

Handout #2: Jewish Interpretations of Abraham

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ON ABRAHAM

¹ I will now praise those godly people,
our ancestors, each in his own time—
² The Most High's portion, great in glory,
reserved to himself from ancient days:

⁹ ABRAHAM, father of many peoples,
kept his glory without stain:
¹⁰ He obeyed the Most High's command,
and entered into a covenant with him;
In his own flesh the ordinance was incised,
and when tested, he was found steadfast.
¹ For this reason, God promised him with an oath
to bless the nations through his descendants,
To make him numerous as the grains of dust,
and exalt his posterity like the stars,
Giving them an inheritance from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Sirach 44:1-2, 19-21

ceed by a dry, and level, and plain path, journey on without stumbling; so also those men who are conducting their soul through the road of bodily and external good things are only accustoming it to fall; for these things are full of stumbling and the most insecure of all. But they who by those speculations which are in accordance with virtue, hasten towards God, are guiding their souls in a safe and untroubled path. So that we may say with the most absolute truth, that the man who trusts in the good things of the body disbelieves in God, and that he who distributes them believes in him.

(270) But not only do the holy scriptures bear witness to the faith of Abraham in the living God, which faith is the queen of all the virtues, but moreover he is the first man whom they speak of as an elder; though they were men who had preceded him who had lived three times as many years (or even more still) as he had, not one of whom is handed down to us as worthy of the appellation. And may we not say that this is in strict accordance with natural truth? For he who is really an elder is looked upon as such, not with reference to his length of time, but to the praiseworthiness of his life. (271) Those men, therefore, who have spent a long life in that existence which is in accordance with the body, apart from all virtue, we must call only long-lived children, having never been instructed in those branches of education which befit grey hairs. But the man who has been a lover of prudence, and wisdom, and faith in God, one may justly denominate an elder, forming his name by a slight change from the first. (272) For in real truth the wise man is the first man in the human race, being what a pilot is in a ship, a governor in a city, a general of war, the soul in the body,

or the mind in the soul; or again, what the heaven is in the world, and what God is in the heaven. (273) And God, admiring this man for his faith (*pistis*) in him, giving him a pledge (*pistis*) in return, namely, a confirmation by an oath of the gifts which he had promised him; no longer conversing with him as God might with man, but as one friend with another.

For he says, "By myself have I sworn,"¹⁹ by him that is whose word is an oath, in order that Abraham's mind may be established still more firmly and immovably than before. (274) Let the virtuous man both be and be called the younger and the last, since he only pursues such objects as may produce revolution and as are placed in the lowest rank.

(275) Thus much is sufficient to say on this subject. But God, adding to the multitude and magnitude of the praises of the wise man one single thing as a crowning point, says that "this man fulfilled the divine law, and all the commandments of God,"²⁰ not having been taught to do so by written books, but in accordance with the unwritten law of his nature, being anxious to obey all healthful and salutary impulses. And what is the duty of man except most firmly to believe those things which God asserts?

(276) Such is the life of the first author and founder of our nation; a man according to the law, as some persons think, but, as my argument has shown, one who is himself the unwritten law and justice of God.

¹⁹ Genesis 15:6.

²⁰ Genesis 26:5.

2. There were ten generations from Noah to Abraham, and in all of these God spoke to only one of their number, to Abraham. R. Berekhiah taught in the name of R. Nehemiah: [God's sifting through the generations until he found Abraham] may be illustrated by the parable of a king who, while traversing from place to place, lost a pearl from [the crown on] his head. The king halted and had his retinue halt. When passersby asked, "What is going on here with the king and his entire retinue?" they were told, "A pearl has fallen from the king's head." What did the king do? He heaped the soil in a number of piles, brought sieves, and sifted the first pile, but did not find the pearl; he sifted the second, but did not find it; but when he sifted the third pile, he found it. Then the passersby said, "The king has finally found his precious pearl."

Likewise, the Holy One said to Abraham, "Go—you"² (Gen. 12:1), it was for you I was waiting. Otherwise, what need had I to record the [lengthy] genealogy of Shem, Arpachshad, Shelah, Eber, Peleg, Reu, Serug, Nalor, and Terah? Was it not on account of you? Hence it is written, "Thou didst choose Abram . . . because Thou foundest his heart faithful before Thee (Neh. 9:7-8)."³

Philo

Genesis Rabbah, Midrash Tehillim

6. R. Simeon ben Yohai said: Our father Abraham—his own father did not teach him, nor did he have a master to teach him. From whom, then, did Abraham learn Torah? It was the Holy One who had provided him with reins that were like two pitchers overflowing and filling him with Torah and wisdom all through the night.⁷ R. Levi, however, said: Abraham learned Torah all by himself.⁸