

Nov-2016

Book Review: Reimagining the Religion of Abraham

Keith Lewinstein

Bridgewater State University, klewinstein@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation

Lewinstein, Keith (2016). Book Review: Reimagining the Religion of Abraham. *Bridgewater Review*, 35(2), 39-40.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol35/iss2/13

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Reimagining the Religion of Abraham

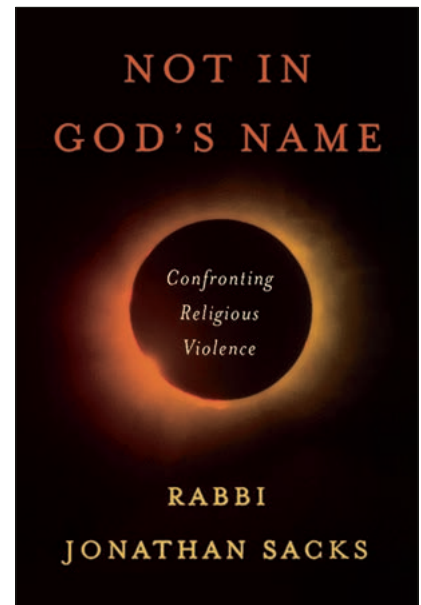
Keith Lewinsein

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015).

Both the author and title of this book are likely to attract notice. Religiously inspired (or at least legitimated) violence drives media coverage and colors political discussions, and any serious effort to describe the mindset behind it will naturally find a

place in the debate. When the effort is made by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, that place will be a prominent one. Sacks is the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, the author and editor of more than 25 books, a regular presence in the British media, and a globetrotting academic. He writes with clarity, erudition, and passion. It would be a mistake, however, to approach this book as a conventional scholarly examination of religious violence, despite its author's deep learning and broad reading in a range of disciplines. The book may better be read as an intervention in two distinct discussions: the critique of religion promoted by the so-called "new atheists," for which the book serves (largely implicitly) as rebuttal, and the call for interfaith dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, for which the book serves as a model. For Sacks, the problem of religious violence has to be addressed from within a religious context, something that the new atheism is ill equipped to do. The world is becoming more religious, not less, and the only way to defeat religious violence according to Sacks is to confront it on theological grounds. In the case of the three monotheisms, this entails the recovery and embrace of a shared Abrahamic heritage that itself mandates tolerance and respect for the Other.

The book is divided into three parts, with the core theological work occupying the middle third. Part One ("Bad Faith") introduces readers to a set of concepts meant to explain the historical connections between religion and politicized violence. People like to live in groups, and religion emerged to enable that by generating solidarities based on mutual trust. At the same time, the inborn human tendency to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, and to practice aggression toward the latter, has meant that violence is always just beneath the surface. It may be activated in moments of social crisis, when a kind of "pathological dualism" (51-65) leads people to split the world into good and evil, to search for scapegoats, and to carry out in the name of God grotesque acts of violence against those not in the group. This "altruistic evil" (9-10, 249) might be observed in any society, but if it has at times afflicted the relationship between Jews, Christians, and Muslims with particular intensity, the reason is to be found in the sibling rivalry between these three claimants to Abraham's legacy. The desire to have what the other has – or even be what the other is – is for Sacks characteristic of the rivalry between the three monotheisms, and is exemplified in Paul's claiming Sarah (Isaac's mother) exclusively for Christianity while seeing the



slave-girl Hagar (Ishmael's mother) as representing Judaism, a reversal of Jewish self-understanding that could only be seen by Jews as identity theft (92-97).

If this sibling rivalry is to be broken, it has to be done on the Abrahamic turf that the three monotheisms share. Part Two ("Siblings") seeks to do precisely that, and presents a deft re-reading of the sibling rivalries central to the stories of Abraham's family (Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers). These have conventionally been read as displacement narratives, with the younger and weaker sons acquiring the inheritance rights and the blessings that should have gone to their older brothers, leading in each case to tension, hostility, and potential violence. God chooses those who would otherwise have lost out. What Sacks argues, however, is that the narratives are designed to subvert the surface meaning of the text. The biblical reader is subtly led to empathize and even identify with the displaced outsiders Hagar, Ishmael, and Esau, with Joseph's brothers (among the chosen, but painfully aware of their father's favor for their younger sibling), and with Jacob's wife Leah, who endures her husband's obvious preference for Rachel. The literary craftsmanship linking these stories

together is well known, but Sacks takes things a step further by noting that the final verses of each cycle together offer a structured sequence with a profound message about identity and tolerance. From Cain's murder of his brother at the beginning of Genesis we move to Isaac and Ishmael standing together at Abraham's grave, and from there to Jacob's and Esau's cautious embrace, and finally – as Genesis ends – to an elaborate process of true reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. The biblical message is that sibling rivalry can be overcome, and that the chosenness of the one need not entail the rejection of the other.

