

CLAIMING ABRAHAM

Reading the
Bible and the Qur'an
Side by Side

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OPENING

ARGUING OVER ABRAHAM

Hear, O Israel:
The LORD is our God, the LORD is one.
—The Shema

For us there is one God, the Father,
from whom are all things, and for whom we exist,
and one Lord, Jesus Christ,
through whom are all things and through whom we exist.
—Paul the Apostle

There is no God but God,
and Muhammad is His prophet.
—The Shahada

As an outsider, may I be allowed to say this:
*you People of the Book had better get along
and get to know each other sometime soon.*
—John Yokota, Shin Buddhist

How shall we Christians and Muslims speak with one another? How do we get to know one another, let alone get along? What ideas, experiences, or practices can provide a basis for conversation? Can we really speak with one another, or are we destined only to speak past one another? With our

common history all too often marked by violence and venom—Crusaders and colonialism on one side, jihad and terrorism on the other, not to mention media that tend to play up the differences for all their sensationalistic worth—will our words toward each other ever be more than accusations, caricatures, and curses?

I do not pretend to be able to offer a definitive answer to these questions. But I and many others desire to affirm a far deeper sense of hope regarding the Muslim-Christian conversation than all of the tired clichés and typical caricatures would allow. Arguably it is required of us all to nurture such hopes, for it appears that the future of our world, at least humanly speaking, may well hang in the balance. There is undeniably a kind of contesting under way between Islamic culture, particularly in the Middle East, and so-called Western culture—a culture perceived by the great majority of Muslims, more or less correctly, as having been profoundly shaped by the Jewish and Christian traditions. This contesting poses a seemingly constant danger of bursting and flaming out of control not only in the West Bank but also on the West Coast, not only at Israel's borders but also in Indonesia, not only in the Philippines but also in Philadelphia. The pressure is on: it is incumbent upon people of faith, but also people simply of goodwill, to begin the hard task of listening to, appreciating, and hopefully even loving one another across the often harshly drawn lines of varying religious traditions.

In this book I propose one avenue that such difficult conversations might take. I do not think it is the only avenue, and possibly it is not even the best, but I believe it is an interesting and potentially fruitful one. It is the avenue of attempting to read, carefully and sympathetically yet also critically, the sacred texts of religious traditions not our own. This possibility suggested itself to me the first time I read through the entirety of the Qur'an—in English translations, admittedly—several years ago.

I am a Christian minister and theologian, pursuing my vocation primarily as a university professor. One of my interests through the years has involved the challenging task of attempting to understand, and then to communicate to my students, something of the riches of religious traditions other than my (and usually their) own. It is a difficult undertaking, this attempt to engage, appreciate, and even learn from the religious “other”—or, to employ the biblical term, the “stranger.” But I, along with many others, have found it to be an undertaking that is inherently rewarding. Most of us have heard the injunction of the book of Leviticus to “love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18), but far fewer of us know that later in the same chapter the Israelites were commanded also to “love the alien as yourself” (19:34). It seems important, too, to add that this commandment to love the stranger is followed by a hauntingly compelling rationale: “for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”

It is as though God called to the fledgling community of Israel—and calls to us even today—to remember what it is like to be the outsider, the excluded, the forgotten one. Remember what it feels like—and know that the “alien” or “stranger” is also a fellow human being, and thus one who can feel the pain of exclusion, of marginalization, of dehumanization. In my best moments, I have tried to nurture in my own heart, as well as the hearts of my students, a glimmer of what it might mean for us to love the *religious strangers*—that is, people of religious convictions and practices that might appear alien to us—as ourselves. I am hopeful that a sense of this love for “the stranger” will permeate the lines and spaces of this book.

In the light of this biblical calling to love the stranger as oneself, it occurred to me a few years ago that since part of my job is to teach something of Islam to my predominantly Christian students, it might behoove me actually to read through the entire Qur’an! Certainly I had read much of it, mostly in anthologies that offer snippets of the scriptures of the world’s great religions. But especially given what had occurred the previous September (the now infamous and immediately recognizable 9/11), it seemed to me that I owed it to myself and to my students to read the entire Qur’an with them. And so, in the spring of 2002, we did.

What I found in that reading was a bit of a shock. I was (and still am) struck by the undeniable power of many passages in the Qur’an, even though I experience them only in English translations. (I have begun the process of learning Arabic during the writing of this book.) But I also was struck by the considerable number of biblical characters whose exploits are renarrated and whose stories are retold—often in noticeably different ways—in the Qur’an. While I am not trained as a biblical scholar per se (by which I mean that my doctoral work was not in biblical studies), my vocation as a theologian demands that I try to be a careful reader of texts, biblical and otherwise. In this book I attempt to read the texts of the Bible and the Qur’an precisely as a theologian, which means constantly asking about the theological assumptions, whether explicit or implicit, animating and arising from the text. Similarly, in asking such questions of the text, we are confronted by the inescapable fact that we readers approach the text already with our own, often unexamined, theological assumptions. To the extent that we acknowledge this, perhaps we may at least occasionally allow our assumptions and prior commitments themselves to be challenged, chastened, or even changed. Our primary goal will be to interpret and reflect upon what the text either implies or directly claims about God and God’s relation to the world. To engage in such interpretation is also to wonder about the practical implications these theological claims have for the way we live. What I believe I have found in reading relevant and comparable texts from the Bible and the Qur’an are, at least in

some cases we shall explore, distinct theological trajectories. In other words, if I am correct in my reading, then the Bible and the Qur'an often construe God, humans, and the world as a whole in noticeably different ways—and in ways that make for significant differences both in theology and in practice. These significant differences are largely what this book is about.

The idea for this book, in fact, occurred to me first during that spring of 2002 as I read the Qur'an's retelling of one of the Bible's stories of Abraham, found in Genesis 18. I was repeatedly struck by the differences in detail found in these two narratives; I was also aware of the traditional Muslim assumption that when there are differences between the Bible and the Qur'an, it is to be understood that the latter provides God's correction of the former.¹ While I confess that as a non-Muslim this is not my assumption, the question still can be raised: Are these differences between the Bible and the Qur'an of any significance? Do the differences make a difference, particularly as the stories in question have been recited, heard, read, studied, and memorized by their respective communities of faith over these many centuries? I suspect that at least sometimes the differences do matter, including those that arise in the telling of the story of Abraham.

