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Colum Hourihane, ed., *Abraham in Medieval Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Art*. Princeton, N.J.: Index of Christian Art, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University in association with Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013. xiv+ 240 pp. 152 color/30 b&w illustrations, index. \$35.00 US (pb). ISBN 978-0-9837537-2-8.

Reviewed by Marc Michael Epstein, Vassar College/Boston College.

The biblical figure of Abraham is a bridge between culture and times. The midrash (*Genesis Rabbah* 56:14) relates that Jerusalem received its name as the result of an embrace between antiquity and renewal. Abraham, who according to Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions gave the world a new understanding of God, called Jerusalem *Yireh*, (Genesis 22:14), “future vision,” a name that represents renewal. Melchizedek, (who according to the same midrash was Shem, Noah’s son and the representative of the most ancient lineage of priests,) used the name *Shalem* (Genesis 14:8), “peace,” “stasis,” or “completion,” which represents stability and the comfort of tradition. This is why Melchizedek brings Abraham a gift of bread and wine to teach him that everyone wants freshly baked bread—future vision, new ideas, renewal on every level— but that everyone also needs a bit of the old wine— the peace, integrity and deepness of tradition and respect for those who came before.

Of course, the bread and wine tendered to Abraham by Melchizedek acquired typological significance in Christianity, and Ibrahim’s status as the paradigmatic *hanif* was the essence of his reception in Islam. Contention over the person and the symbol Abraham is endemic to the inter-religious discussion. Whose Abraham is meant when we speak of “Abraham”? Which community “owns” Abraham?

One site of contention, but also of collaboration, is that of the visual traditions of each of the religious cultures that claim Abraham. In this wonderfully concise yet comprehensive survey, Collum Hourihane and the staff at the Center for Christian Art at Princeton have once again produced a monographic, indexical treatment of this important iconographic subject, one that has remained relatively untouched since the earliest iconographers and which has never been explored in so comprehensive and orderly a manner. The words “monographic” and “indexical” do little justice to the importance of this work beyond its practical utility. In two hundred and forty clearly laid out and indexed pages, Hourihane and company unfurl before the reader a set of iconographic loci that by their very organization and trajectory reveal a narrative about the history of the subject.

The volume is beautifully produced like all the publications of the Index of Christian Art. Hourihane and his staff evince a meticulous attention to the aesthetics of each and every production, and a bibliophile like myself would be remiss if I did not mention the elegant and understated design and composition by Mark Argetsinger Book Design of Rochester, New York. Moreover, the book is, as an index should be, graphically clear and linguistically comprehensible. Iconographic comprehensiveness or completeness is, of course, the Holy Grail of indices, but veteran toilers in the vineyard of iconography know well that there are always more examples awaiting discovery, usually at just the moment when one feels one has found them all. A good indexical work points the way to the major themes and significant examples and in this way habituates the researcher to seek out those themes and to discover various parallels. That having been said, this is an extremely comprehensive index. Every

significant event from Abraham's life trajectory from birth to death is treated here, and every mode of Abraham's character—in relationship, fatherhood, war, contemplation and activism—is covered. The range of media from which examples are taken—from frescos to manuscripts to the plastic arts in all forms—is truly stunning. And the dates of the examples range from the earliest moments of nascent Christianity in the catacombs and early desert monasteries to the end of the sixteenth century.

The comparative aspect of the book is one of its most salient features. This is the first volume from the Index of Christian Art that supplements the extensive Christian examples from the Princeton image bank with their parallels in Jewish and Muslim visual culture, thanks to the catalogue of Jewish iconography of the subject compiled by Ariella Amar and Michel Sternthal based on the holdings of the The Bezalel Narkiss Index of Jewish Art and a catalogue of Islamic exempla compiled by Rachel Milstein of the Hebrew University, one of the foremost authorities on Islamic parallels with Jewish/Christian biblical imagery.<sup>[1]</sup> One wishes that these two catalogues were more extensive, but their brevity is due, of course, to the aniconic stance of many Islamic civilizations on the one hand, and to the wholesale destruction of monuments of Jewish visual culture over the centuries on the other. This leaves by design and exigency relatively little material compared to that found in Christian art. It would have been helpful as well to have at least some visual examples of the Jewish and Muslim iconography of Abraham to parallel the nearly two hundred examples from Christian art pictured both in crisp and clear black and white and in stunning color in this beautifully produced volume. One imagines there were issues around the procurement of permissions that prevented this. Still, the inclusion of the Jewish and Muslim material is a step in the right direction. No Index is an island, and the utility of the Index of Christian Art is much enriched and its breathtakingly vast and useful holdings much enhanced by this sort of collaboration, especially when it engages such considerable resources as those in Jerusalem and such fine scholars and indexers as Amar, Sternthal and Milstein.

Looking at the images in comparative context, it becomes clear, for instance, that in the Middle Ages, themes involving Abraham that involved various typological foreshadowings, such as Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine, the three visitors foreshadowing the three Persons of the Trinity, and the Sacrifice of Isaac (as it is termed in Christian sources) as a typological antecedent of Christ's sacrifice, were by far the most popular. Abraham was also naturally celebrated as a pivotal axis in the ancestry of Jesus. In spite of the stunningly recursive obviation Abraham's ancestral primacy that Jesus is made to utter in John 8.58, ("Before Abraham was, I was,") visual culture tends to go the way of the Synoptics, emphasizing the genealogy of Christ and Abraham's key role therein. Following suit, Christian iconography in this instance contains within it a germ of true invitation to contemplate the mutual ownership of Abraham by the three "Abrahamic" religions.

By contrast, the iconography of Abraham's being cast into the fiery furnace, relatively infrequent in Christian art, was proportionally more popular in Islam and Judaism. The reasons for this difference are certainly textual. The source of this tale is midrashic (cf. *Bereshit Rabba* 38:13, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 26 and *Tanhuma Toledot*, 4, for instance, among other sources) and makes its way into the Qur'an (Sura 6:74 and expanded in Sura 21:51-71) along with a great deal of other midrashic material. But they are also contextual, given the historical realities of the martyrdoms of many Jews and Muslims at the hands of Christians in the Middle Ages. Read in light of historical circumstances, they represent not only expansions of scriptural narrative, but also contemporary commentary on a dire reality that had Jews and Muslims looking toward their ancestor for much-needed strength and fortitude.

Some might question the utility of a printed volume such as this one—even such a gorgeously produced example—in light of comprehensive available online and digital resources. In reality, both types of resources supplement and complement each other. The printed book form also evokes connections (and thus connectivity) between motifs that are hard to achieve in a shifting universe of multiple windows on a virtual desktop. The book and the digital resources work harmoniously together, and I, for one, sincerely hope that the Index will continue in printed form for as long as it can be reasonably sustained,

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lest something significant be lost. This wonderful collection containing all the good “old wine” in a beautifully crafted vessel works splendidly alongside the “freshly baked” resources proliferating daily on the Internet. In creating this volume and the others like it in the series titled “Resources” of which it is the fourth volume, the Index of Christian Art under the visionary coordination of its Director has provided art historians, cultural historians and textual historians alike with a significant resource, produced with obvious love and great dedication.

#### NOTE

[1] The Bezalel Narkiss Index of Jewish Art at the Center for Jewish Art of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. Online at <http://cja.huji.ac.il>. See also Na’ama Brosh and Rachel Milstein, *Biblical Stories in Islamic Painting* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1991).

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