BOOK REVIEWS


*Abraham* by Kari-Josef Kuschel is a book in the spirit of its time. It deals with processes of peace and interreligious dialogue. Kuschel is a close friend of Hans Küng and like Küng, he is engaged in interreligious dialogue. For Kuschel, who is a Roman Catholic, the Bible matters a great deal even in the religious encounter. The present book develops the Biblical pursuit in the area of interreligious dialogue. The message Kuschel gives to the followers of the three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is that one should look for similarities rather than differences. He even labels the conflict between these religions "a family quarrel". Kuschel takes his starting-point in the German Jewish poetess Nelly Sachs’ drama of Abraham. In this drama she portrays Abraham as a young man; Abraham in search of God. For Nelly Sachs, Abraham becomes the very archetype, the primitive man from Ur: the human being who in his search of God refutes every sign of idol worship and who, with guidance from God, wanders towards an unknown but promised land. This image of Abraham is that which Kuschel aims to uncover in his own journey in the three religions, tracking down coinciding attitudes and analogous ideas.

Kuschel’s first question is: How is Abraham characterised in Judaism? Kuschel contrasts Abraham’s "non-Jewishness" with the image of Abraham which manifested itself from the time of Babylonian exile up through history. Abraham was not a Jahvist and he did not observe the Law of God, the Torah. Nevertheless, Abraham, as an ideal had validity in spite of the periodic Jewish exclusivity predominating at that time. According to Kuschel, the promise God gave Abraham inspired hopes and aspirations among the Jews despite the exile and the loss of land. It can be said that Abraham is the one who guarantees to the Jews the promise of God of the Jewish land. The story of Abraham and Sarah, in the view of Kuschel, has therefore had the effect of creating a psychological crisis. The author illustrates how the image of Abraham has shifted emphasis from a particularistic representation in periods of prevailing Jewish exclusivity, such as is apparent in the writings of Ezra and Nehemiah,
to a universalistic representation in periods of openness and dialogue as for instance in the Hellenistic era. Kuschel thus demonstrates how the person of Abraham performed different functions in different ages. He has played theological and social roles according to the specific conditions of the Jews.

After his survey of Judaism, Kuschel goes on to analyse the Christian view of Abraham. Even in this part we are confronted with the fact that the socio-political circumstances have, to a great extent, influenced the outcome of the theology. In this part which deals with Christianity, the perspective of the author is most apparent. He is a Christian theologian, and in a time marked by interreligious dialogue with the Church as the driving force behind this initiative, his personal commitment materialises. This culminates in Kuschel’s description of Paul’s portrayal of Abraham and the consequences of this portrayal of Abraham. Kuschel emphasises the objective of Jesus as a reformer within Judaism rather than an instigator of a new religion. He scrutinises Jesus’ statement in Matthew and Luke:

Many, I tell you, will come from east and west to feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of Heaven. But those who were born to the kingdom will be driven out into the dark, the place of wailing and grinding of teeth (Matthew 8, 11-12; cf. Luke 13. 28-29)

Kuschel suggests that Jesus’ original message as expressed in this passage was not to reject or disinherit Israel. On the contrary, Jesus gave Israel a decisive hope, because he gives vent to the view that the land orginally belongs to Israel and the Jews are the original selected "sons" of God (pp. 75-76). Kuschel points out that Jesus himself was a Jew and he strictly observed the Torah. Thus Jesus’ statements, in Kuschel’s view, were meant as nothing else than a warning to the Jews.

Kuschel also portrays Paul primarily as a Jew, Paul observed the Torah, but at the same time he advocated that non-Jewish Christians were not obligated to observe the commandments of the Jewish law. Paul’s objective was mainly to emphasise "faith", and Kuschel shows that Paul’s image of Abraham points to this particular aspect of Abraham’s relation with God. For Paul, Abraham is the heathen, the gentile, who manifests the task of the non-Jew, which is to have faith rather than to observe the law. According to Kuschel, Paul looked upon faith and deeds (the observance of the Torah) as contradictions, and regarded Abraham as the archetype of the strong believer. Moreover, Paul considered Abraham as the testimony that lineage does not empower man, only faith does so. This universalistic view of Abraham, which we find in Paul’s writings, is also manifest in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. However, in the Gospel of John, Abraham is "Christified". Kuschel points out that the changing socio-political circumstances are the reasons for the changing dimension of the image of Abraham. In the Scripts of the Patriarchs he
discovers a similar structural development of the image of Abraham as he found in the Jewish Scripture.