But we should appreciate the irony here. It is not uncommon to hear appeals to the fundamental consonance of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as "Abrahamic" faiths. It is certainly true that the basic plot of the Abraham story provides a lot of common ground for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. But like all clichés, the one that flaunts the notion that these three great monotheistic traditions are "Abrahamic faiths" has just enough truth—and more than enough falsity—to make it dangerous. On the one hand, it is true that believers within all three of these traditions lay claim to Abraham as their father. On the other hand, the ways in which they construe Abraham's patronage and story are so divergent as to yield some very different Abrahams. When my children were much younger, a song they sang regularly in Sunday school began, "Father Abraham had many sons, many sons had Father Abraham." The intertextual exercise we shall undertake in chapter 1, soon to follow, should make it evident that those many sons (and daughters) in turn have, over the centuries, given birth to many different Abrahams!

To be sure, only the most superficial reading of these traditions would come to a less complicated conclusion, such as "Well, we all have Abraham as our father—now isn't that nice? Shouldn't we all just try to get along?" To begin with, many of us recognize that there are real differences simply between Jews and Christians regarding the nature of Abraham's offspring. Indeed, it was probably some of those differences, adamantly and vocally disputed, that brought the issue most sharply to Muhammad's mind. These questions are typical of the Qur'an: "O People of the Book, why do you

dispute concerning Abraham, when the Torah and the Gospel were only revealed after him? Do you have no sense?” (Q 3:65).² Traditionally, Jews trace their physical lineage to Abraham, through his son Isaac, down to Jacob, who through his God-wrestling became Israel.³ Christians, following the argument of the apostle Paul, trace their lineage spiritually through Jesus back to Abraham, the ancestor “not only [of] the adherents of the law but also [of] those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us . . .)” (Rom. 4:16). There are hints aplenty in the Qur’an that the disputations between Jews and Christians regarding Abraham’s true progeny, some of which occurred within earshot of Muhammad, cried out for a solution—a solution the Arabic prophet attempted to offer particularly during his years in Medina (622–32 CE).

In chapter 1 we will attempt a careful look at how the Qur’an retells the story of the divine visitation of Abraham as told in Genesis 18. I believe it will provide a fitting and powerful opening exercise in intertextual study. Before doing so, however, I want to acknowledge some of the challenges involved in undertaking a study such as this. First of all, I am not a Muslim. I am not, nor do I seriously entertain the possibility that I might become, a believer within the *umma*, the worldwide Islamic community. I do not share in their practices, convictions, or culture(s). I am an outsider; thus, from the vantage point(s) of the Muslim community and its rich traditions, it is I who am “the stranger.” Given this reality, is it possible for me to pick up the Muslims’ holy text and read it truly? Do I not need the help of their history of living with, and within, and out of, the Qur’an? Is it in fact at least a little voyeuristic to read this text as an outsider, bereft of the history of interpretations that shapes Muslim readers and practitioners of the Qur’an? I have tried to mitigate this problem by reading extensively and carefully from a variety of Islamic commentators and writers. Nonetheless, I still stand outside the Islamic circle of conviction and practice. This is a thorny, difficult issue. But it is not the only one.

Next, as I briefly mentioned earlier, I presently do not know the Arabic language well. I cannot read the Qur’an with any facility in its original tongue, and while I am moved by hearing it recited by Muslims trained in the art of its recitation, I am lucky just to pick out an occasional word or phrase. Meanwhile, Muslims traditionally have insisted that to hear the Qur’an truly as *God’s vocalized, recited Word*, one must hear it in its Arabic purity and clarity. In this book, on the other hand, we will be encountering the Qur’an in English translation; this is already a serious dilution, Muslims insist, of the text’s inherent and divine power. According to the Qur’an itself, the only miracle that the prophet Muhammad was given to perform was, well, the Qur’an itself—and according to Islamic tradition, in its native Arabic the

Qur'an's miraculous nature is indisputable. "This Qur'an could never have been produced except by Allah . . . There is no doubt about it. It is from the Lord of the Worlds" (Q 10:37). So I am not only an outsider to this rich tradition of practice and interpretation of the Qur'an; I am a stranger also to its cadences, rhythms, poetic beauty, and—by Muslim standards—its miraculous power.

This poetic or aesthetic, ostensibly even miraculous, element of encountering the Qur'an is not, by the way, a minor consideration. Indeed, like many other religious traditions, Islam celebrates the *performative* dimension of its scripture reading. By this term scholars mean that the power of religious tradition's scriptures is not exhausted simply by understanding the basic meaning of a passage. Beyond the cognitive meaning, the oral *performance* involved in reading or reciting the text is experienced as possessing a profoundly formative influence upon all who hear it.⁴ Simply stated, to *perform* the text is not simply to *inform* hearers but in fact to *transform* them—or at least to provide the setting in which such transformation may be possible.

It is helpful to acknowledge that this is far from unique to Islam. Many Buddhists experience recited texts such as the Lotus Sutra in a comparable way, and Hindus' recitation of their ancient scriptures, the Vedas, is also performative. When traditional Catholics who do not actually know the Latin language nonetheless desire to hear the Mass performed in Latin, we are dealing with a comparable phenomenon. Fundamentalist Protestants who insist on using the King James Version of the Bible are probably themselves motivated by a similar fascination with the perceived power of its now-distinctive English prose—a style of language that, by lifelong association and habituation, has become widely identified with the sounds of holiness. I know that in my own churchly upbringing, sometimes the very feelings evoked by the King James idiom were far more powerful in their effects than any perception of cognitive meaning arising from the text.

