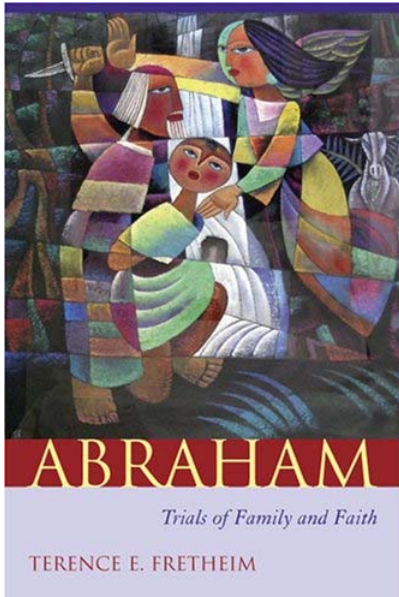


RBL 04/2009



Fretheim, Terence E.

Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith

Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament

Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007. Pp. xv + 262. Hardcover. \$44.95. ISBN 1570036942.

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Let it be said at once, this is a brilliant book. When its dust jacket presents it as written “in an inviting style that showcases [the author’s] literary discernment, theological sophistication, and passion for the biblical text,” it is a true endorsement. Terence E. Fretheim is Elva B. Lovell Professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Fretheim has previously written a substantial body of outstanding scholarly literature; in the guild of Old Testament scholarship, he needs no presentation beyond this. His book on Abraham adds to this work of excellent authorship. (A short lesson of Norwegian history and philology: Fretheim’s Norwegian family name comes from between the high mountains at the inner bottom of the beautiful and famous fjord Sognefjorden, where huge cruise ships call daily throughout the summer season. We Norwegians often have farm or place names as last names. Fretheim possibly comes from the name of a river, in old days probably called Freta, passing through this small local community, while “heim” means “home”—the home at Freta.)

As a book on Abraham, the primary focus is on Gen 12–25, but an additional chapter (7) includes “Abraham in Memory and Tradition,” where Fretheim follows the Abraham tradition further through the Hebrew Bible, the intertestamental and apocryphal literature, and the New Testament. He also gives a side glance to Abraham in Muslim

tradition. These discussions are not so elaborate as those on the pericopes from Gen 12–25. As for the Qumran texts, he refers shortly in a note (213) to 1QApGen, but I cannot see that he mentions or comments on 4Q225 or 4Q252. A somewhat curious detail is that he lists 1QApGen among the pseudepigraphic literature. Is this because 1QApGen, even if this text was found in Qumran, was probably not produced there? Another detail: he refers to 1QS, the Rule of the Community (213 n. 84), but it does not appear in the index.

The two first chapters are of a more basic character for the book and deserve the closest attention here. In chapter 1 Fretheim discusses “The Universal Frame of Reference: A Key to Understanding Abraham,” while chapter 2 is on “The Abrahamic Narratives: Literary and Historical Perspectives.” In chapter 1 Fretheim underlines that the story of Abraham “will not be properly understood apart from this universal context,” that is, its connections to chapters 1–11 (1). The division between chapters 1–11 and 12–50 should not be made sharper than the text itself does, Fretheim warns, and he calls 12:1–3 “a fulcrum text” between the two main parts of Genesis. “Too sharp a distinction between these two major sections of Genesis will not serve the interpretation well” (2). Therefore a “global observation is of crucial importance in understanding the story of Abraham” (1–2). The story’s “salvation history” aspect should not neglect its creational themes. Fretheim sees this connection to Gen 1–11 particularly illustrated in Gen 13 (3–5), where he finds a series of parallels to Gen 1–11. He welcomes a more integral reading of the book of Genesis as a whole, but he goes further, with J. G. Janzen, arguing that “it is the distinctive function of the ancestral narratives in Genesis 12–50 ... to sustain the literary and theological connection between Genesis 1–11 and Exodus–Revelation” (2).

Blessing and promise are basic concepts in Genesis; one is incomplete without the other (see 8). Both have “deep levels of continuity” with the theology of creation. “God has a promissory relationship with the universe before any covenants are made with Abraham. ... the creator God has a relationship of love and faithfulness toward the earth and says a fundamental and irrevocable ‘yes’ to *this* earth and *these* human beings,” Fretheim claims, with Karl Loning and Erich Zenger (9). Fretheim finds this universal aspect illustrated in Gen 14, where Melchizedek is represented as Abraham’s teacher (11).

