

**Introduction:**

Abraham is the father of nations, the father of the faithful and revered as a first figure among three major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Who is Abraham? What do we know about his story? Why is he so important to so many people? How has his memory been preserved and transmitted? Are those memories “accurate” to the original story? If not, what accounts for the changes? Why have particular memories of Abraham been preserved and nourished? Why have other memories been forgotten? How do the lives and memories of Abraham inform our world today? Globally? Nationally? Community?



In this course students will gain working knowledge of three major religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Students will gain skill and confidence in reading ancient texts and understanding the historical, social, and religious trends that shaped the ancient world and which still influence us today. Students will also become conversant with modern day religious, social, and political trends on global, national, and community levels that are effected by competing memories of Abraham. In the process students will improve their critical thinking skills—the process of learning to articulate one’s own values, interacting with others on the basis of values, and using values to reason and evaluate.

This course will begin with a careful study of the Abraham stories as preserved in the Old Testament book of Genesis. Then we will devote time to studying the emergence of Judaism and its use of Abraham to create religious identity. Next, we will study the development among some ancient Jews of a new approach to Abraham and how this influenced the emergence of a new religious tradition, Christianity. Then we will explore the foundation of Islam to see how it too looked to Abraham as a guiding figure in religious development. The last portion of the course will be devoted to exploring the persistent memories of Abraham throughout the world today, especially in our own community of Bloomington.

**Objectives:**

1. Encourage, practice, and sharpen critical thinking skills
2. Think, write, dialogue, and express yourself critically and cogently
3. Develop researching, interviewing, questioning, and writings skills
4. See and explain patterns and religious themes at work in our own community, nation, and world

5. Demonstrate
  - a. Literacy in certain books and passages of ancient texts (Bible, Qur`an, etc.)
  - b. Understanding of key terms, people, and historical trends in the religions traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
  - c. Skill in using research tools and applying them to the history of interpretation
  - d. Ability to critically evaluate sources, arguments and the ideas of others (in print, orally, etc.)
  - e. Originality in creating and presenting a research project or paper on one community's memory of Abraham.

**Teaching Philosophy:**

I do not believe in the either/or division of “sage on the stage or guide on the side.” I believe that a skilled instructor must be both. Students are short-changed when they have poorly educated instructors. Additionally, students lose when they are not encouraged to be active learners with encouraging coaching from a mentor. The best combination is to have a content expert with expertise in guiding active learning. This is what I bring to the students. I commit to be a primary resource for bringing knowledge and structure to the course (indeed, an “in-struct-or” is one who establishes structure). But I also commit to guide and encourage student active and self-directed learning. Thus this course has been crafted to allow for both options. There is a clearly defined theme in this course which will allow students to see trends in religion and history. However, the journal assignments and research projects will allow students greater autonomy in their educational and intellectual exploration. Finally, there must be some structure to instruction. If not, we are but mindless wanderers in a vast forest of knowledge knowing not where we are or where we are going. If learners have a clearly defined “starting point” they will always be able to judge later where they are in relation to that starting point.

**Learning Philosophy:**

I believe that learning best occurs in a social environment, one which encourages thoughtful listening and assessing, collaboration (at defining questions and working towards answers), and feedback. However, since societies are fundamentally comprised of individuals, each individual must spend sufficient time preparing their own heart and mind for contributing to learning in a social environment. For example, no amount of group work will ever increase learning among students who come unprepared to participate. Hence I believe that individuals must first approach learning as an individual quest, defining goals for themselves, seeking avenues to reach those goals, constructing knowledge along the way upon the groundwork of prior learning and experience, *and then* involving others in this process.

**Classroom Activities:**

About  $\frac{3}{4}$  of class time will be devoted to interactive teaching and exploration of themes and issues for the given week. About  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the time will be devoted to directed discussion, group work, etc.

**Attendance:**

Attendance is expected in order to fully experience the learning potential of this course. However, I do not take attendance.

**Assignments & Evaluation:***Grading:*

I believe that grading should be open and fair. This means that students must know the values and criteria by which they are judged and that these things are applied equitably. To that end, I use rubrics to grade assignments and these rubrics are publicly available to the students. Furthermore, I believe that as learners we are more motivated to perform to our potential if we have a stake in establishing the grading values and criteria. So, early in the semester I will invite students to suggest modifications to the rubrics; changes will only be introduced through common consent. I do not grade on a curve. Students will be rewarded appropriate to their achievement (A, B, etc.).

*Evaluation:*

Students will be evaluated on the following forms of output:

Weekly journal or study sheets (15% of total grade); students choose one or the other each week; each counts 3% of semester grade. These assignments help fulfill course objectives 1, 2, 3, 5b, and 5d.

1. Journal—
  - a. 400-600 words per assignment. Allow students to more fully engage the idea presented in the class
  - b. College work is just that—*work*. It involves reading, thinking and action. Writing is a powerful way to make thinking explicit, and thinking is a basis for belief and action.
2. Study sheets—
  - a. Short, one page with questions and exercises related to readings and/or weekly topics
  - b. These will be straightforward allowing the students to improve in areas such as knowledge, comprehension, synthesis, analysis, and evaluation of texts and ideas that we study. The study sheets will be crafted along the lines of Bloom's taxonomy.

Five (5) projects (80% of total grade ). One project per unit

Please note that with projects 2, 3, and 4 you have a choice of two options each time. However, over the course of the three projects you must do at least Option A once and Option B once.

1. Project #1 Unit 1 (10%). This project is tied to course objectives 1 and 2.
  - Retell the Abraham story in your own words, write as much as you need to tell it the way you think is most appropriate; then in two paragraphs explain why you have highlighted some things and “forgotten” others; what personal values of yours are implicit and/or explicit in your story?

