

Book Notes - Rabbi Steven Rubenstein

Inheriting Abraham by Jon Levenson

Did you ever wonder how Abraham became such a critical Jewish ancestor even though he lived his whole life without celebrating Shabbat and without keeping kosher? Or did you ever wonder why Akedat Yitzhak, the Binding of Isaac (which is so central in Jewish tradition that we read it on Rosh Hashana and refer to it in our daily prayers) is hardly referred to again the entire Tanakh after the story itself? No? Well, that's OK because Jon Levenson has asked these questions and quite a few others in his book *Inheriting Abraham*. Levenson is Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity School and one of the most respected Bible scholars in the world today.

The questions above are actually only a small part of this book which is actually a consideration of the role of Abraham in Abraham, Christianity, and Islam. Levenson isn't interested in easy answers. In a post-9/11 world he recognizes (and appreciates) the desire to find avenues for Jews, Christians, and Muslims to communicate and to find common ground. Nevertheless he is troubled by those who use the term 'Abrahamic Religions' as a short-cut--as if, the simple recognition that all three religions share Abraham could eliminate the very real differences between the three faiths. In fact, Levenson explores the deep complexity of the topic rather than settling for clichés.

The final chapter of his book, titled "One Abraham or Three?" makes the case that in fact, each religion has laid claim to a **different** Abraham. That is, the role and relative importance of Abraham in the three traditions is quite different one from the other—for the record, Levenson believes that Abraham plays the most central role in Islam.

Aside from marveling at the wonder of Levenson's knowledge of all three traditions that are explored in *Inheriting Abraham*, I found myself appreciating two outcomes of reading the book. First is a renewed sense of who Abraham is in Jewish tradition overall—first Jew? Observant Jew? Philosopher of Monotheism? All of the above? In addition, Levenson provides us with a great opportunity to learn about Christianity and Islam. A professor of Religious Studies once said, 'one who knows but one religion knows none.' That is, only by understanding the development of Judaism within a broader knowledge of other traditions can we really understand the choices our ancestors made. I'm not

sure how far I would take this but it is clear that Levenson has given us a chance to gain greater insight into our own tradition through this broad exploration of Abraham.