The point is that, while it is not difficult to understand the idea of a religious text's exercising a performative role in the lives of its devoted readers, this performative function of the Qur'an—utterly crucial for countless Muslims—cannot play a significant role in this book. Instead, we will be reading primarily for theological purposes, attempting to discern how the Qur'an renders biblical narratives and describes characters, including God. Again, I will be reading not as a practicing Muslim from within the Islamic history of tradition but as a Christian theologian who attempts to read these texts critically yet respectfully. This means I will assume that the historical, social, and religious milieu in which the Qur'an came to be is of vital importance for understanding its nature as well as its message. While I will assume that the Qur'an is a historical document, I will also attempt to heed respectfully

its claims for itself as well as its claims for God, whom Muslims take to be the very Author of the Qur'an. I presume, however, that listening respectfully to those claims does not require the reader to accept them.

While I do not share the traditional Muslim assumption regarding the purely divine origin of the Qur'an, I hope to proceed with openness to the question of its status as revelation. For now, we can at least admit that, even in translation, there are times when the Qur'an's poetic and literary power is palpable. Particularly in some of Muhammad's earlier revelations, it is difficult to miss the apocalyptic urgency, the world-shattering power, erupting right through the very lines of the text. For example: "When the heaven is rent asunder; and hearkens to its Lord and is judged—and when the earth is spread out; and casts out what is within it and is voided; and hearkens to its Lord and is judged—O man, you strive unto your Lord and you shall meet Him" (Q 84:1–6).⁵

Even as we grant this rhetorical power of the Qur'an, in this book we will largely restrict ourselves to the task of encountering the Qur'an for its theological themes rather than for its transformational power—that is, for *what* we read on its pages rather than for *how* we might feel when we hear it recited. Similarly, while I do not read it "religiously," I do intend to read it theologically, with respect and care, even as I read it, inescapably, as a person of Christian faith. My primary consolation in this approach is that along with whatever performative and transformative capacities Muslims experience in the recitation or hearing of the Qur'an, they also hear it for what it claims for God and the human relation to God—including the nature of our responsibility before God. Hence it is that Muslim scholars can write learned and detailed commentaries on the Qur'an, engaging in the task of interpretation and application of the text for the sake of faithful Muslim believing and living. It is at this point of attempting to come to terms with the theological message of the Qur'an, then, that we will approach this text. So we will build on the simple observation that, to varying degrees at various times in his ministry, Muhammad understood himself to be offering a message from God that had the potential to heal the rift between Jews and Christians, to say nothing of his message to the growing Muslim community of his own day. To put it simply, Muhammad claimed to be the bearer of *a message*—something to be heard and understood not only by Muslims but also by Jews and Christians and others. In a sense, then, despite a sense of historical and theological alienation from the Qur'an on the part of most non-Muslims, its claims do invite our careful and critical attention.

With these important provisos in mind, hopefully we are in a position to explore the Qur'an's dramatically divergent retellings of biblical stories, of alternative interpretations of biblical figures and ideas. These differences

between the Bible and the Qur'an become evident by laying respective passages, all in English translation, side by side. This procedure itself, however, raises yet another important issue to acknowledge in the early going. My assumption is not at all that Muhammad had written copies of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, or of subsequent Jewish and Christian commentaries on those scriptures, from which he worked. I do not assume that he could have laid written versions of the biblical and qur'anic stories side by side, as I am about to do in most of the chapters to follow. I have no suspicion that Muhammad was intentionally changing details or theological ideas as found in biblical narratives. The Qur'an—a term which, after all, means “recitation”—was produced in an oral culture, where most people's encounter with their sacred scriptures would have been through oral performance. The “Bible” Muhammad would have known, presumably, was a dynamic, fluid stream of oral transmission.⁶ Even though the Qur'an is filled with references to “the Book,” this notion of “book” would be far less captive to the columns on a page than our own books are.

Further, I have come to appreciate, even if slowly, that there is a certain ethics of reading that is at risk in this venture. What once seemed to me to be a relatively innocent idea—to lay columns of text from the Qur'an and from the Bible side by side, like parallel passages telling the same story—has grown increasingly complicated.

How and why did I choose the texts that I did? Can they simply be laid side by side like that, as though in each case the passages in question were serving comparable purposes for their faith communities?⁷ One can even raise the question whether when the biblical passage is placed in the left-hand column and the qur'anic passage is on the right, the author or editor who so arranges these texts is already prejudicing readers in at least some subtle ways. I can only confess to an awareness of the weightiness of these issues and assure my readers that I have attempted to pursue this work with these important ethical questions always near at hand. I hope my efforts to be attentive to such issues will be judged to have been at least relatively successful. This does not mean that I expect or even hope that Muslims will find my characterizations of the Qur'an's message to be the same as their own; I am certain that they will not. But I do hope that my engagement will be perceived as respectful, honest, sensitive, and conducive to further conversations.

ARGUING OVER ABRAHAM ARGUING WITH GOD

Say: "Allah has spoken the truth. Follow then the religion of Abraham, the upright; he was not one of the polytheists . . . O People of the Book, why do you disbelieve in the Revelations of Allah, when Allah witnesses whatever you do?"

—Qur'an 3:95, 98

It is not unusual to hear appeals to the possibility of concord among Jews, Muslims, and Christians around the figure of Abraham. Often such an appeal is framed by the notion of all three traditions sharing in what is called "Abrahamic faith." The question I raise in this chapter, very simply put, is: How helpful is this appeal? While certainly it is true that the figure and story of Abraham appear in all three religious traditions (and in many of their offshoots), we will see that Abraham provides at least as much contested ground as common ground.

In this chapter I hope to unearth some of that contested ground for our surveying. We will of necessity restrict ourselves to a single episode in the Abraham story shared by the biblical book of Genesis and the Qur'an; many other episodes could be explored, but I offer this one for its particular interest and importance. It is the story of the mysterious divine visitation

of Abraham in Genesis 18, which ends with an intriguing conversation between God and Abraham regarding the ethical merit of God’s plan to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. This strange and compelling narrative is mentioned in the Qur’an several times, most extensively and with greatest detail in Surah 11.¹ My intention is to explore these parallel passages from Genesis 18 and Surah 11, interspersing theological commentary along the way. In my recitation of both passages in the following pages, nothing is deleted from either passage; each will be explored in its entirety.

