In the acknowledgments at the beginning of *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Jon Levenson avers that he has lectured on this subject for more than three decades. Reading through his thoughtful and extensive treatment of the patriarch, one can certainly see connections with his previous publications on such topics as the Aqedah or Sinai, but this work is in no way redundant. A new dimension of this book is the way that Levenson discusses the relationships between the three faiths mentioned in the subtitle, highlighting the commonalities as well as the differences. When Levenson discusses the Christian and Jewish understandings of Gen 12:3b, for example, he explains that he is concerned to “challenge the convenient dichotomy” (34) between them. Such an impulse runs through the book as Levenson is careful to note connections and overlap. Yet he is also careful not to blur the differences among the faiths. In fact, throughout the book Levenson makes the case that Abraham can only be understood as the father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam if the distinctions between the three are flattened.

The introduction—“Who Was (and Is) Abraham?”—lays out the structure and central ideas in the book, which will attempt to answer the titular question by starting with the Jewish Bible. Levenson is a careful reader attuned to literary details, but he also utilizes
source criticism and theology as he discusses the specific texts. However, as Levenson points out (2), any discussion of Abraham cannot limit itself to Genesis, for three reasons. First, because the text is laconic, it calls for interpretation. Levenson writes concerning Gen 12:10–20 that it is “so compressed and so cryptic that it is susceptible to many interpretations, some diametrically opposite to others” (37). In reference to Gen 22, he explains, “the austerity of the narrative leaves us uncertain, even as it prompts us to fill in the gaps.” (75) Second, Levenson points out that within Judaism the Bible is always “bundled” (2) with a rich corpus of interpretation. The postbiblical Abraham found in those interpretations may take on qualities not explicitly described in the text and in some cases the traditions about Abraham overwhelm the textuality. Third, Abraham’s relationship to Islam and Christianity can only be seen fully by moving beyond Genesis. Within Islam, Genesis is not part of the canon. Within Christianity, Abraham is read through the lens of Paul (and, at times, a distorted understanding of the Pauline message, as Levenson demonstrates). Therefore, Levenson includes reception history of Abraham, tracing his identity through midrash and Talmud, within the Qur’an and New Testament, and even through the present day.

Chapter 1, “Call and Commission,” considers the topic of “chosenness” and its related term, “election.” Levenson points out how the tradition of Israel’s origin in Gen 12—as a divine promise to a childless ancestor—demonstrates that this is a people whose very existence depends on God’s providence and God’s willingness to sustain it. Levenson also reads Ezek 16 as a variant tradition about origins, suggesting that if we read the people of Israel as standing for Jerusalem in the text, then the chosen people are a child born of mixed origins, adopted (and married) by God (22). Ezekiel’s depiction of Israel coming from the mixed marriage between an Amorite and a Hittite means that chosenness cannot equal racism (23). Still, the text’s emphasis on a promised heir coming from Abram’s own loins (Gen 15:4) means that the people of God are not merely a community with a common creed or faith. Levenson explains,

the people Israel is neither a nationality in the conventional sense nor a churchlike body composed of like-minded believers or practitioners of a common set of norms. Having something in common with both of these more familiar identities, it reduces to neither of them. Rather, as the call and commission of Abram already indicate, it is a natural family with a supernatural mandate. (24)

In this same chapter Levenson also treats the common understanding that God’s people are chosen for a mission, as he patiently explains varying—and variant—interpretations of the phrase in Gen 12:3b about Abram blessing the families of the earth. Levenson concludes this chapter by dealing with the Christian interpretation of chosenness that equates being chosen (or “elect”) with being saved. In particular, he argues that the book
of Genesis lacks a notion that Abram’s chosenness is contingent on, or even implies, the rejection of others.

In chapter 2, Levenson treats the “Frustrations and Fulfillment” related to childlessness and its eventual end. As he discusses Gen 12:10–20, he places Ramban’s interpretation in conversation with that of Assyriologist Barry L. Eichler (38–39). The way Levenson combines interpretations, and utilizes differing methodologies, is part of what makes his work so rich. Levenson also poses a theological question about Abraham that reverberates into the three faiths discussed: “Does faith in God and his promises require in the beneficiaries a stance of quietism and passivity, or does it, rather, require the opposite stance of human initiative and activism to help bring about the promised result?” (38). Obviously, there cannot be a simple or simplistic answer to that question, and Levenson does not attempt such an answer. He will deal with it in more detail in subsequent chapters, particularly as he looks at the reception of Gen 15:6.

