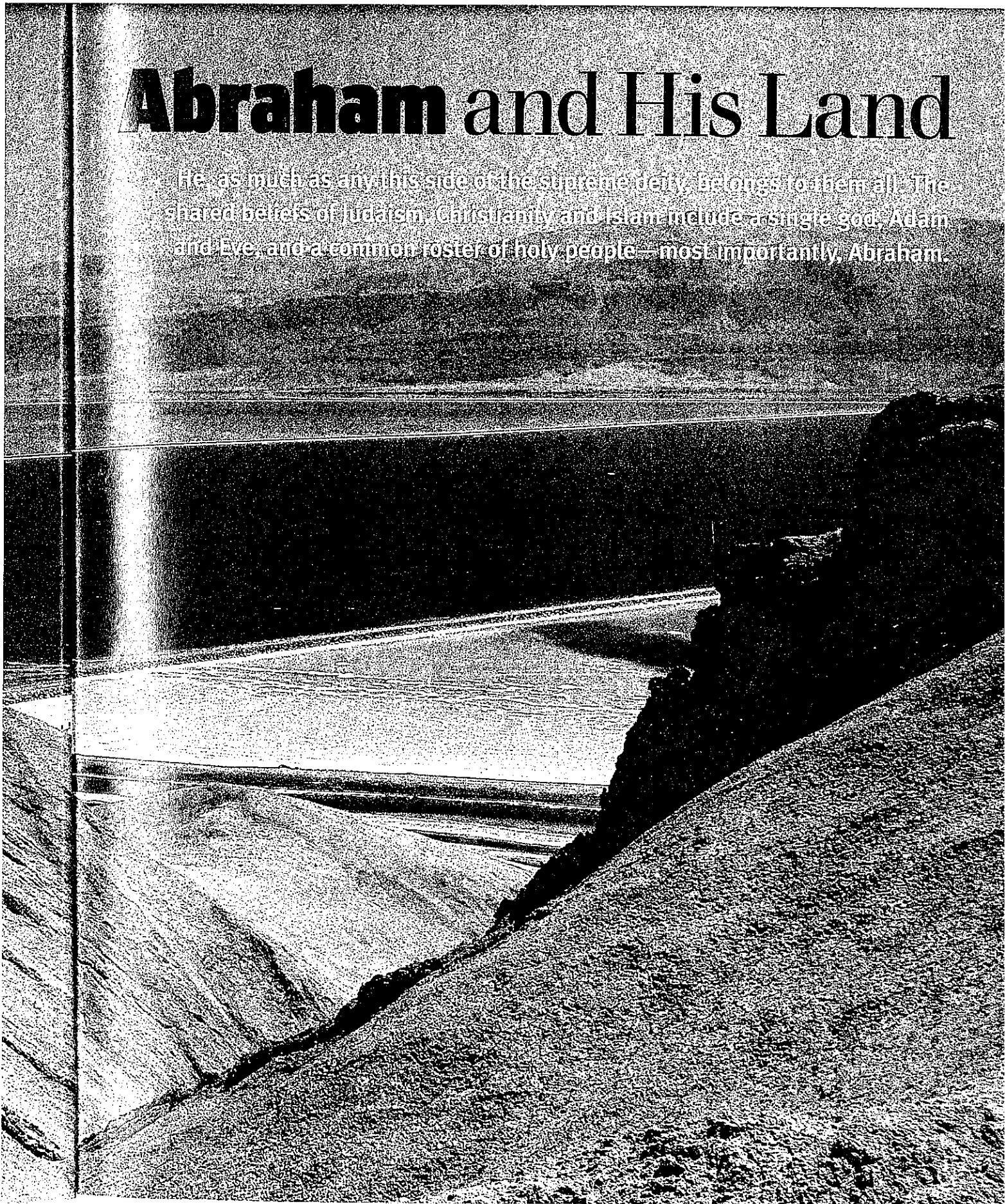


# Abraham and His Land

He, as much as any, in this side of the supreme deity, belongs to them all. The shared beliefs of Judaism, Christianity and Islam include a single god, Adam and Eve, and a common roster of holy people—most importantly, Abraham.



