

RE 382: Abraham in the Abrahamic Religions

Colby College, Spring 2009 — Tuesdays, 1:00–3:30 pm, Lovejoy 344

David M. Freidenreich

Lovejoy 350, 859-4646, dfreiden@colby.edu (email is the best way to reach me)

Office Hours: Mondays/Wednesdays 10:30–12:00 and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

“Tales of ancestors are signposts for their descendants.” For no figure is this Rabbinic aphorism more true than Abraham, revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. This seminar critically examines tales about Abraham and members of his family told within these three traditions from Biblical times to the present day, using variations in these stories as a means of learning about the people who tell them. Course assignments are designed to develop student proficiency in oral communication skills.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

Attendance and Participation

This is a discussion-based seminar course: attendance and active participation are crucial. You are expected to attend class regularly and to contribute to class discussions in a constructive manner; participation should reflect strong preparation of assigned readings and prior consideration of assigned study questions. It is understood that circumstances may prevent you from attending class on a given day, and you are entitled to one absence with no questions asked. More than one absence, however, will impair your ability to benefit from this course and will affect your final grade significantly unless all absences result from documented emergencies or illness; if such circumstances arise, please speak with me. **I reserve the right to fail students who miss more than three sessions.** In determining the final grade, I assign extra credit to students with perfect attendance records.

Evaluation of participation: I assign a ✓+, ✓, ✓-, or 0 to each student after every class, on the following basis:

- ✓+ indicates that the student participated actively in class discussions, engaged others about ideas while respecting their opinions, and elevated the overall level of discussion.
- ✓ indicates that the student offered constructive contributions to class discussion; I expect every student to do so at least once in every class, either in the classroom or online.
- ✓- indicates that the student was present in class but either did not participate sufficiently or participated in a non-constructive or disrespectful manner.
- 0 indicates that the student was absent and failed to post to the online discussion or that the student was especially disrespectful toward fellow participants.

Assignments

Assignments are designed to measure your command of the specific knowledge and skill sets being taught in this course along with the general skill sets associated with an undergraduate liberal arts education. Engaging in acts of academic dishonesty is antithetical to this goal, and for that reason any student guilty of such acts may automatically fail the course. If you are in doubt as to whether an act crosses the line into academic dishonesty, speak with me, another member of the faculty, or a librarian.

Note that many of the assignments in this course involve oral communication. **You will be graded on the quality of your delivery as well as on the content of your presentations.** Detailed descriptions of each assignment will be distributed separately.

	<u>Weight</u>	<u>Date</u>
Preparation and Participation	1/6 of final grade	
Oral Presentation 1 (teaching)	1/6	in class: Feb. 17 or 24
Short Essay	1/6	April 7
Oral Presentation 2 (“sermon”)	1/6	outside of class: late April/early May
Research Essay/Presentation	1/3	Wednesday, May 13, 3:30 pm
— Proposal and Preliminary Bibliography		March 10

Barring extraordinary circumstances, no extensions will be granted.

Note: Grading in the humanities is not an exact science. My goal is to be fair in evaluating your work, open about the reasons for the grades I give, and available to help you improve your work over the course of the term. Please note that if a student is on the border between two final grades, I will give extra weight to performance in the second half of the semester. I use the participation grade as a tie-breaker.

TEXTS

Assignments for each class session may be found on the course Moodle site, <http://moodle.colby.edu>. All readings not found in the following books are posted there as well.

Please purchase the following books (all available at the Colby Bookstore)

Access Bible

Bruce Feiler, *Abraham*

Diana Hayes, *Hagar’s Daughters*

Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*

Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*

NOTE: Please bring to class the assigned readings for that session.

WEEKLY READING ASSIGNMENTS

NOTE: These assignments are subject to change, and they probably will.

Week 1 (2/10) — Stories of Abraham

Genesis chap. 11–25

Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, pp. 82–110

Erich Auerbach, “Odysseus’ Scar”

Week 2 (2/17) — Contextualizing Abraham within the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East

Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, pp. 3–81

Genesis chap. 11–25 [yes, re-read: focus on 11.26–12.4, 15.1–18.16, 21.1–21, 22.1–19]

Abraham outside of Genesis: selections from the rest of the Hebrew Bible

Week 3 (2/24) — The Call to Abraham

Apocalypse of Abraham

Josephus, *Judaean Antiquities* 154–68

Caesarius of Arles, Sermon 81

Genesis Rabbah, selections

Qur’an 19.41–50, 6.68–90, 37.69–113, 21.51–73, 3.64–102 [organized chronologically]

Week 4 (3/3) — A Bitter Divorce: Sarah and Hagar in Early Jewish and Christian Literature

Galatians 2.15–5.1 [use *Access Bible* or another NRSV translation]

Tosefta, Soṭah 6.6

Elizabeth Clark, “Interpretive Fate [of Hagar and Sarah] Amid the Church Fathers”

Augustine, *Against Faustus*, selections

Ophir Münz-Manor, “All About Sarah”

Yannai, Qerovah for Gen. 15

Week 5 (3/10) — Hagar and Ishmael: Views from the Islamic World

Tabari, *History*, on the construction of the Ka’ba

Carol Bakhos, “Abraham Visits Ishmael: A Revisit” [includes *Pirke d’Rabbi Eliezer* 30]

selected medieval Rabbinic commentaries on Biblical verses about Hagar

• **Research Paper Proposal Due**

Week 6 (3/17) — Hagar and Sarah in Feminist Religious Thought

Phyllis Trible, “Hagar: The Desolation of Rejection”

Diana Hayes, *Hagar’s Daughters*

Azizah al-Hibri, “Hagar on My Mind”

selected contemporary Jewish poems

SPRING BREAK

Week 7 (3/31) — Abraham's Sacrifice: Who Was the Victim? Who are the Beneficiaries?
Reuven Firestone, "Merit, Mimesis, and Martyrdom"
Norman Calder, "From Midrash to Scripture: The Sacrifice of Abraham
in Early Islamic Tradition"

Week 8 (4/7) — The Binding of Isaac in Early Jewish and Christian Literature
Levenson, *Death and Resurrection* 173–232
Jubilees 17.5–18.19
Josephus, *Judaean Antiquities* 225–236
Caesarius of Arles, Sermon 84
Genesis Rabbah, selections
• **Short Essay Due**

Week 9 (4/14) — The Akedah in the Crusades
Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*

Week 10 (4/21) — The Philosopher's Abraham
Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

Week 11 (4/28) — Abraham and His Son Today
Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 125–142
Ruth Kartun-Blum, "'Where Does This Wood in My Hand Come From?' The Binding
of Isaac in Modern Hebrew Poetry"
anthology of Israeli poetry on the Akedah
A Son's Sacrifice [documentary, to be screened in class]

Week 12 (5/5) — Abraham and the "Abrahamic religions"
Bruce Feiler, *Abraham*

FINAL PRESENTATIONS: Wednesday, May 13, 3:30–6:30 pm