

BOOK REVIEWS

Blenkinsopp, Joseph. *Abraham: The Story of a Life*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015. 256 pp. Paperback, \$29.00.

Joseph Blenkinsopp, John A. O'Brien Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at the University of Notre Dame, has a comprehensive repertoire of published materials on the OT. His bibliography includes such books as *A History of Prophecy in Israel, Creation, Re-creation, Un-Creation: A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1–11*; 3 volumes for the Anchor Yale Bible Commentary on Isaiah; *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* for the Old Testament Library series; *Ezekiel* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching); *David Remembered: Kingship and National Identity in ancient Israel*, and *Judaism, the First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism*; and many more.

In this new volume, Blenkinsopp applies his acclaimed historical skills to the Abrahamic narratives. These narratives (Gen 12–25) occupy a prominent section in the fifty chapters of Genesis, rightfully deserving continuing scholarly study. Abraham figures large in the Christian canon. Indeed, subsequent OT books (Exodus through Malachi) often refer to Abraham—forty-three additional times. In the NT, Abraham is noted in eleven books, including all four Gospels (Matthew, six times; Luke, fourteen times), along with being featured in one of the longest sections in Heb 11 and mentioned nine more times in Galatians and the same in Romans.

Blenkinsopp opens this book with a four-page preface followed by a twenty-four page introduction. Next are ten chapters of his narrative analysis and an epilogue. Nine of these chapters travel through Abraham's life: "The Journey;" "Sarah and Lot, Wife and Nephew;" "The Promise;" "Hagar and Ishmael;" "The Covenant of Circumcision;" "Abraham Entertains Guests, Sodom is Destroyed, Lot Rescued;" "In the Land of Moriah;" "Abraham's Other Beloved Son;" and "The Death and Burial of Sarah and Abraham." The tenth chapter proceeds to the next generation with "The Marriage of Rebekah and Isaac."

The preface opens with a reminder of a foundational posture for biblical scholars: "Reading is an art that, like writing, we have to learn. This is especially so with texts that come to us from unfamiliar cultures and ancient time, both of which situations apply to biblical texts" (ix). Blenkinsopp then proceeds to demonstrate that he has widely read ancient historical documents. Each chapter of the book, dealing with different years of Abraham's life, is compared to other ancient historical records. Blenkinsopp enriches the Genesis text by drawing in many ancient sources, including Jewish Midrash and historians such as Josephus and Philo.

His analysis of the Isaac/Ishmael narratives within the Abraham sequence yields a positive understanding of Ishmael, Abraham's "other beloved son." For example, he writes concerning the prophecy of Ishmael:

The reference in the oracle to the wild ass (Gen 16:12) is not derogatory, as it is in much rabbinic comment. The wild ass (onager) is an animal that is at home in the wilderness and in desolate, uninhabited places (Isa 32:14; Jer 2:24; Hos 8:9), wants nothing more than to be free, and is practically untamable (Job 39:5–8). The oracle, therefore, celebrates in advance the freedom-loving Bedouin lifestyle of Ishmael and his tribe and their often contentious relations with the settled population in their vicinity (83).

His insight concerning Ishmael and Isaac is also refreshing:

Throughout the long history of the interpretation of these texts, Ishmael and Isaac have often been presented as bitter rivals—one element in a long history of wasteful interreligious and interethnic polemic—but this conclusion must be tested against a close and careful reading of the Abraham narrative cycle independently of its numerous interpretations. Ishmael is Abraham's other beloved son, and he and Isaac go their separate ways, Ishmael to the wilderness of Paran (Gen 21:21), Isaac to Beersheba. But at the end of the day, they come together around the grave of their father in the cave of Machpelah (25:9) (173).

These sentiments are timely, giving evidence of a close and careful reading of the Ishmael/Isaac chapters. But Blenkinsopp is not always consistent in doing this and dismisses textual details that do not fit his undergirding interpretative grid.