The Bible	The Qur’an
Genesis 18:1–5	Surah 11:69
The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed	Our messengers indeed came to Abraham bearing good news.
down to the ground. He said, “My lord, if	They said, “Peace,”
I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and	
wash your feet, and rest yourselves under	he said, “Peace.”
the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on— since you have come to your servant.”	

What may attract our attention immediately is that in the Genesis version God actually “makes an appearance” of sorts as “the LORD”—the traditional translation for the four-letter designation for God (*YHWH*) that English-speaking Christians have sometimes rendered as “Jehovah” or “Yahweh.” This name, often referred to by scholars as the Tetragrammaton (literally, “four letters”), is deemed in the Jewish tradition to be too holy for human lips; hence, “the LORD” (or in Hebrew, *Adonai*) is a typical Jewish circumlocution for the divine name, though in recent years some Jews prefer *HaShem* (“the Name”) and others *G-d*. In deference to the most common Jewish usage, however, throughout this book I will utilize the term *Adonai* to designate the holy, unutterable divine name of *YHWH*.

The fundamental point is that this divine name, in the long development of Jewish tradition, eventually came to designate God’s considerable—if not infinite—holiness and transcendence. It may be surprising, then, that in the early chapters of Genesis it is particularly in those narratives when God is

designated by this holy name that we encounter the most obvious and dramatic examples of anthropomorphism—of God’s being portrayed in very human ways. Surely the story before us bears out this tendency.

Never mind that later in the Torah Adonai will reply to Moses’s request to see God’s glory, “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live” (Exod. 33:20)—or, for that matter, that the Johannine writings in the New Testament insist that “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12). Here in Genesis we read that Adonai “appeared to Abraham.” Some Jewish commentators, most notably the great Maimonides (1135–1204), have tried to sidestep the difficulty by suggesting that Abraham’s experience was a vision, much as an earlier episode in Abraham’s life appears to have been (Genesis 15). However, Genesis 18 has far less of the mysterious, visionary hues that are evident in Genesis 15. For example, the story in Genesis 15 occurs as the sun is setting; in fact, in language that suggests something of a twilight-zone atmosphere, we read that “a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him” (15:12). Genesis 18, by contrast, describes its theophany as occurring “in the heat of the day” (18:1). In the earlier story, Abraham has a vision or dream in which God, oddly enough, appears as “a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch” (15:17). In our story, Genesis 18, Adonai’s appearance is not only in broad daylight but in an accessible, human form. Further, this experience involves an extensive meal, and Abraham’s wife Sarah also gets involved later in the conversation. None of this means that Genesis 18 cannot be interpreted as the description of a visionary experience; it just means that the text is less obvious in suggesting just exactly how we should interpret it. Against Maimonides’s understandable sensibilities, the quaint yet mysterious story of Genesis 18 seems to offer a tangible, nearly human deity.

The Qur’an appears to be grappling with this problem by changing the subject of this appearance from God to angels. (Subsequent Muslim tradition would identify them as Gabriel, Michael, and Israfil.) Immediately by stating that these visitors are not the appearing of God per se but rather messengers of God, the Qur’an succeeds in quieting the disquieting problem of blatant anthropomorphism, of conceiving of God as though God were essentially a human being writ large. For in making this observation regarding the Qur’an’s retelling of the story, we must appreciate the fact that the biblical depictions of God such as encountered in Genesis 18 created interpretive problems for Jewish (and later, Christian) readers. What kind of God is it who, earlier in Genesis, like a potter molds the *adam* (earthling) out of *adamah* (dirt of the ground); or who takes a stroll through the Garden of Eden, hunting down Adam and Eve and engaging them, along with a talking serpent, in a long

and complicated interrogation; or who places a rainbow in the clouds to remind himself about his promise not to flood the earth again? Is this God not “all too human”? It seems quite clear that the stories cannot be interpreted literally—so how should they be read?

In addressing the problems created by anthropomorphism, well before the time of Muhammad, Jewish teachers had developed an interpretive scheme that was to prove useful for their own and, later, Christian reflection upon the biblical text. The rabbis argued that the scriptures offered imagery for God that was accessible to the human mind. Our limitations require of God a downward movement of accommodation, so that when scripture describes God in human terms—such as having a face, hands, feet, or a heart, or as walking and talking and so on—this is divine revelation “stooping down,” we might say, to our level. Thus, such figures of speech regarding God were to be interpreted not literally but figuratively; rabbis frequently employed the phrase *k'b'yakol*, translated “as it were” or “so to speak,” to remind themselves and their students that anthropomorphisms are unavoidable though not literally true. Given the notion of divine accommodation—an idea that John Calvin honed expertly in his writings—modern and contemporary Christian theologians generally tend to read these ancient stories of Adonai for what the stories may teach us *theologically*. This means we attempt to read them seriously and carefully, but usually not literally. In other words, such a story as Genesis 18 should be read with the question in mind, “Without needing to assume that this passage gives us a simple, literal description of God, what does it suggest to us theologically regarding God and God’s ways with the world?” If this approach is fruitful, it implies that we ought to treat these stories far more like parables than like newspaper accounts, with the assumption that one of the very important ways human beings have attempted to put into words their most noble and subtle notions regarding divine matters is through the use of story, parable, myth. The words of the Genesis text, then, that “the LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre,” might be interpreted as portraying through narrative the theological claim that God truly can, and truly does, draw near in communication and communion with human beings—and does so in particular times and places.

Genesis 18:5–8

So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it,

and make cakes.” Abraham ran to the

Surah 11:69–70

Then he brought a roasted calf at once.

<i>Genesis 18:5–8</i>	<i>Surah 11:69–70</i>
herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set	
it before them; and he stood by them	But when he saw that their hands did not
under the tree while they ate.	reach out to it, he became suspicious of them and conceived a fear of them. They said: "Fear not, we have been sent to the people of Lot."

