

Shared Stories, Rival Tellings: Early Encounters of Jews, Christians, and Muslims

Robert C. Gregg

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“What are the differences and similarities between the early encounter and pivotal stories of the Abrahamic faiths?” is the main question underlying this engaging academic book. Recently, there has been a revitalization of discussions about Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations in academia and in interfaith work around the United States. This book comes at a timely and crucial time, one in which where there is so much misunderstanding and misinformation about these particular faiths, especially about the questions of origins and absolute truths. Gregg’s methodology and choice of texts, illustrations and sacred stories are intriguing and complex. The book captures the reader in a detailed textual analysis that seems hard to sustain; however, his writing wins one over with its clarity and enticing content that one cannot stop reading this tome of a book. He provides an extensive yet accessible guide for many religious texts that also include artwork as well as historical writings to illuminate religious interpretations and their impact on community relations.

The book offers ways of connecting the Abrahamic traditions both through the writings but also by providing historical data and content of the

contact and exchange among early Abrahamic communities. His theoretical methodology can easily be compared to that of the great historian Fernand Braudel, whose concept of *Longue durée* in his book *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, 3 vols. (1949) argues that all the human sciences, history included, are contaminated by each other. Cultures and civilizations can speak the same language and are affected by one another in a somewhat imperceptible manner such that they can even communicate with one another even through change and new interpretations. Similarly, Gregg has outlined this concept beneath the many narratives and interpretations that he presents, thereby marking the changes and connections in a seamless manner.

The book's content explores the historical context of the divides among Jews, Christians, and Muslims that other scholars have treated in isolation and, more singularly, as a religious competition and authenticity as regards such topics as Christ's place in Muslim beliefs, Muhammad in Jewish beliefs, and early encounters between Jews and Christians. Even though Gregg does not shy away from showing the religious competition, his book brilliantly anchors itself on the notion of "sharing," which echoes in its title, and "telling" rather than an absolute truth or religious competition.

The unique significance of this particular book is its focus on the textual and illustrative aspects of the Abrahamic sacred texts, which leaves little room for assumptions or judgments. The reader can follow the methodology of interpretative and critical chronological analysis, which allows for open interpretation and a different interpretation of controversial narratives, in all of the Abrahamic stories and texts. For example, in the last section Gregg discusses how the Abrahamic faiths' depiction of the figure of Mary, Maryam, and Miriam relies on the written historical basis that includes and evokes negative and callous excerpts from Celsus and its parallels with the Talmudic text. Gregg, however, relies again on the textual Biblical verses: "Jewish anti-Mary and anti-Jesus critiques and attacks – especially those contained in Jewish writings like *Toledoth Yeshu* and *Sefer Zerubbabel* – stood alongside and responded to polemics developed in Christianity" (p. 540).

The book is divided in three parts, each of which analyzes narratives that appear in the three Abrahamic traditions. The sections are divided as following: Cain's murder of his brother Abel; the clash between Sarah and Hagar; Joseph the young Hebrew slave in Egypt tormented by the sexual advances of his master's wife; the disobedient prophet Jonah and the whale; and the saga of Mary, Jesus's mother. The book can be taught in sections for any class on any of the Abrahamic traditions or read by a curious reader who would

benefit from learning about the three faiths' intricate connections in terms of revelation, prophecy, and moral principles.

Examples of how Gregg utilizes illustrations are found in many of book's sections. The most intriguing example, however, part's account of Cain and Abel, "Tell Them the Story of the Two Sons of Adam as It Really Was," where he reintroduces Abel's reappearance and connects it to a Persian ritual. We are told here, by the great Muslim scholar Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (1000), that the festival of offering food to the dead

originated with Adam and Eve, who longed to be reunited with their son Abel. Returning to his parents, Abel, unlike others, seems to have been visible, but we are told that in their presence he was mute. The interrupted text does not allow us to know if he partook of the food and drink laid out for him, or was restricted to savoring the odors. (p. 103)

The section is further elucidated by a figure that shows the deceased Habil (Abel) visiting his parents surrounded by food. We read that a Persian ritual of offering food to the deceased emulates this very scene and depiction of Abels' parents. What one learns is that rituals that are still ongoing in the Abrahamic traditions were created with the first creation and destruction of humanity.

Another illustration and analysis is presented in the same section: a raven teaching Cain how to bury his brother's body (dated 1228). Gregg provides an analysis that recalls Q. 5:31-32, which relates this story, but also explains how its illustration (popular in Persian art) carries with it a deeper meaning.

... the sending of the raven to instruct Qabil about how to bury his brother, and his chagrin and self-castigation upon observing the action – are obvious and "literal." At the same time, there is room, or invitation, in these scenes for recognition that the raven's action is a divine gift – perhaps not only of basic know-how to Qabil, but also of guidance of a deeper kind. (p. 105)

This section carries with it questions of Islamic art, ritual, and divine guidance that adds a richer and deeper reading to this particular narrative. It evokes feelings of the bereaved, moral principles, the divine gift of animals and miracles within the Islamic tradition.

Shared Stories, Rival Tellings also delves into sensitive and at times controversial topics, such as the role of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar (viz., the progenitors of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, respectively), but more frequently the debate lies with Abraham's relationship with these two women: "Attempts by Christian interpreters to make the Bible's account of the strife between Abraham's two women and sons serve the churches best interests were definite

and aggressive” (p. 218). Here he discusses the animosity between these women in light of their sons, which softens the memory of how Hagar was banished from the home and Sarah remained there as Abraham’s wife. As a matter of fact, we learn that in a painting illuminating a manuscript of al-Nisaburi’s *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’* the story is depicted as a pleasant one that celebrates the completion of the *Ka’ba* and Sarah as forgiving. The announcement of Isaac’s birth is also witnessed.

Upon receiving the command to construct the *Ka’ba*, Abraham summons (from Syria) Sarah, Isaac, along with others loyal to him. Abraham then informs Sarah that the time has come for her to be at peace with “my son and his mother.” Sarah does not resist her husband’s request, even though there follow grudging comments. Sarah claims that God has shown partiality to Hagar and Ishmael, showering them with greater mercy and property, blessing them in their residence in Mecca ... Jewish and Christian estimations of Sarah’s preeminence are being rebuffed. (p. 214)

Gregg further connects these stories by pointing out that the Islamic version is complete. When confronted with the Jewish and Christian stories, the narrators of this illustration and elsewhere “chose to generate a continuation of the story of this half of the prophet’s family but situating them in Mecca and involving them in the prayers for which the *Ka’ba* was dutifully, and wondrously, built” (p. 216).

The comparisons and stories of these faiths raise questions of intertextuality of sacred texts due to the contact and exchange that all three faiths had stemming from the same geographic areas and sharing traditions from prayers to circumcision. The motifs of Christ and Abraham in these stories reveal that the most crucial aspect of this work is to tell and share a story without the usual religious competition. As the author notes in his own conclusion: “The competition over scriptural interpretations did not consist merely in reflexive responses – that is, quick rebuffs of unwelcome criticisms. Rather, we have learned that being questioned and engaged by their competitors had profound results” (p. 598).

People who are interested in faith, scripture, illustrations and the telling of these profound stories will find this book is compelling and deeply insightful. Gregg has attempted to analyze and provide scholars with indelible material that can be used to retell and share these Abrahamic stories in the future.

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