For Sacks, this is not just a plausible reading that may be imposed on the text. It is the core theological message of Genesis, "God's reply to those who commit violence in his name" (173). This is the Abrahamic monotheism that can be shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and Part Three ("The Open Heart") is a sustained, sermonic call for such sharing to take place. One target of that call, according to remarks Sacks made on NPR last year, are young Muslims living in the West who might be receptive to a case for religious pluralism. One can easily imagine other audiences as well. Part Three addresses potential obstacles to the success of that case: the biblical concept of chosenness;

the textual literalism of fundamentalists among all three traditions; the attempts by some in each tradition to marry faith and political power; the comfort some find in perpetuating familiar hatreds.

But there are more obstacles here than Sacks may want to acknowledge. Leaving aside the book's failure to take full account of the complex social and political conditions (war and occupation among them) that bolster extremist views among both Muslims and Jews, there remains a conceptual problem: the relationships between the sibling monotheisms are not entirely parallel. The Hebrew Bible is not scripture for Muslims as it is for Christians, even if plenty of biblical and extra-biblical material can be found in the Qur'an. The stories examined so insightfully by Sacks don't exist as extended narratives for Muslims. The Joseph story constitutes a partial exception, but the Qur'anic version sits on its own, disconnected from any larger narrative about the trials and tribulations of a covenantal family. Joseph functions primarily as monotheist prophet in the Qur'an, as do Isaac and Ishmael; there is no covenantal drama to be read against the grain, and no exclusionary attitude toward Isaac resulting from Ishmael's place as the Arabs' ancestral link to Abraham. There is no broad Muslim parallel to Paul's laying claim

to Sarah on behalf of Christianity, or to his insistence that the true children of Abraham are the followers of Jesus, not Moses (*pace* Sacks, 98). (If Muslims came to regard Ishmael as Abraham's intended sacrifice, they appear to have done so only belatedly: the Qur'an is unclear on the matter, and until the 9th or 10th century most Muslim exegetes identified Isaac as the son, following Jewish and Christian teaching.)

All this is to say that there may not be a neutral Abraham who can serve Jews, Christians, and Muslims equally well. For Muslims, the Religion of Abraham (a phrase used in the Qur'an) is just another term for Islam, and it is hard to imagine many Muslims being impressed by an Abrahamic monotheism that has to be excavated from the Genesis narratives. For all his eloquence, Rabbi Sacks may be preaching only to the converted.



Keith Lewinstein is Professor and Chair in the Department of History.

Call for Submissions

Bridgewater Review invites submissions from full- and part-time faculty members and librarians, and others in the BSU community. *Bridgewater Review* is published twice yearly by the faculty and librarians, of Bridgewater State University. It provides a forum for campus-wide conversations pertaining to research, teaching, and creative expression, as well as a showcase for faculty art. Articles in all disciplines and genres are welcome and encouraged, including scholarship about research interests and trends, scholarship about teaching and learning, creative writing, and short reviews of other publications.

Articles should be 1700-2200 words in length, though shorter articles will also be considered. Creative writing can be submitted at lengths briefer than 2200 words. Those wishing to submit are asked to consult the *Bridgewater Review* submission guidelines (available from the Editor). In keeping with the founding spirit of our faculty magazine, the editors are equally interested in unfinished pieces of writing that may need

assistance with revision and in polished pieces that are publication ready. All submissions will be reviewed, but there is no guarantee that submitted work will be published.

Bridgewater Review also welcomes Letters to the Editor with the hope that *BR* may become a locus for community discussion at Bridgewater State University.

Submissions should be sent electronically to:
Andrew Holman
Editor,
Bridgewater Review
bridgewater.review@bridgew.edu

Articles published in *Bridgewater Review* may be reprinted with permission of the Editor.