**T**he reasons for contemplating the holy lands of Judaism, Christianity and Islam at this time are evident. In a region forever plagued by territorial disputes, the recent heightened violence between Arabs and Jews—punctuated in 2002 by a horrific series of suicide bombings and Israeli crackdowns in the West Bank—begs for an understanding of the roots of conflict. The fruitlessness of Pope John Paul II's pilgrimages to Jordan and Israel in the spring of 2000, during which he apologized for past Roman Catholic misdeeds against other religions and pleaded for ecumenical compassion among all faiths, brings into question what influence Christianity retains in the land of Christ's birth.

And for Americans, there is, of course, September 11. Radical Islamists said forcefully that the events of that day were about religion, about Western infidels transgressing on sacred soil in Saudi Arabia, about Muhammad's true teachings, about the need for global jihad. What did the message of September 11 really have to do with Islam, and how does that apply to what's going on week by week,

day by day, hour by hour, in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Ramallah and, indeed, Riyadh, Rome, Washington, D.C.?

The complexity of the equation is daunting, and certainly some answers cannot be known. For example, What is the difference between the devout believer, the fundamentalist and the radical? Through whose eyes are we looking when we make that determination?

There are things we cannot fathom and things that will have a different cast tomorrow than today. Nevertheless it is worthwhile to seek a basic understanding of the faiths involved: where they came from, their shared place, their shared history, some of their shared traditions, their different hopes and dreams for the future of their holy land. In assessing the Middle East today, it's not unreasonable to conclude that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are as different as the moon, the stars and the planets, and as antagonistic as dogs and cats. In deep history, however, nothing is further from the truth. In deep history, they are one.

This argument could start with Yahweh or God or Allah, the single sacred being who is the heart

**Three views of Abraham's test: In an 18th century Jewish painting (below) and a Rembrandt from the 17th century, Abraham prepares to slay Isaac. In a Turkish illustration, circa 1583, he raises his knife to Ishmael. The Koran does not specify which son God asked Abraham to sacrifice, but Muslims consider Ishmael to be the designee and Mecca, rather than Jerusalem, the site.**



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alone in teaching that their original sin had to be redeemed by Christ's crucifixion).

But while freely admitting that there is no way to address this topic in a rigorously secular manner, it is most useful to begin with an historical human being (who may or may not have existed; proving him is impossible) named Abraham.

Or Abram, as he appears in the earliest citations. These are in Genesis, in both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, documents whose early chapters are also shared tradition with Islam. (The Koran, Islam's holy text as composed by Muhammad in the 7th century A.D., cites and sanctions many biblical characters and stories; until the time of Abraham, it is in general accord with biblical accounts of how things went.) According to Genesis, "Abram," a name referring to "father love" or an exaltation of the father, was one of Noah's 10th-generation descendants and was born in the Mesopotamian city of Ur (today, in the most prominent theory, Ur is Iraq's Tall al-Muqayyar, 200 miles southeast of

and soul of all three religions. Before the rise of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it was deviant thought that there was not a plurality of gods but, rather, one supreme being. Today, by contrast, more than half the planet adheres to a one-god theology, with 2 billion Christians, 1.3 billion Muslims and nearly 15 million Jews outnumbering the followers of pantheistic religions.

So this argument could start with God, or it could begin with Adam and Eve, humanity's progenitors in all three faiths (even if Christianity is



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**Excavations near Ur have revealed a city dating from circa 2000 B.C.—approximately the time of Abraham. From what was then a port on the Persian Gulf (Ur is now inland), Abraham went forth.**

Baghdad). In 2000, John Paul tried desperately to add Ur to his itinerary and said at one point that no Christian's Holy Land pilgrimage could be complete without a visit to Abraham's birthplace, but the Pope was rebuffed by Saddam Hussein.

According to the Bible's genealogies, and other historical writings measured against modern archaeological finds, it seems probable that Abraham, if he existed at all, lived sometime between 2100 and 1500 B.C. This was not a godless age in places such as Ur; it was a multi-god age. How Abram's thinking evolved to monotheism—and thereby put him in position to become the first patriarch of both the people of Israel and the Arabs—is speculative. Most of Ur looked up to a moon god named Sin, but Abram would be different.

