

BOOK REVIEW

Abram to Abraham: A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative

by JONATHAN GROSSMAN

(Bern: Peter Lang, 2016)

Reviewed by
David Curwin

The stories of Abraham are among the most familiar in all of biblical literature. Children learn about him even before entering school, and year after year we review the four weekly Torah portions in which he appears. One might assume that any book about Abraham could just be added to the piles of countless commentaries written over the centuries.

However, such an approach would be missing something important about the centrality of Abraham to our understanding of the Torah overall. Our familiarity with the stories masks great ambiguity regarding what they are supposed to teach us. Is the story of Abraham one with a universal message, describing a man who discovers God through his inquiries and whose teachings are relevant to all of humanity? Or is this the account of God's choice of a particular individual, somehow different from all his contemporaries, and how his descendants will eventually form a nation distinct from all others?

And what kind of relationship between man and God are we to learn from Abraham? One of obedience, as exemplified by the *Akedah*? Or one of Divine-human partnership, even with occasional conflicts like Abraham's argument with God to save the city of Sodom?

These questions are not answered clearly in the text, and their philosophical echoes can be heard throughout Jewish thought—in the midrash, in the differences between the medieval scholars Halevi and Maimonides, and even today in the debates over the nature of Jewish religion and nationhood.

The key to understanding the apparent conflicts and contradictions in Abraham's personality and mission is to take a much wider view and look at all of the chapters of Genesis discussing Abraham. This is where Dr. Jonathan Grossman's book, *Abram to Abraham: A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative* (translated from Hebrew by Atara Snowbell) proves to be a valuable resource. Whereas most Torah study focuses on individual verses or specific stories, Grossman, a professor of Bible at Bar Ilan University, reviews the entirety of Genesis 11-22. In doing so, he

reveals a “chiastic or concentric structure” (p. 37), where the initial and concluding stories contain parallel elements (such as the imperative “*Lekh lekha*” found in God’s command to Abraham to go to the land of Canaan and in the *Akedah*), with the parallels continuing towards a central passage. While Grossman is not the first scholar to note this structure in the Abraham narrative, his presentation of a number of different alternatives, including analysis of their advantages and disadvantages, illustrates the complexity of the subject.

However, what is particularly illuminating is not just the aesthetic beauty of the chiastic structure, but in the differences between the parallel sections. Grossman details two different aspects to the Abraham story. One, marked by the ineffable Tetragrammaton, indicates a personal relationship between Abraham and God, focusing on Abraham’s personal actions and needs, particularly regarding his own family. The other aspect, which uses the name *Elohim*, relates to God’s overall plan for history and the role the future nation of Israel will play. Sometimes these two aspects will appear in different verses in the same story, and sometimes we will find parallel stories with similar, but distinct, themes. For example, Grossman points out a “double narrative” in the tidings of Isaac’s birth (p. 333), and explains that Chapter 17 relates to “the implementation of God’s plan” while Chapter 18 portrays “Isaac’s birth as a personal reward to Abraham and Sarah for their hospitality.”

Grossman’s comprehensive familiarity with biblical scholarship—from midrashim and traditional Jewish commentaries to modern academic research, both Jewish and non-Jewish—enables him to explain the deeper significance of these literary devices. Orthodox readers of his book will find some preconceptions challenged, but Grossman succeeds in developing a framework that does not discredit tradition. I myself was shocked to read his suggestion (p. 460) that perhaps the *Akedah* took place on Mt. Sinai and not in Jerusalem, but Grossman offers literary and geographic arguments for such a claim. Unfortunately for English readers, the more extensive discussion included in his Hebrew book was not quoted here, and so sources in rabbinic literature that could also have provided evidence are not mentioned.¹

Although the Torah remains purposely ambiguous regarding the circumstances of Abraham’s election, some of Grossman’s most interesting

¹ Grossman’s parallel Hebrew book, *Avraham: Sipuro shel Masa* (Tel Aviv: Sifrei Maskel, 2014), while published earlier than the English one reviewed here, was actually written later. The two books share the same structure and most of the content, but there is not a precise correlation between the two editions.

TRADITION

insights relate to the nature of the developing relationship between Abraham and God. Grossman notes that Abraham's brother Nahor was the more logical choice to be entrusted with God's mission because he had children and their other brother Haran, who also had had children, was dead. By choosing Abraham, God enhanced "the sense of divine selection throughout the narrative cycle" (p. 71). Selecting Nahor, the obvious but not mysterious choice, would not have shed light on the relationship between God and His elected. He would have appeared as simply the son of Terah, just another "begat" in the genealogies listed in the opening chapters of Genesis.

However, despite the emphasis on the relationship between Abraham and God, the element of obedience still plays an important role. As Grossman points out, in both the initial "*Lekh lekha*" and in the test of the *Akedah*, God does not tell Abraham the destination. Grossman reveals "the true purpose of the initial concealment: God will lead the way. Abraham might know where to go, but the place is selected by God" (p. 467). When it comes to fulfilling a command of God, the distinction between sovereign and subject is explicit.

Abraham's relationship with God continues throughout the entire narrative. It is not consistent and calm, but constantly being tested and strained. Sometimes the stories deal explicitly with Abraham's faith in God, as expressed through their dialogue, and other times the question is whether or not Abraham walks in God's way without direct communication. Grossman delves into these subjects in great detail, one example being an examination of whether Abraham acted properly in his dealings with the kings Pharaoh and Abimelekh.

The pinnacle of the relationship between Abraham and God is at the *Akedah*, following which God does not speak to Abraham further, although Grossman's book continues until the end of Abraham's life. Grossman writes (p. 488) that it was the *Akedah*, where Abraham went beyond his covenantal obligations by showing willingness to sacrifice his promised son, which made the covenant between God and the family of Abraham unbreakable. This provides an interesting contrast to Maharal, who writes (*Netsah Yisrael* 11) that the covenant can never be rescinded because it was not based on any righteous act of Abraham, so no subsequent lack of righteousness by his descendants can invalidate it. Grossman, however, concludes that "God's response is a promise; the blessings are now anchored and independent of Abraham's loyalty. Even if Abraham's offspring should sin and become unfaithful to the covenant, they will maintain the merit of the binding of Isaac, and their relationship with God will prevail."

Book Review

Grossman's willingness to explore every avenue of scholarship, no matter what source, shows a great deal of courage. The book has a very impressive bibliography; an index would have been equally appreciated. He risks offending traditional readers by quoting modern, critical works, and academic readers (particularly those who have read the other books in the series) might find the mentions of Talmudic discussions and medieval Jewish commentators an irrelevant distraction. But in the end, Grossman weaves a masterful synthesis, in which the conflicts and ambiguities in the Abraham narrative are shown to be essential elements in our understanding of the inherent complexity of the mission of the followers of Abraham.