Chapter 3 is titled “The Test,” and, indeed, the Aqedah can be understood as the single most important test Abraham undergoes. The chapter begins with a close reading of Gen 22, followed by a tour through its reception in Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism (89–99), in Christian interpretations (99–104), and in the Qur’an (104–6). Tucked within these pages are insightful comments on topics such as the association of the Aqedah with Passover and Rosh Hashanah (92–96) and negative implications of typology (103). Levenson concludes the chapter by working through Immanuel Kant’s use of the Aqedah as the example of an irrational person believing that an “immoral” command can come from God. He warns that Kant has “abstracted the story not only from the larger web of biblical law and theology but also from the story of Abraham in Genesis” (107). Levenson suggests that Kant’s interpretation of Abraham, which locates the story within ethics and not in narrative and theology, is the forerunner for subsequent interpretations of Abraham’s actions as villainous or violent. A recent example he gives is Yvonne Sherwood’s point that the letters found in the Boston airport, written by the al-Qaeda hijackers of the planes on September 11, 2001, suggested “an allusion to the Abrahamic sacrifice in the Qur’an” (108, referencing Sherwood’s “Binding-Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the ‘Sacrifice’ of Abraham's Beloved Son,” JAAR 72 [2004]: 824). Levenson deals with the assumptions present in such interpretations of Abraham as willing to commit a heinous, immoral act. To those who are concerned that reading Gen 22 could lead to such disastrous real-world results as filicide, he argues that there is a scarcity of attempts to imitate the Aqedah (111). With reference to Islam, he is careful to acknowledge the complexity of 9/11 and the intricate hermeneutics that would be required for someone to draw on the Muslim story of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his unnamed son as a model for contemporary violent behavior (111).
Chapter 4 departs from a pattern of beginning with the Jewish Bible, then discussing implications and interpretations of the texts. Instead, titled “The Rediscovery of God,” this chapter traces how the biblical Abraham evolves into a “monotheistic purist” (117) and an iconoclast who refuses to serve false gods (121) in Judaism and Islam. As Levenson puts it, he traces “the process by which Abraham the father of the Jewish people became Abraham the founder, or rediscoveror, of belief in the one true God as well” (139). Levenson points out the “profound philosophical issues lurking behind these seemingly naïve stories” (123), such as God’s relationship to physical matter (God exists, but not as an object; God created the universe with its physical laws, etc.). Thus, the postbiblical Abraham is not only a champion of monotheism, but he also becomes a teacher of philosophy, particularly in Josephus’s characterization of him in the *Jewish Antiquities*. Different midrashim have Abraham teaching others about God and even converting them into Judaism. Even if these Abrahams bear scant resemblance to the patriarch in Genesis, Levenson shows how they have been shaped into their final forms through the religious traditions that reflect upon him.

Chapter 5, “Torah and Gospel,” focuses on the way that Judaism and Christianity respectively understand Abraham to be a model for following the law and walking in faith. It is in the Second Temple period that Abraham is understood as someone who kept the Torah—in whole or in part—even before it was revealed to Israel at Sinai. Throughout the book Levenson has pointed out that interpretations within Judaism do not agree, and the same is true within Christianity. Levenson’s explanation of how Paul and James use Gen 15:6 is a salient example of how the New Testament is consistent in insisting that Abraham is a model, even though he models different things (faith and works) in different ways.

“One Abraham or Three?” (ch. 6) returns to a discussion of all three faiths. Levenson begins by describing the recent initiative for interreligious and international cooperation sponsored by the Global Negotiation Project at Harvard University and titled “Abraham’s Path.” Ultimately Levenson praises the impulse behind the initiative, as it seeks reconciliation in a deeply divided world. Yet he points out that, if Abraham is the one in whom Judaism, Christianity, and Islam find their common ground, some of the distinctive theological positions of the three faiths—such as the Christian belief in a triune God—must be suspended. Levenson addresses Bruce Feiler’s popular (and best-selling) work on Abraham and Karl-Josef Kuschel’s scholarly treatment of the patriarch. As Levenson goes through their arguments, he explains how some of their assumptions are not accurate. This final chapter of the book culminates with the point Levenson has been making throughout the work, that Abraham is seen quite differently in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

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It is worth noting that the three faiths mentioned are not given equal amounts of time in the book; Levenson spends more time discussing Judaism than Christianity and less time on Islam than the other two. This is not necessarily a fault because Levenson’s work reflects his own religious commitments, but it may be helpful for the reader to know ahead of time.

In Levenson’s own words, he is writing for “both general and scholarly readers” (xiii). Throughout the book he strikes a fine balance in addressing both audiences, with the exception of a few places where his argument would benefit from more detailed referents. For example, when Levenson discusses Abram and Sarai’s sojourn to Egypt in Gen 12:10–20, he refers to the reputed sexual deviance of the Egyptians elsewhere in the Bible (36). It would be helpful to have a brief reference to Ezek 16 and 23, particularly for those readers who might be unaware of how those chapters describe Egypt. A second example where Levenson’s characteristically careful and detailed discussion seems to be missing is in his assertion that in Gen 17:18 Abraham fears that God will kill Ishmael (51). If Levenson is drawing on interpretive traditions to explain Abraham’s emotions, it would be helpful to read some referent to that tradition. That leads me to another critique of the book: instead of footnotes, it has endnotes. This seems to be typical of the Princeton University Press, but because Levenson’s citations are so rich and thoughtful, it is especially frustrating to have to flip back and forth between the chapters and the endnotes.

Overall, *Inheriting Abraham* is a book to be savored, lingering over the fine points in Levenson’s writing. It is a book to be discussed in the classroom (probably at the graduate level, though a colleague of mine used it with undergraduate students) and in religious communities. It is an important book, particularly in our present historical situation, when it is imperative that we understand the differences, as well as the commonalities, among these religions.