According to scripture, his clan was migratory even before God gave Abram instructions to travel yet farther, and because of who he would become in the theologies of great religions, every step he and his people took served to sanctify holy ground. First they went west from Ur to Haran, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in northern Mesopotamia. Haran, which today is in Turkey, was a site of pil-

grimage for Sin worshipers, and so an expected destination for citizens from Ur. Abram's father, Terah, died in Haran at the age of 205, says the Bible. The good genes of his family would prove essential in the Abraham story, as will shortly be evident.

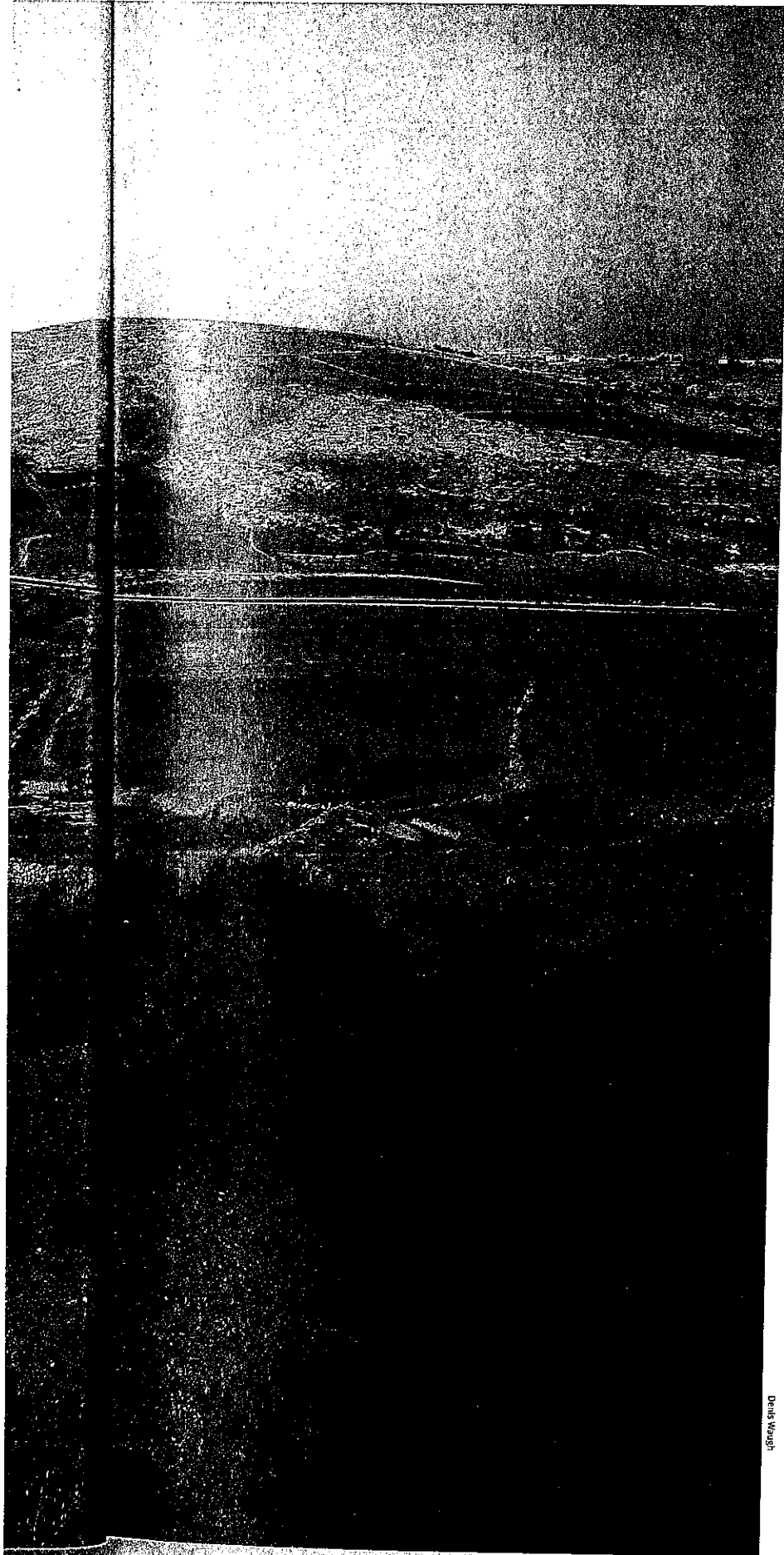
Abram's caravan, which included not only his wife Sarai but his biblically famous nephew Lot, went west again and forded the Euphrates, perhaps at Carchemish. Nayrab, near Aleppo, was another Sin city, and probably a stopping point. As new fields offered new opportunities of fortune to the itinerant shepherds, the journey continued: Damascus (probably), Shechem, Bethel (now Baytin, north of Jerusalem), southwest to Egypt and then back to the oaks of Mamre, which, according to Genesis, "are at Hebron." According to modern knowledge, they were a mile and a half northwest of Hebron, at a place now called Ramat al-Khalil, Arabic for "Heights of the Friend," Allah's friend being Abram. Amidst the oaks of Mamre, events of significance transpired, leading to narratives that would change the world.