Fretheim discusses literary and historical perspectives on the Abraham narrative also in chapter 2. As for the type of literature in Gen, 12–50, he singles out two types—narratives and genealogies (14)—and calls the narratives “rather episodic in character” and difficult to assess formally (15). As for their structure, he argues that “it seems best ... to discern more modest structures from within the flow of the narrative itself” (15–16). He finds “the most striking feature” of these narratives to be “the doubling of key elements over the course of the narrative.” In particular, he points out as basic structural elements genealogies, calling and testing stories, stories pertaining to land, Lot stories, covenant

stories, Hagar and Ishmael stories, the election of Isaac, and stories about Abimelech (16–18). Fretheim briefly presents source and tradition theories (19–22) and concludes that “scholarly reconstructions of this ancestral period have had mixed results.” As for dating the time of the ancestors, he calls this “exceptionally difficult” but indicates “the first half of the second millennium (2000–1500 B.C.E.)” (22).

In chapters 3–6 Fretheim discusses selected themes from chapters 12–25. In chapter 3, “Abraham: Recipient of Promises,” we are at the very core of the Abraham traditions. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 concentrate on Abraham and the “outsiders”: “The Endangering of Sarah” (4); “Gift, Threat, and Challenge” (5); and “Hagar and Ishmael” (6). Fretheim notes that “remarkably little polemic is directed against these outsiders in the Genesis text. ... these ‘nonchosen’ folk will often play a positive, if at times critical, role in Abraham’s life and God’s economy” (8). The term “outsider” is used for people not in the genealogical chain after Abraham and Sarah (182 n. 7). This attention to “outsiders” Fretheim takes as an illustration of God’s “global concern” (xi). Outsiders are interpreted as a divine gift but also as a threat and a challenge (cf. the blessing in Gen 12:3 [xiii]).

Abraham is one of the most central persons in the history of religion, as religious “father” both in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. There has been a renewed attention to Abraham (ix), not least intensified by the Jewish-Christian-Muslim interrelationships and promoted by the problems in the Middle East. This makes Abraham one of the most important eponymic figures in the history of religion. Fretheim call him “progenitor” of Israel (22). In itself it is “remarkable” that the biblical God’s own identity is linked to a particular person and his family: “the God of Abraham” (xi). Therefore, a book such as this should be of general religious interest in wide circles; in Fretheim’s own words, “interest in the Abraham story has reached beyond scholarly circles ... and caught up the larger culture” (ix). But this book is not primarily focused on interreligious questions; this is a close—very close, often ingenious—reading of the biblical text. Fretheim has fabulous skills to let the text itself speak. Sometimes he leaves the narrative exegesis and comes with applications to modern problems. Fretheim is not a postmodern exegete, but often a vein of postmodern thinking is recognizable.

Scholars working with traditional historical-critical methods will possibly dismiss this book as superficial or not sufficiently critical, but this is to misunderstand the author. He does not dismiss the traditional historical-critical methods, but those are not his methods in this book. When the historical-critical exegetes have done their job and penetrated below the surface of the text, the text is still there to be read as it stands. This is what Fretheim does: his book is a narrative and theological analysis, with side glances to literary- and historical-critical questions, mainly in chapter 2. His study “is primarily concerned to develop the theological issues that center around the figure of Abraham....

Issues related to putative literary sources and possible historical and sociological backgrounds will receive only introductory attention” (x). This literary-narrative-theological analysis is, in my opinion, a very welcome and successful product of this kind. We need such exegesis, too, and I, surely with many others, will thank him for the insights he shares with us.

Debate with other scholars does not dominate this book, even though Fretheim has a long series of references to other scholars, either for critique, discussion, or endorsement. Fretheim has a series of acknowledgements (xv), but this is just for the sake of courtesy; this book is a very independent presentation. Fretheim is a great scholar standing on his own scholarly feet, with a series of noticeable literature on his CV, not least the small but renowned *The Suffering of God* (Fortress, 1984), to which I myself repeatedly return.

The book has thirty-four pages of very good endnotes; personally, I prefer footnotes. A select bibliography covers thirteen pages. A comprehensive subject index comprises seven pages, and a scriptural index of twenty-one pages ends the book. All this, together with extensive use of subheadings in each chapter, makes this a very user-friendly book. Last but not least, this is a very beautiful book, given a delicate jacket, reproducing Sacrifice of Abraham by Dr. He Qi.

In short, this is a great scholarly book written in a way that makes it accessible not only to scholars but also to ministers, even to many in the pews, “believing and thinking Bible readers,” as a Norwegian New Testament professor used to say. This is what makes it great. Not least, preachers will profit from this book. Let me congratulate the author—and the reading public—with the book. May its readers be many!