s 1977 Ph.D. dissertation in the Department of Psychology at Yale University.

The introduction in chapter 1 begins with the Akedah, the story of Abraham’s “binding” of his son Isaac preparatory to sacrificing him. This incident has led more than one commentator to speculate on Abraham’s mental stability, but Abramovitch argues that the story can only be properly understood within the context of Abraham’s life. After a brief introduction to the texts he will use throughout, and an outline of the overall story of Abraham, the author proposes that the patriarch can best be understood as a spiritual innovator faced with the characteristic challenges of balancing a revolutionary separation with the past and the need to pass along a new tradition to succeeding generations.
Abramovitch describes his method as a combination of biblical studies, cultural anthropology, and lifecycle psychology. He proposes doing a close reading Hebrew text, with the assumption that it fairly accurately reflects “the cultural practices, kinship pattern, ecology, rituals etc. of Abraham and his tribe” (23), and thus can reveal Abraham’s “life history.”

He notes the large body of critical material relating to Abraham’s story. Declaring it unlikely that one can uncover the historical Abraham, he takes Abraham “as he appears in the present redacted text who is the Abraham for believers” (26). The introduction concludes with some comments on construction and wordplay, sentence structures, and vowel markings in the Hebrew text.

In the second chapter, “Abraham in Context,” Abramovitch seeks to place the biblical story of Abraham within three contexts: the literary and theological structure of the book of Genesis, Abraham’s development as an adult in light of Daniel Levinson’s lifecycle theory of adult development, and biblical notions of biography.

The references to Abraham’s age in the text, rather incredible by modern standards, are rather to be taken as relative indicators in Abraham’s lifespan. Since his biblical lifespan of 175 years is at least twice the expected, the author proposes that the story uses “biblical years,” which are roughly equal to two contemporary years. This would put the events from God’s call to the Akedah into Abraham’s middle adulthood.

Chapter 3, “Life with Father,” explores how a spiritual revolutionary must let go of the God of the father and yet find some way of consolidating the new vision for the next generation. Abramovitch discerns the relationship of Abram to his father Terah, his wife (and half-sister?) Sarai, and his brothers. He describes classic Freudian approaches as being “child-centered,” while the biblical texts are “father-centered.” Conflicts in Genesis are more often between siblings than fathers and sons.

Abram’s call (Gen 12) represents Levinson’s “Breaking Out,” a developmental crisis. By leaving his father’s home, Abram enters a new adventure and opens the way for his eventual fusing of the tribal God of Mesopotamia with an ethically demanding Creator God—the “God of Abraham.”

“Abraham as Wanderer,” the fourth chapter, considers Levinson’s developmental task of early adulthood, namely, “forming a Dream and giving it a place in the life structure.” Key factors in negotiating this stage involve the importance of women in carrying on the line, survival strategies that involve the naming of Sarai as wife and/or sister, and the importance of mentoring in Abram’s relationships with Melchizedek and Lot.
This wandering time, the author argues, is a time of extreme isolation for Abram. After leaving home, he does not affiliate with a new group but becomes a wanderer, moving freely in and out; this intense isolation is necessary in shaping spiritual founders.

The next chapter, “Abram the Founder,” focuses on Gen 14 and 15, the war against the local kings and the rescue of Lot, followed by God’s promise, confirmed in the covenant ceremony. Abramovitch takes the declaration that “he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6) as an indication that “Abram has developed an autonomous internalized morality” (90).

A “life history” is the chronology of a person’s life events; at this point, Abramovitch argues, we have moved into Abram’s “life story,” an interpretation of those events to make a coherent story.

Next we encounter “Abram Reborn as Abraham.” Abramovitch describes the meaning of a name change in ancient Near Eastern culture. Circumcision as a ritual event carries different significance for Abraham, an adult; Ishmael, on the verge of adulthood; and Isaac, still a child.

The encounter with the angels in Genesis 18 displays ambiguities in the text that suggest a development of the God-image not only for Abraham but within the book of Genesis itself.

With Abraham’s development in relationship to God come several “Crises of Growth,” (ch. 7). His new relationship with God is demonstrated in his defense of Sodom on ethical, not tribal, grounds, calling God to account. The events following the destruction of Sodom seem to reveal posttraumatic stress within Lot’s family. The events in Gen 17–20 describe Abraham’s development into a prophet, a mediator between God and the world.

Genesis 21 covers the relatively stable years of middle adulthood and set the stage for the Akedah (ch. 8). It includes the birth of Isaac and expulsion of Ishmael, the treaty with Abimelech, and settling into Beersheba. The Akedah represents a second crisis of generativity. Abramovitch explores the ambiguity Abraham might feel that brings necessity and denial to his actions.

Chapter 9, “Final Reconciliation,” notes that the Akedah marks the high point of Abraham’s development. In the remaining chapters of the Abraham saga, God no longer appears because Abraham’s spiritual development has been completed. The remaining tasks of old age are those of ensuring physical continuity: the purchase of the cave of Machpelah and the selection of an appropriate wife for Isaac.
In his concluding chapter, “Psychology of Spiritual Revolution,” Abramovitch attempts to generalize from the specific story of Abraham to a more general theory of spiritual revolution.

Additional materials include an epilogue, “Abraham and the Paths of Peace,” which observes that the story of Abraham plays an important role in relation to the contemporary conflicts between Israel and Palestine. Expansionists claim God’s promise of the land as a birthright, while others look to Abraham as a model for the stranger who comes into a land not his own and finds ways to live peacefully with his neighbors.

An appendix, “Common Cultural-Ecological Background,” offers some textual and cultural background materials for Abraham’s saga. Finally, there are footnotes, a bibliography, and two indices—one general and one of scriptural texts.

Works like this that seek to bring together the two disciplines of psychology and biblical studies reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the author. As a psychologist, Abramovitch is conversant with the perspectives and issues of that field, but he is less able to handle the complexities of biblical studies. Although he clearly has read extensively in the literature, he does not seem to have integrated it coherently into his own work. Evidently, much of that critical reading was done as part of the original dissertation, as most of the works cited are thirty years old or more.

It is not clear at times whether he purports to be studying Abraham as a historical figure, Abraham as a character in the stories of Genesis, or Abraham as he is developed in later rabbinic literature. Biblical scholars are likely to be frustrated by Abramovich’s blend of historical, anthropological, and psychological theories. His core premise—that the key events of Abraham’s life reflect the common experiences of midlife—raises the question of whether a contemporary psychological theory can be applied usefully to an ancient individual, especially one known to us only through a written record that is itself shaped by literary convention, theological intention, and tradition. In some instances, such an investigation can yield fruitful insights, but in this case it feels that Abramovitch has begun with his conclusions and reasoned backward to interpret Abraham to fit the theory.

Finally, the book suffers from the lack of an editorial hand. Problems with punctuation and typesetting appear throughout, footnotes are misnumbered or omitted in the text, and bibliographic citations are misspelled or missing dates of publication. In-text citations often do not appear in the bibliography.