Lot and his family were attacked, and Abram leapt into action, speeding northeast from Mamre

David Lewis



Satellite Photograph: Photo Researchers



**He was a city kid who became part of a nomadic caravan. In crossing what is now Judea, Abraham and his fellow shepherds would seek out fields with some fertility in the vast, fallow desert.**

to save him, showing a warrior instinct in one who theretofore was largely pacifist. This enlarges his character but does not fundamentally change his role, his being. What did transform him—and, thus, everything—was the call from God to forsake his old country and to found a new nation in Canaan, between Mesopotamia and Egypt. If Abram took up this considerable task, he would be blessed with many offspring, and his “seed” would inherit what he surveyed. God pledged to Abram that if his people remained faithful, then Canaan, which included the modern Palestine, would be their “everlasting possession [Gen. 17:4–9].”

To this rough point in time, the Bible and the Koran do not vigorously disagree. Genesis and Muhammad’s account of Allah’s words in the Koran are in basic accord about who Abram was and what was promised to him. It is with the man’s sons that the stories diverge.

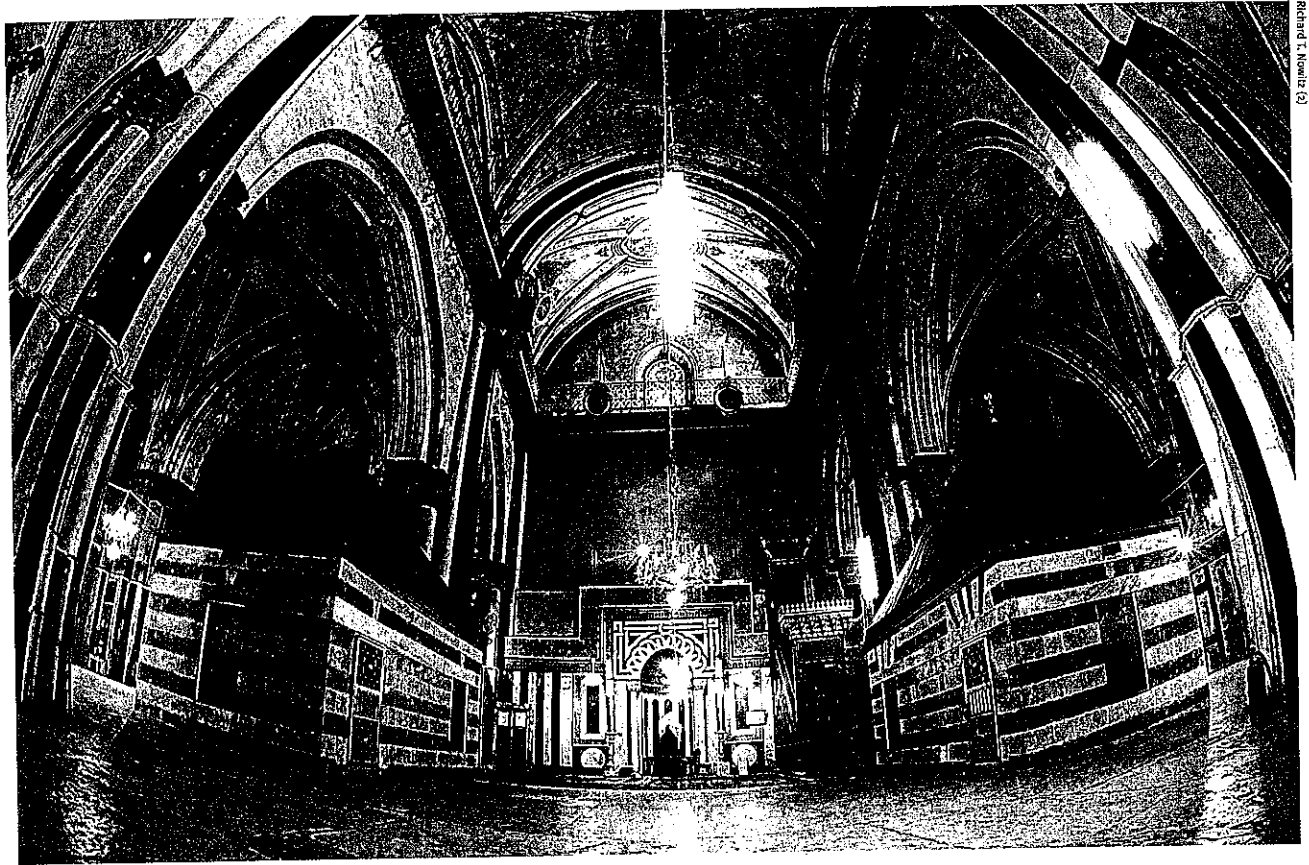
Abram was 75 years old when he entered into his covenant with God, who in a later vision certified the agreement by changing Abram’s name to Abraham, meaning “Father of many nations.” In the immediate aftermath of the first revelation, Abraham and Sarah, as she was renamed, remained childless, and what might come of the communication with God was uncertain. Sarah lent her Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar, to Abraham that she might bear him a child. This boy was Ishmael.

God continued to talk with Abraham; their debate about Sodom and Gomorrah, with Abraham urging leniency for the sinful cities, was a notable dialogue. (God, while moved by Abraham’s arguments, destroyed the wicked citadels, though he spared Lot, who at the time was living in Sodom.) When Abraham was 99, God pledged him a son with Sarah. A year later she bore Isaac.

