

Report on the Workshop “Abraham as Ritual Model” (December 17, 2018)

Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions remember Abraham as a model of various types of ritual action. The workshop, held at Kleine Synagoge within the context of the Research Centre “Dynamics of Jewish Ritual Practices in Pluralistic Contexts from Antiquity to the Present” at Max-Weber-Kolleg, examined significant Jewish and Christian rituals whose origins various groups and authors trace to Abraham. When and how did authors connect the figure of Abraham to sacrifice, circumcision, or the rejection of polytheism and idolatry? Why did certain literary traditions prefer certain images of Abraham such as the one that portrays him as the first human being to sacrifice to the right God? When did specific ideas connected to Abraham develop, such as the one that the patriarch was a person who recognized God and God’s commandments even before they were given on Mount Sinai? How did these images of Abraham play themselves out in later literature?

The workshop brought together a selection of specialists in Hebrew Bible, Judaic Studies, and early Christian literature. By case studies, the various ways in which the figure of Abraham became an exemplary model whose actions were understood to provide patterns that could be followed by subsequent groups and agents were investigated. Hillel Mali (Jerusalem) outlined major patterns of Abraham as a model for ritual in Second Temple Literature. Günter Stemberger (Wien) explored images of Abraham as ritual model in the rabbinic tradition. Thomas R. Blanton IV (Erfurt) investigated Philo’s defense of circumcision, a ritual associated with Abraham in biblical and postbiblical tradition, in Greek and Roman contexts. Kathy Ehrensperger (Potsdam) asked the question why the crucial term ἐνσέβεια, which one would expect in literature that uses the figure of Abraham, does not appear in the letters written by Paul. Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr (Jena) discussed the motif of the correct knowledge of God as it appears in Romans 1:19–25. William S. Campbell (Swansea) explored to the reception of the Abraham tradition in Romans 4 and 9. Finally, Christoph Bultmann (Erfurt) guided the listeners into the eighteenth century philosophy of religion by discussing the reception of the figure of Abraham in religious humanism. The final remarks were offered by Judith Frishman (Leiden) who also pointed out *desiderata* in the study of Abraham as ritual model: Is Abraham a purely Jewish symbol or a symbol for all faith communities that adhere to monotheistic traditions? What happens to the figure of Abraham in more modern periods when traditional rituals such as circumcision become more and more contested? How does the figure of Abraham contribute to the ancient and current discussions of a perfect human body versus an imperfect one? How can the shift from Abraham as a model for ritual activity to Abraham as a model for migration be explained?

Thomas R. Blanton and Claudia D. Bergmann, the organizers of the workshop, are planning on opening the field for discussion along the lines of these questions and will invite for the contributions to the topic with the goal of publishing a book of case studies exploring the figure of Abraham as ritual model from antiquity to the present. Thomas Blanton’s larger project on Abraham as ritual model, which he would like to pursue during another research stay at the Max-Weber-Kolleg, documents the literary and ritual innovations evident in biblical and Second Temple Judaic sources in a volume now in progress entitled *The Circumcision of Abraham: Modeling Ritual from Genesis to the Pauline Letters*. The volume analyzes Judaic

texts and traditions in an effort to address questions of broad significance to the study of religion; it critically examines the rhetoric of adherence to tradition, deployed by agents who claim to follow examples set by ancient model figures, in light of historical research, which frequently reveals that significant aspects of reinterpretation and innovation are present in the very rituals and discourses that claim ancient models such as Abraham as their precedent. In this way, the study of texts depicting a particular Jewish ritual (circumcision) contribute to the critical analysis of processes occurring more generally in the history of religions: myths of origins and the use of ancient figures as exemplary models.

Report prepared by Claudia D. Bergmann and Thomas R. Blanton IV