Now the stakes are raised! In the Genesis version of the story, not only has Adonai made an appearance to Abraham in the heat of the day, but Abraham has set about busily to provide rich hospitality for his mysterious guest(s?). Genesis goes into far greater detail than the qur'anic parallel, but in both stories it is obvious that Abraham is fulfilling the praiseworthy role of host to strangers, an act highly prized among Middle Eastern peoples. But of course the big difference then emerges: in Genesis the three strangers (one of whom, it seems, is Adonai) actually partake of the feast, while in the Qur'an the angelic beings do not. In this Genesis passage there is the possibility of material sharing between the divine and the human; there is fellowship, conversation. In the Qur'an God is absent from the narrative, except as represented by "messengers" who are themselves too heavenly, too transcendent, to avail themselves of Abraham's hospitality. Abraham's understandable reaction to this turn of events is to feel afraid of these mysterious strangers. Though they are then able to calm his trepidation, an important qur'anic point has been made: the heavenly realm of Allah does not traffic in earthly things. Eighth-century Muslim exegete Ibn Kathir commented, "According to the People of the Book, the fatted calf was roasted and served with three rolls, fat, and milk. And, according to them, the angels ate, but this is not right."²

Meanwhile, in Genesis: please pass the curds and milk.

<i>Genesis 18:9–21</i>	<i>Surah 11:71–73</i>
They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall	
have a son." And Sarah was listening at	His wife was standing by,
the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after	

<i>Genesis 18:9–21</i>	<i>Surah 11:71–73</i>
the manner of women. So Sarah laughed	so she laughed.
to herself, saying,	Thereupon We announced to her the good news of Isaac, and after Isaac, of Jacob.
“After I have grown old,	She said: “Woe is me, shall I bear a child
and my husband is old, shall I have	while I am an old woman,
pleasure?”	and this, my husband, is an old man too?
	That is truly a very strange thing.”
The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did	They said:
Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear	“Do you wonder at Allah’s Command?
a child, now that I am old?’ Is	May the Mercy and Blessings of Allah be
anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the	upon you, O people of the House [of
set time I will return to you, in due season,	Abraham].
and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied,	
saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He	
said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”	
	Surely He is Praiseworthy and Glorious.”
Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the ways of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” Then the LORD said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.”	

We now encounter a truly remarkable development in our intertextual reading. On the one hand, we find a striking similarity between the two narratives regarding the announcement of Sarah’s impending miraculous pregnancy, along with her understandable reaction. On the other hand, the next part of the Genesis narrative, immediately above, has no qur’anic parallel whatsoever. In Genesis, the narrator pulls back the curtain on Adonai’s own

reflective process—we read of God, *as it were* (to borrow the rabbinic phrase), mulling something over: “So should I hide this from Abraham, or not? I suppose I really should tell him, since out of him I intend to create a mighty nation that will bless all the nations.” Some rabbis suggested that God’s line of reasoning was that if indeed God was about to make Abraham the “father of many nations” or peoples (*goyim*), it would hardly make sense to conceal from Abraham a plan to destroy the *goyim* of Sodom and Gomorrah: no time like the present to start putting Abraham to work as a father-figure who has “charge [over] his children” (18:19). But does God really need to think things through? Our traditional theological notion of divine omniscience—of God’s immediate and absolutely thorough knowledge of all of the details of creation, past, present, and future—would seemingly preclude the proposition that God would need to sift through some possible courses of action.

Further, Adonai describes the impending action against Sodom and Gomorrah in distinctively anthropomorphic imagery. “I must go down,” says Adonai, and “see” what the situation is like in these twin cities of sin. It is as though God is saying, “I need to go down and check it out to see if it’s as bad as what I’ve heard—and if it isn’t, well, I’ll find that out too.” Again, language like this plays havoc with traditional notions of God’s omniscience and omnipresence. What would it mean for a God who is present, presumably, throughout all of creation to “go down and see”? No wonder the Jewish and Christian traditions have labored hard to understand these anthropomorphisms as God’s humble method of communicating with finite and frail human beings; no wonder, too, that the Qur’an also attempts in its own ways to avoid at least the more obvious anthropomorphisms of the Bible.

<i>Genesis 18:22–25</i>	<i>Surah 11:74–75</i>
So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! <i>Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?</i> ”	Then when fear left Abraham and the good news came to him, he started pleading with Us concerning the people of Lot. Abraham is truly clement, contrite, penitent.

“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” is one of the great questions in the Bible—raised by a human being, challenging the Creator and Sustainer of all things to do right. *Amazing!*—and for the Qur’an, inconceivable. The Qur’an’s relative silence on this part of the Abraham story certainly is understandable; after all, it is not only a wonderful question but a troubling one too. Does God really need Abraham to issue this challenge? Does God need to have God’s ethical horizons broadened by the likes of this puny human, hospitable though he was? And what is the standard of justice or fairness to which Abraham appeals? Why is this a standard that the holy Creator of all things would necessarily recognize or embrace? Do human beings and God share some common ideals about justice? What would it mean for God to be answerable to some standard of justice? Whose standard is it, anyway?

But for all of that, it is a compelling question. It is a marvelous narrative scene. Abraham the human, made of “dust and ashes” (18:27), gets in God’s face, so to speak, and holds God accountable. It is a compelling portrait of biblical humanism we encounter here, where the human insists that its deity hew to just and equitable practices.

<i>Genesis 18:26–33</i>	<i>Surah 11:76</i>
And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” Abraham answered, “Let me take it upon myself	“O Abraham, desist from this; the Command of your Lord has come and an irreversible punishment shall surely smite them.”
to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” And he said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.” Again he spoke to him, “Suppose forty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.” Then he said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.” He answered, “I will not do it, if I find thirty there.” He said, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.” Then he said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.	