When she became a mother, Sarah insisted that her husband banish Hagar and Ishmael from his community, and Abraham obeyed. To greatly simplify the latter chapters of Abraham’s story: In Genesis, God tests Abraham’s faith by asking him to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham is on the verge of doing so atop Mount Moriah when God stays his hand, pro-

Denis Waugh





Richard T. Nowitz (3)

**Above and below: Jews honor their heritage at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, where Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac and his son Jacob are said to rest. Opposite: Abraham's failure to sway God is memorialized in this desolate land on the Dead Sea where it is said that Sodom and Gomorrah lie buried.**



Alan Reinherz/Contact

vides a ram as a substitute sacrifice and allows Isaac to grow, prosper and, through his son Jacob (who will be called Israel), to found the Jewish nation in Palestine. According to Islam, it was Ishmael who was nearly sacrificed. His many offspring settled on the site of the future Mecca, where they flourished, spreading across the Arab world: the Muslims.

Abraham died at the age of 175 and was buried beside his wife in the Cave of Machpelah east of Mamre, which is today in the West Bank.

So Abraham was indeed the patriarch of many nations built beneath two overarching theologies: Judaism and Islam. As for his place in the Christian world, John Paul's high regard for the prophet is indicative. Abraham is cited 72 times in the New Testament, more than any Old Testament figure save Moses, and always with the utmost respect. No less an authority than St. Paul, in ardent admiration of Abraham's righteousness and pristine faith, speaks of him as "the father of us all [Rom. 4:16]."

The great religious saga in the Middle East starts with him, with Abraham. Where it will lead, we still do not know.