

Bristow, George. *Sharing Abraham? Narrative Worldview, Biblical Interpretation and Comparative Theology in Turkey*. Cambridge, MA: Doorlight Academic, 2017. 303pp. By Jacob Blankenship.

Often, the desire for peace and mutual understanding inspires individuals, programs, and faith-based initiatives to utilize the fields of interfaith dialogue, intertextuality, and scriptural reasoning. One corner of this movement involves what some refer to as “Abrahamic Dialogue,” or shared and respectful conversation among the “Abrahamic” faiths. George Bristow, while researching for his dissertation, entered the conversation to ask, “do we (as Christians) share a broad ‘Abrahamic’ basis for Christian-Muslim dialogue?” As a scholar, author, and coordinator of a theological training network for churches in Turkey, he is well situated to engage in this venture of understanding Abraham through the eyes of Turkish Muslim leaders. Bristow finds value in open dialogue between faiths. He develops a compelling approach to the question by beginning with the idea that, through narrative and worldview, dialogue between Christians and Muslims may take place, along with comparative theology which accounts for the biblical and qur’anic interpretations of their own texts. Bristow justifies this approach by noting that, “(1) worldview is often articulated in narrative form, and (2) canonical master narratives undergird Christian and Muslim worldviews” (25).

Because the subject at hand is the person of Abraham, Bristow focuses the conversation on what each faith says about the patriarch and how each faith interprets his life, words, and deeds; this includes the different texts received or rejected/diminished by each faith. Thus, the categories for the Christian worldview that are driven by the texts of the Old and New Testaments alone are Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation. The figure of Abraham is tied intimately to each

theme, as the consequences and the hope of each theme resonate in the life of the biblical patriarch. In comparison, the categories for the Islamic worldview as driven by both the qur'anic texts and the interpretive traditions of para-qur'anic texts are Tawhid, Prophethood, and Afterlife. These overarching themes serve to generalize the interpretive traditions as they interact, per this discussion, with the Abrahamic narratives.

With these themes guiding the Christian-Muslim dialogue, Bristow juxtaposes these central elements to point out three polarities he sees between the biblical and qur'anic worldviews. These elements aid him in depicting the common ground existing between the two worldviews and the dissonance between their respective narratives concerning Abraham. Three comparative highlights will demonstrate these polarities as derived from their Abrahamic narrative settings. First, about the Creation-Fall and Tawhid polarity (37-41), Bristow shows the biblical narrative depicts Abraham primarily as a person of faith brought into a covenantal relationship with God by God himself. This contradicts the qur'anic worldview that seems to utilize the person of Abraham paradigmatically, portraying him as an obedient person who acts as a true vicegerent. Inside this narrative polarity is the answer to the question of evil for each in their depictions of Abraham. The patriarch found in the biblical narratives is just as sinful as those around him and he is a son of Adam—bound in the fall of mankind. Abraham is brought into a covenant with God, who sets his promise and blessing on Abraham—bringing ultimate fulfilment in a future prophet-priest-king. In the qur'anic/para-qur'anic worldview, the greatest evil that exists is idolatry, and Abraham calls all to worship God alone and abandon all idolatry. Secondly, the worldview polarity of Redemption-Prophethood (41-46) follows naturally and notes that the obedience—specifically the faith that drove Abraham's obedience—is pivotal in the biblical narrative. This faith culminated in the God-Man, Jesus, the son who was sacrificed and who redeems all who believe in the promise

of God through his death and resurrection. What is then pivotal in the biblical worldview is completely absent in the qur'anic worldview. In this framework, it is the work of God to 'rightly guide' his chosen representatives (prophets) through whom he sends guidance to a people, that they may be reminded of God and warned against idolatry. Thus, the life and message of Abraham serves as an example to Muhammad of the proper imam, who can rightly reason but who gives complete obedience to God, as one who fears both God and the Last Day. Lastly, a third highlight naturally follows the question of finality in the life of Abraham through the Consummation-Afterlife polarity (47-51). It was the God of promise who brought life from Abraham's 'dead' and aged body and Sarah's barrenness, and this same God of promise raises Jesus to life—fulfilling the promise and the resurrection of Abraham's children. These true children of Abraham are the redeemed and the elect, who join Abraham and the fathers at the messianic banquet. The land for which Abraham longed is fulfilled in the picture of this final state, where God dwells with his people and the curse of the fall is completely removed with sin and death banished. In contrast, the God of the qur'anic worldview is not the God of promise-fulfillment; instead, he calls men to 'return to God' through his rightly-guided prophets. Those who obey will receive only what they deserve—paradise for the obedient who heed the warnings, and eternal fire for those who spurned the warnings. Abraham is pictured as praying for himself, his family, and others to be obedient and not disgraced on the final Day of Reckoning.

In his exploration of differences in worldviews, Bristow focuses on four Abrahamic stories in the Qur'an as the narratives from which the two worldviews originate. These stories are: (1) the para-qur'anic story of Abraham reasoning to God from the stars and challenging his relatives to give up idolatry and worship Allah, (2) the visitation of Abraham by God/angels, (3) Abraham building the Kaaba with Ishmael, and (4) the offering of Abraham's son. For the qur'anic/para-

qur'anic worldview, each of these stories is utilized to some degree in an interpretive tradition that upholds the values of Tawhid, the guidance given by God through his prophets, and the coming Final Day/Afterlife. These values can be found in the qur'anic interpretive tradition, and they help to distinguish the Abraham of the qur'anic worldview from that of the biblical worldview. The search for common ground between these two faiths that 'share' Abraham is won or lost in the narratives and their interpretations.

Therefore, do Muslims and Christians rightly share Abraham? Considering Bristow's research and careful interviewing of Turkish imams, is there indeed substantial common ground? "It turns out that the common ground that does exist is not, in fact, particularly Abrahamic..." (169). Bristow notes that most of the common ground rests on the agreement of one Creator God who interacts with mankind through prophets. But even this is too general and too misleading of a commonality due to the identity of this God and his interactions with mankind in the texts. "Thus, the dissonance in our respective readings of Abraham is indeed rooted in the difference between two sets of stories; it is not simply a matter of two readings of the same story..." (169). Bristow clarifies that there is no one story or set of stories about Abraham that results in a different reading by each side. Instead, despite even some narrative overlap, there are two separate sets of stories that concern the life and person of Abraham. This is better illustrated when one considers the separate purposes for which these narratives are used by Christians and Muslims. The application of this understanding is best summarized by Bristow,

With informed planning and respectful listening, biblical and qur'anic Abraham materials can be compared and contrasted in ways that help both Christians and Muslims better understand both their own faith and the faith of the other.... Not only areas of harmony but also areas of dissonance can be discussed with mutual benefit. Particularly through discussions of our disagreements, I had opportunity to articulate my own understanding of how Abraham and the Christian gospel are related, which represented a form of contextualized Christian witness to Muslims (170).

To conclude, I highly recommend this work to those who engage in the wide field of Christian-Muslim dialogue. At any level, the student, teacher, or worker will encounter the similarities and dissonances between these two faiths—not only with Abraham, but also with other biblical figures and their narratives. Bristow presents for us a charitable and missional approach at seeking understanding for what is absent in the opposing worldview and its use of Abrahamic (or other) narratives. Then to faithfully, adeptly, and graciously seek the opportunity to declare that which is missing in the form of the promise-fulfillment of our God, who has made a place at his table for the children of Abraham by the work and power of Jesus alone.

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