And so, not surprisingly, where Genesis offers one of the great bartering-for-justice stories in the history of human narration, the Qur'an is silent. Or nearly so. More precisely, in the Qur'an it is Abraham who is told to be silent, to hold his tongue, to submit to Allah's judgment. While the Qur'an does offer a brief hint of Abraham's pleading and bartering—immediately qualified, if not effectively denied, by insisting that Abraham was “clement, contrite, penitent”—any pleading for Sodom is quickly cut off. “Don't waste your breath, Abraham. The decree has been issued, and nothing can change that.”

Anthropomorphisms abound in the Genesis story before us: God, in cahoots with a couple of mysterious fellow-travelers, wanders into Abraham's campsite and sits down to a big Middle Eastern spread; God holds an internal conversation about how much to let Abraham in on the divine plan; God engages in a social ethics debate with Abraham; God could perhaps even have been “talked down” out of nuking the sinners—who knows? But again we must ask: Is this any way for a deity to behave?

No wonder the Qur'an cleans up God's image. The qur'anic version of the story is much cleaner, crisper, and godlike. God the transcendent Creator does not play a narrative role, but the messengers know exactly how to deliver God's unchangeable decree and get God's things done.

Clearly, this process of side-by-side reading yields some fascinating differences. It is not difficult to trace the significant shifts these differences might make in a community of interpretation, over time, regarding God and God's relationship to the world and to oneself. However, further reflection suggests that we cannot lay these two narratives “side by side” quite so simply and readily. After all, there was several centuries' worth of reading the biblical texts, by both Jews and Christians (if not others as well), that had already accumulated by the time of Muhammad. In other words, there were already many layers of Jewish and Christian interpretation, oral and written, that interpose themselves between the Genesis and Qur'an columns on a page. To draw on James Kugel's title and terminology, we must take into account the “Bible as it was” that lies between Genesis 18 and Surah 11.³ Stated simply, “the Bible as it was” means *the Bible as it was interpreted*—as it was read, recited, heard, grappled with, commented upon, and applied by Jewish (and then later, also Christian) scribes within, and in behalf of, their particular communities of faith and practice. The Bible never stands apart from the communities of faith and practice that embrace it; such communities are the reason, historically speaking, that the Bible even exists. But of course the opposite is also true: these communities take shape and thrive as they draw strength and vision from their holy texts. The Bible is far from simply words on thin

pages; it is a history of readings, of discussion and debate, of questions and replies, of lives seriously lived in historical communities of interpretation and application. All of this lies in the space separating the biblical and qur'anic texts we have been comparing.

Here is an example pertinent to our present purposes: several centuries' worth of rabbinic commentary on the book of Genesis was collected and collated near the end of the fourth and into the early fifth centuries CE (which means roughly two centuries before Muhammad's time). This material, called *Genesis Rabbah*, provides an authoritative Jewish sourcebook of readings of the Genesis text by and for the Jewish community not only of two millennia ago but even of today. Interestingly, what it demonstrates is that the differences between Genesis and the Qur'an are to some extent accounted for (or at least softened a bit) by the history of Jewish interpretation itself. In other words, our undertaking is far from simply a matter of showing "how far the Qur'an departed" from the Bible; instead, it is a matter of seeing that the qur'anic versions of biblical narratives often already imbibed the ambience of Jewish readings of the biblical text—readings intended, often, to deanthropomorphize God in a discernible tendency toward greater theological sophistication. Let us take another intertextual look, this time at the rabbinic exposition of Genesis 18 found in *Genesis Rabbah*, laid alongside the Qur'an's narrative:

<i>Genesis Rabbah</i> ⁴	<i>Surah 11:69</i>
"And Thy condescension hath made me great" (Ps. 18:35): with what condescension did the Lord make Abraham great? In that he sat while the <i>Shechinah</i> stood; thus it is written,	
"And the Lord appeared unto him . . . as he sat."	Our messengers indeed came to Abraham bearing good news.
. . . Thus it is written, "And he lifted up his eyes and looked" (18:2)—he saw the <i>Shechinah</i> and saw the angels . . .	

While the rabbis did not deny that it was God who appeared to Abraham, they found it useful to make a linguistic shift. When wanting to denote God's presence and activity within the creaturely realm, they tended to employ a subtle circumlocution, the term *Shechinah*. This designation, derived from the Hebrew word for "dwelling" (*shakhan*), provided the rabbis a way to speak of God as being near to, present with, and active in the world without actually saying it was *God*—even though it is.⁵ Let us simply say that the *Shechinah* is the divine presence, and thus that the rabbis' theological strategy does not undercut Genesis's insistence upon God's desire and capacity for true com-

munion with human beings or with the creaturely realm generally. Indeed, the rabbis playfully observe in this story of divine visitation that God, like an observant Jew, undertakes a *mitzvah*—a good deed that makes the world a better place—of visiting the sick. A cursory glance at the end of Genesis 17, the previous chapter, reminds the reader that Abraham has only recently been circumcised. So he is one sore old man! Thus, the God of all creation bends low to visit the ailing Abraham, allowing him to remain seated while the Shechinah stands.

<i>Genesis Rabbah</i>	<i>Surah 11:70</i>
“And they said, ‘Do as you have said’” (18:5). “As for us,” said they, “we neither eat nor drink; but you who do eat and drink, do as you have said . . .”	But when he saw that their hands did not reach out to [the meal], . . .
<p>Above [in the heavenly sphere] there is no eating and drinking; hence when Moses ascended on high he appeared like them [the angels], as it says, <i>Then I abode in the mount forty days and forty nights; I did neither eat bread nor drink water</i> (Deut. 9:9). But below, where there is eating and drinking, we find, “And he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat” (18:8). Did they then eat? They pretended to eat, removing each course in turn.</p>	

In the light of the rabbinic commentary on Genesis 18, it seems likely that the Qur’an’s denial that the heavenly messengers even lifted a hand toward Abraham’s nice spread shares with the Jewish interpretive tradition a hesitation to portray God in such anthropomorphic ways. In the rabbinic readings preserved in *Genesis Rabbah*, the divine party only “pretended to eat”—an explicit undercutting of the surface meaning of the Genesis text, surely. But, again, it is not a surprising reading the rabbis offered, for it certainly seems much more in keeping with the idea of divine transcendence: “above there is no eating and drinking.”