The chapter on Abraham and Islam is the weakest part of the book. The starting point of the author is that Islam claims Abraham for itself (p. 130). He distinguishes between the image of Abraham in the Qurʾān during the Makkan period and that during the Madinan period. In the revelations during the Makkan period Kuschel sees a "Biblical" image of Abraham with emphasis on Abraham's monotheism and faith, whereas in the revelations during the Madinan period he notices that Abraham is used more exclusively to strengthen Islam as a religion. Kuschel is of the opinion that Islam displays the same structure in its view of Abraham as found in Judaism and Christianity: particularism contra universalism, according to the different scriptures originate from different socio-political circumstances.

As a theologian, Kuschel is familiar with the history as well as the theology of both Judaism and Christianity. In the chapter on Islam, however, one gets the feeling that the author is less well-versed in this religion. This becomes obvious in his use of the historical-critical method. This method is well-established within both Judaism and Christianity, but that does not mean that it can be applied to Islam in the manner Kuschel does. Jesus and his preaching would still be valuable for Christians even if it did turn out that the New Testament has only a limited degree of authenticity. In Islam, on the other hand, the whole theology depends on the axiom that the Qurʾān is the word of God. If one were to look at the book, Abraham, as a whole and try to comprehend Kuschel's message, one would understand that Kuschel's historical-critical perspective in his analysis on Islam, on the one hand, might lead to a Muslim rejection of his book. On the other hand, the book will confirm many non-Muslims' prejudices about Islam by looking at Islam in ethnocentric terms. This will be clear by the following example: Kuschel says that in surah 6 Muhammad is depicted as the first believer (p. 140). He quotes the Arabic word for "the first" occurring in the relevant Qurʾānic verse, possibly has different connotations and meanings than that specific term that Kuschel has chosen to refer to. Most of the Qurʾānic interpreters regard the word "first" in this passage to mean the "foremost" or "leading", i.e. Muhammad is the "foremost believer" due to his message as the first and the only universal message that God sent to a prophet.

Kuschel continues with this idea of Islamic primacy by referring to the German orientalist, Stieglecker's works. In Stieglecker's view, Islam gives Muhammad the same value in the history of revelation as all the rest of the prophets from the family of Abraham taken together (p. 160). Later in the book, Kuschel contradicts his own statements when he points out that the Qurʾān regards the Jewish prophets as adequate believers on the same footing as
Muhammad and Abraham, an idea which in my opinion is more appropriate in an Islamic context.

These small shortcomings, which I have referred to above, together with various mis-spellings of Arabic words, makes the chapter on Islam inferior to the rest of the chapters. One should bear in mind, however, that the text is an English translation from German, and one cannot exclude the possibility of errors in the translation.

In the last part of the book where Kuschel analyses the possibility of "an Abrahamic ecumenic", Kuschel returns to his former standard of the work. In this part he shows Abraham’s solution of conflicts, either share of land or tracts of peace (p. 237).

The book is well worth reading, and although Kuschel’s own sympathies and affiliations are very visible, I found that he describes the different religions, particularly Judaism and Christianity, in an adequate way. He has also managed to find common denominators in the three religions which might pave the ground for better understanding and cooperation between them in the future. The book, although a scholarly work, is written in a popular style and is therefore easy to read. As for Kuschel’s vision for the future of dialogue and peace in "the Abrahamic family", we can only hope and pray for that it might materialize.

Anne Sofie Roald


A predominant theme among students of the contemporary Muslim world is the challenge Islam has faced in its confrontation with modernity and secularism, a confrontation which frequently is couched in terms of "Islam versus the West." Orientalists and many Western scholars hold a traditional opinion, which has some support among the extreme left in the Muslim world, that Islam is a religion incapable of being modern, incapable of presenting a viable way of life in the modern world. A not unfair generalization is that these Orientalists and leftist thinkers consider Islam to be in bondage to an unyielding tradition and to