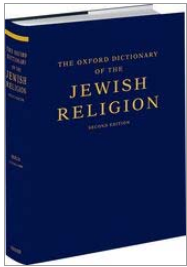


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ABRAHAM

(Heb. *Avraham*), father and founder of the Hebrew people; the first of the patriarchs. The story of Abraham's life as recorded in *Genesis* 11.27–25.18 is a combination of several traditions. Scholars are divided as to when Abraham lived, dating him anywhere between 2000 and 1400 BCE, but most place him in the eighteenth century BCE. According to biblical tradition, though Abraham's ancestors (including his father, Terah) worshiped many gods (see *Jos.* 24.2), he was the first to worship only one and is considered the founder of the monotheist tradition and the first Hebrew (or Israelite or Jew). More accurately, however, Abraham's own religion can be labeled monolatry (the worship of one deity, without denying the existence of other gods), which only later evolved into monotheism (the belief in one deity).

The biblical account begins with God speaking to Abraham (first called Abram [*Gn.* 11.27–17.5], then a dialectal variant, Abraham, interpreted in *Gn.* 17.5 as "Father of a multitude of nations") and commanding him to leave his native city Ur of the Chaldees, and to go to the land of Canaan (*Gn.* 12). Abraham, at the age of seventy-five, and his wife Sarah (Sarai) immigrated to Canaan and there lived in various cities, notably Hebron. God promised Abraham offspring who would become a great nation and possession of the land of Canaan (the "promised land"). The ensuing narrative revolves around the fulfillment of this promise. His son Ishmael was born to a secondary wife, Hagar, and at Sarah's insistence they were driven away. Sarah miraculously gave birth to a son in old age, Isaac (*Gn.* 21), who was to be the heir of the covenantal promise. A dramatic crisis, endangering this promise, occurred when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (the *'aqedah*; *Gn.* 22). Abraham passed this supreme test of his faith in God by his readiness to obey, but God prevented the consummation of the sacrifice. The covenant established between God and Abraham (*Gn.* 15) forms the basis of biblical religion: God will be the God of Abraham and his descendants, and Abraham and his descendants will be the people of God. The binding symbol of the covenant is circumcision. The story of the *'aqedah* is followed by the account of Sarah's death (including Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machpelah in Hebron for a burial site; *Gn.* 23) and the procurement of a bride, Rebekah, for Isaac (*Gn.* 24). The Bible notes that, in addition to Hagar and Sarah, Abraham had a third wife, Keturah, whom he married after Sarah's death, and through her six additional children were born (*Gn.* 25.1–6). When Abraham died, his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him next to Sarah in the cave of Machpelah (*Gn.* 25.7–10).

The Midrash tells many stories about Abraham, for example, his smashing of Terah's idols while still a youth and his institution of morning prayers. He is the symbol of hospitality (*Gn.* 18) and the first of the guests welcomed in the Ushpizin ceremony in the *sukkah* during Sukkot. Abraham plays an important role in Islam, since Muslims view Abraham as the founder of their religion as well, with descent passing from Abraham through Ishmael to later historical Arabs, and the Qur'an includes many stories of Abraham derived from both biblical and Midrashic sources.

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—GARY A. RENDSBURG

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