It is noteworthy, too, that even as the rabbis could speak of the Shechinah, the presence of God, as paying a visit to Abraham, they also identified all three visitors as angels. Thus, in anticipation of what we read also in the Qur’an, God is not identified with any one of the angels. Rabbinic tradition identified the three as Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael; according to *Genesis Rabbah*, Rabbi Hiyya taught that Abraham conversed with “the most important of them, Michael”⁶—who is thus being identified functionally as God’s stand-in.

<i>Genesis Rabbah</i>	<i>Surah 11:75–76</i>
<p>“Abraham remained standing before the LORD” (18:22). Rabbi Simon said: This is an emendation of the Soferim [lit., “bookmen” or scholars; scribes from the time of Ezra to the Maccabean period, roughly 450—100 BC], for the <i>Shechinah</i> was actually waiting for Abraham. (<i>The issue is that another, early and reliable, manuscript tradition reads “while the LORD remained standing before Abraham”—i.e., as though standing as a servant before a superior.</i>)</p>	
<p>“Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, . . . Far be that from you!” R. Judan interpreted: It is a profanation for Thee; it is alien to Thy nature . . . R. Abba said: Not [simply] “to do such a thing” is written here, but “to do anything after this manner”: neither this nor anything like it nor anything even of a lesser nature.</p>	<p>Abraham is truly clement, contrite, penitent.</p>
<p>“Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” (18:28). R. Hiyya b. Abba said: Abraham wished to descend from fifty to five, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: “Turn back” (i.e., “This is too big a jump”).</p>	<p>“O Abraham, desist from this; the Command of your Lord has come and an irreversible punishment shall surely smite them.”</p>

The rabbinic interpreters could even be explicitly self-aware of their theological wrestlings with, and renderings of, the biblical text. Here in *Genesis Rabbah* the observation is attributed to Rabbi Simon that earlier Jewish scribes actually had made a change in the language of the Genesis text they had inherited: even if Abraham boldly engaged the Almighty in a little discussion of theological ethics, surely it is not acceptable to say that God stood “before Abraham”—as many of the oldest manuscripts actually had it—as a servant stands before the master. Rather, surely it was the case that the Jewish scribes of Ezra’s time had been correct to insist that in fact Abraham had stood “before God.” Yet it is not at all clear that Rabbi Simon was sympathetic with this revision of the text; he appears to be saying something like “As a matter of fact, it was God’s Presence, the *Shechinah*, that was waiting upon Abraham.”⁷

In his commentary on Genesis, the contemporary Christian biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has written regarding this interchange between Abraham and God:

It is as though Abraham is Yahweh's theological teacher and raises a question that is quite new for him. The question concerns Yahweh's willingness to set aside the closed system and approach the world in another way. Abraham is the bearer of a new theological possibility. He dares to raise risky questions with Yahweh. The relation of Abraham and Yahweh in this passage is worth noting in detail . . . [A] very early text note (not to be doubted in its authority and authenticity) shows that the text before any translation actually read, "Yahweh stood before Abraham." The picture is one which agrees with our comment about Abraham as Yahweh's theological instructor . . . But that bold image of Yahweh being accountable to Abraham for this theological idea was judged by the early scribes as irreverent and unacceptable . . . But the earlier version suggests with remarkable candor what a bold posture Abraham assumes and how presumptuous is the issue he raises.⁸

Even if the narrative image of God "standing before" Abraham was judged to be "irreverent and unacceptable," the rabbis were nonetheless quite willing to elaborate on Abraham's moral challenge to God. "It would be utterly alien to your nature to destroy the innocent along with the wicked," the rabbinical Abraham theologizes. "Far be it from you to do such a thing, or even anything remotely like it!" The most beautifully compelling argument, however, is attributed to Rabbi Levi, who interpreted Abraham's challenge to be "If you want to have a world, there can be no justice, and if justice is what you want, there can be no world. You are holding the rope at both ends; you want a world and you want justice. If you don't give in a bit, the world can never stand."⁹ It is an appeal to the Creator to recognize and even embrace the inherent limitations in creaturely existence, to temper heavenly ideals with earthly realities.

Indeed, Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba is said to have remarked that God had to apply the brakes to Abraham's impulses toward mercy. According to this imaginative rabbinic strand of interpretation, Abraham had dropped the hypothetical number of righteous Sodomites from fifty down to five in a single leap! "Turn back," the rabbinically rendered Shechinah replies; that is too big a jump all at once; let's slow down, back up, and work the number down a little more gradually! But even this is a far cry from the Qur'an's rendering of the angels who, speaking on God's behalf, order Abraham to "desist from this" hopeless plea-bargaining entirely.

We detect, then, a set of subtle but fascinating shifts in this Abrahamic story as it is molded by rabbinic reading. The rabbis did not deny that it was

truly God who visited Abraham and Sarah; they did, however, soften the rhetoric of the biblical text from the use of God's Holy Name (YHWH), a name of great mystery and holy transcendence, by employing instead the term Shechinah. Granted, the Shechinah is God—but God specifically imagined, narrated, and experienced as present within creation. As the rabbinic tradition has come to say it, the Shechinah is God walking, “as it were,” among us and conversing with us. True, said the rabbis, God has no legs upon which to stand, literally, and no actual mouth whereby to speak. But God can nonetheless come and sit down, “so to speak,” by Abraham's and Sarah's encampment because the Shechinah is God dwelling among us, in communiqué with us. Yet there was clearly a further move made by at least some rabbis, in which even the Shechinah's presence is embodied in a trio of angels. But whether God or angels, the rabbis insisted, no otherworldly being could actually eat earthly, material food. And while the God of the rabbis is willing to engage in discussion with Abraham regarding the fate of the Sodomites, God finds it necessary as well to place a check upon Abraham's apparently overly generous proclivity for mercy.