As a historian, Blenkinsopp counsels: "A critical reading of texts should not exclude the possibility that a text can mean a great deal more than it intends to this or that reader, but there is still space for attempting to arrive at what it has to say within its own terms of reference" (77). Yet, he often does not allow the texts' own testimony to influence his exegesis. To offer some examples, first, his dating of Noah's flood: "a mythic image of the fifth and last extinction at the end of the Cretaceous period 65 million years ago" (18). Yet, others have noted in Gen 6–8 wording and phrasing the writer's attempt to insist on a literal event. Whether or not one believes the Genesis writer, the text suggests the writer believed in a worldwide flood.

Second, when discussing Noah's and Abraham's covenants, Blenkinsopp suggests:

The similarity between the Noachide and Abrahamic covenants is unmistakable. Both are established by God using the same terminology; both are made with a patriarch as representative of his descendants after him, and most importantly, both are perpetual covenants (Gen 9:16; 17:7, 13, 19). Within the Priestly theology of Israel's history these are the only covenants, since there is no P version of the Sinai covenant (106–17).

However, many scholars argue differently on the basis of textual covenant language and echoes.

Third, regarding Hagar: "Contemporary exegesis would more probably assume that the text is overloaded as a result of incorporating three different responses" (82). Fourth, commenting on one narrative passage about Sarah:

The vision consists in a declarative statement of the deity identified as Yahweh in the editorial introduction, as Elohim (God) after the initial announcement of a covenant (v. 3), and as El Shaddai in the deity's own self-

identification. . . . El Shaddai is first of several indications that the chapter is the work of the priest-scribe, the so-called Priestly source (P). This title occurs in other passages assigned to the same source" (104–15).

Blenkinsopp does not allow that there could be other possible reasons for the different uses of the deity's names.

Blenkinsopp's analysis of the Abrahamic narratives is couched firmly within source criticism and a resulting dating which greatly affects his narrative exegesis, yet he curiously states: "It is not surprising, therefore, that exegetes who adhere to the classical but *now rather outdated source criticism* have found evidence in this brief passage of all three Genesis sources, J, E, and P" (87, emphasis mine). Also, his various comments on the supposedly awkward mismatched Abrahamic verses (e.g., "which must be considered a strange match indeed" [172]) are a bit wearying in light of recent insights from new literary criticism dealing with the final form of the text. It would have enriched this book if Blenkinsopp had also given evidence of the mounting published narrative work resulting from a close reading of the received text. Additional insights into the Abraham narrative sequence could have been gleaned and some dating problems he suggests might have been solved.

Nevertheless, his appreciation for Abraham is rightfully solid:

If we attend to the narrative context of Gen 15:6, we will assign priority to Abraham's persistent faith and trust, even in desperate situations, in the truth of the messages he receives from God, and therefore in God. It is this more than anything else that accounts for Abraham's greatness (76).

Touché.

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Coogan, Michael. *The Ten Commandments: A Short History of an Ancient Text*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. xiii + 176 pp. Paperback, \$18.00.

Michael Coogan is a prolific writer who teaches OT/HB at Harvard Divinity School. I have noticed that in some of his publications he explicitly mentions Seventh-day Adventists as a religious body that honors Saturday as the biblical day of rest. In this relatively short book, Coogan examines the history of the Decalogue in the context of the American polemics against groups that want to display the Ten Commandments in public places, especially on government property and, thus, presumably make them binding on all citizens.

In the beginning of the book, a claim is made that there are not just two, but several versions of the Decalogue in the Bible. The author, however, focuses on Exod 20, Deut 5, and Exod 34. "Of the three," says Coogan,

the latest is probably that in Exodus 20, because of its rationale for the Sabbath observance in imitation of the divine rest after creation (reported in the alleged P source dated to the sixth century BCE). The version in Deuteronomy 5 is a century or more older in its present wording, and that in Exodus 34 is probably the oldest (34).