Interestingly enough, during roughly the same years that these playful rabbinic musings on Genesis were being collected and collated into *Genesis Rabbah*, one of the greatest ever of Christian theologians, St. Augustine (354–430), bishop of Hippo in North Africa, was writing his *Confessions* and many other materials for the benefit of fellow Christians. Augustine was one of the earliest theologians to see glimmers of the Trinity in Genesis 18. This should not be surprising, given the facts that the doctrine of the Trinity received its most serious attention and development precisely during the late fourth century and that Augustine was one of its most important contributors. In fact, in his book *On the Trinity* Augustine, sounding every bit like a Christian rabbi, comments on our story:

Now under the oak tree at Mamre, Abraham saw three men, whom he invited in and received with hospitality, serving them as they dined. Yet Scripture does not say . . . “three men appeared to him,” but “the Lord appeared to him.” Then, however, recounting how it was that the Lord did in fact appear to him, it adds the matter of the three men, whom Abraham invites to his hospitality in the plural number—though afterward he speaks to them in the singular, as if One . . .¹⁰

Over the subsequent centuries, the story of Genesis 18 would for Christians not only provide an apt model of hospitality but also increasingly come to be understood to provide a foreshadowing of the triune God. In medieval Christian exegesis and art, Genesis's mysterious portrait of Abraham's three

visitors as somehow also being or representing “the LORD” became a defining image. Even today, one of the most enduring images in Christian iconography is the fifteenth-century Russian Andrei Rublev’s *Icon of the Old Testament Trinity*, a rendering of three angelic beings seated at a table, gathered around an elevated plate (the Orthodox tradition’s *diskos*) upon which a piece of bread rests.¹¹ Kugel, in his massive and helpful tome *Traditions of the Bible*, includes a facsimile of this same icon, adding this presumably lighthearted comment beneath it: “The angels visited Abraham. They didn’t have much to eat.”¹² But whether in jest or not, Kugel misleads his readers on an extremely critical point: this meal is not simply a single chunk of bread to be shared three ways. Closer examination yields that the bread has a face! This only makes all the more obvious what the viewer might have suspected already: the humble meal at the center of this heavenly trio is none other than the church’s sacramental meal, the Eucharist, the body and blood of Jesus. This is a meal that, for Christians, is of infinite supply and boundless spiritual nutrition; contrary to Kugel, there is plenty to eat! But if Rublev’s icon represents the triune God, what sense does it make for the divine figures to be seated at the Eucharistic table?

Contemporary Roman Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson has written a sparkling little commentary on this icon that helps to answer this question. Johnson muses,

What catches the meditating eye most is the position of the three figures. They are arranged in a circle inclining toward one another but the circle is not closed. What the image suggests is that the mystery of God is not a self-contained or closed divine society but a communion in relationship. Moreover, its portrayal of the figures evokes the idea that this divine communion is lovingly open to the world, seeking to nourish it. As you contemplate, you begin intuitively to grasp that you are invited into this circle. Indeed, by gazing, you are already a part of it. This is a depiction of a Trinitarian God capable of immense hospitality who calls the world to join the feast.¹³

The point here emphatically is not that Genesis 18 actually teaches the doctrine of the Trinity; rather, the point is that as Christians have read this story, it should not be surprising that their interpretation has moved on a distinct trajectory. We might put it this way. In reading Genesis 18 we encounter a surprising scenario in which Adonai sits down at the table, apparently capable of sharing not only in conversation and friendly debate but even in the full spread of a Middle Eastern feast. Subsequent rabbinic interpretation could affirm the nearness and communion-creating capabilities of God but shied away from the blatant anthropomorphism involved in portraying God as washing down calf and curds with a swig of milk. The

Qur'an takes this rabbinic trajectory a step or two further by carefully insisting that Allah makes no appearance; further, even God's angelic emissaries do not participate fully in fellowship with these earthlings. They do not, and presumably cannot, eat.

Meanwhile, over time Christians developed a reading of Genesis 18 that yielded a portrait of God's communing, fellowship-engendering, incarnate grace in Jesus Christ. Thus, in the Christian rendering of this narrative it is ultimately God, not the human, who actually provides the hospitality. This hospitality, this room for us at the table, flows directly out of God's communal nature as Father, Son, and Spirit indwelling one another in mutual love. It is into this communal, mutual sharing-together that the gospel proclaims humanity to be invited in the church's ritual meal, the Eucharist.

We are confronted in this variety of readings of Genesis 18, then, with the importance of the role played by the historical communities of faith and practice that have laid claim to Abraham's legacy. The rabbinic hesitation to portray God simply in human terms is readily understandable. Similarly, the Qur'an's version of the story exemplifies the theme of God's utter transcendence, certainly a dominant theme in Islam. And Christians—reading Genesis 18 through the lens of their conviction that the Word who was with God, and who indeed is God, became flesh and dwelt among us—found in this story foreshadowings of God's communal, triune nature. Indeed, in a real sense none of these traditions was able to read Genesis 18 in a simply literalistic way. The rabbis found their solution by speaking metaphorically (signaled by their use of the phrase “so to speak”) of God's communing presence, a presence further qualified and attenuated by their interpreting the three visitors as angels. Christian interpreters understood all stories of divine presence or theophany (lit., “divine appearance”) as manifestations or foreshadowings of the Logos who later, in the incarnation, became the human being Jesus Christ, God's Son. Thus, in fact, Christianity built upon the rabbinic imagery of the Shechinah to affirm in an even stronger, more decisive way that God has become present to, and present within, God's own creation. The Qur'an takes the exact opposite direction; its solution to anthropomorphism is to keep the story but change the characters (angels pay a visit, not God), and then to edit the story such that God comes out looking very Godly: transcendent, almighty, omniscient—and, in a sense, effectively outside the narrative picture.

It may well be that one's community of faith and practice will determine, at least to a considerable extent, which portrait of God—and which portrait of Abraham, for that matter—one finds to be the most truthful, the most compelling. We will most assuredly confront, again and again, these differing Jewish, Christian, and Muslim trajectories of interpretation in the chapters that follow.