2. Project #2 Unit 2 (15%).
- *Option A:* 1000 word essay (This assignment option is tied to course objectives 1, 2, 3, 4, 5a, 5b, 5c, and 5d)
    - I will give you a short passage about Abraham from an ancient Jewish text that you have not seen and ask you to explain
      - how it imagines Abraham
      - why it imagines Abraham this way
      - what Jewish community it might come from
      - how this “life” of Abraham played a social and religious role in the community
      - if this text is “accurate” to the story of Abraham
      - what social or religious issue of today this version of Abraham could address
  - *Option B:* 1000 word essay (This assignment option is tied to course objectives 1, 2, and 3)
    - Read and review another student’s retelling of the Abraham story? How do they tell their story? Why? What does their story suggest about their culture? Values? Beliefs? What might be the consequences of such culture and values? How has their retelling affected your perception of Abraham? Your values?
3. Project #3 Unit 3 (15%)
- *Option A:* 1000 word essay (This assignment option is tied to course objectives 1, 2, 3, 4, 5a, 5b, 5c, and 5d)
    - I will give you a short passage about Abraham from an ancient Christian text that you have not seen and ask you to explain
      - how it imagines Abraham
      - why it imagines Abraham this way
      - what Christian community it might come from
      - how this “life” of Abraham played a social and religious role in the community
      - if this text is “accurate” to the story of Abraham
      - what social or religious issue of today this version of Abraham could address
  - *Option B:* 1000 word essay (This assignment option is tied to course objectives 1, 2, and 3)
    - Read and review another student’s retelling of the Abraham story? How do they tell their story? Why? What does their story suggest about their culture? Values? Beliefs? What might be the consequences of such culture and values? How has their retelling affected your perception of Abraham? Your values?

4. Project #4 Unit 4 (15%)
- *Option A:* 1000 word essay (This assignment option is tied to course objectives 1, 2, 3, 4, 5a, 5b, 5c, and 5d)
    - I will give you a short passage about Abraham from an ancient Islamic text that you have not seen and ask you to explain
      - how it imagines Abraham
      - why it imagines Abraham this way
      - what Islamic community it might come from
      - how this “life” of Abraham played a social and religious role in the community
      - if this text is “accurate” to the story of Abraham
      - what social or religious issue of today this version of Abraham could address
  - *Option B:* 1000 word essay (This assignment option is tied to course objectives 1, 2, and 3)
    - Read and review another student’s retelling of the Abraham story? How do they tell their story? Why? What does their story suggest about their culture? Values? Beliefs? What might be the consequences of such culture and values? How has their retelling affected your perception of Abraham? Your values?
5. Project #5 Unit 5 (25%) Choose either a qualitative approach or a historical approach
- *Qualitative research project* (this assignment is tied to course objectives 1, 2, 3, 4, 5b, 5d, 5e)
    - Interview/observe Bloomington residents (preferable from one of the three religious traditions we have studied), to describe their views on Abraham and how his story informs their life; how do your findings relate to current trends and issues in our society?
      - Develop research topic
      - develop interview questions
      - conduct interviews
      - study data
      - write up 12-15 page report
  - *Historical research project* (this assignment is tied to course objectives 1, 2, 3, 4, 5a, 5b, 5c, 5d)
    - choose one community and explore their use and interpretation of Abraham over many years as accessed through historical records; how do your findings relate to current trends and issues in our society?
      - Develop research topic
      - Gather resources
      - Analyze and synthesize
      - write 12-15 page paper

Presentation of final project (5%)

- present your research findings of project 5 to the class (this fulfills objectives 2 and 5e)

## Syllabus and Readings

### Topic 1: Abraham in Ancient Memory: Genesis

#### Week 1: Introduction

- course structure and purpose
- getting to know you
- grading rubrics and expectations
- intro to critical thinking skills and learning approaches
- training on academic reading (especially gaining confidence to read ancient texts, or texts from another culture, with confidence)

#### *Assignments:*

- 400-600 journal entry on what you know of Abraham and how his story informs your life (this is NOT a research paper!). Do not study to write this, I just want to see what you already know before we jump into the course. Do not read the Abraham stories before writing this paper. Simply write all that you know about him and how that informs your life right now.



#### Week 2: Close Reading of the Abraham Story (Gen 11-25)

- How are Abraham's stories told?
- What is included? Left out?
- What philosophical or theological issues does it pose? Resolve?
- What did you learn/notice that you did not know/remember before?

#### *Read:*

- Genesis 11-25

#### *Assignments:*

- Journal entry or study sheet due at the end of the week
- Begin preparing and writing for project 1

## Topic 2: Abraham Remembered: Israelite Religion and Formative Judaism

### Week 3: Formative Judaism: Part 1—Old Testament, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha

- What were the major trends of ancient Jewish belief and practice?
- How were ancient Jews participating in the larger world around them?
- How did they identify and imagine themselves?
- What claims to Abraham does Judaism make?

*Read:*

- “From Text to Tradition” by Schiffman, pp. 33-59, 120-127;
- Short selections from various Old Testament, Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphic texts

*Assignments:*

- Project 1 due *first* day of class this week
- Journal entry or study sheet due at the end of the week
- Choose and submit research topic ideas for final project (5) end of the week

### Week 4: Formative Judaism: Part 2—Qumran, Philo and Josephus, & Rabbis

- What were the major trends of ancient Jewish belief and practice?
- How were ancient Jews participating in the larger world around them?
- How did they identify and imagine themselves?
- How is Abraham used as an identity figure?

*Read:*

- “From Text to Tradition” by Schiffman, pp. 60-97; 127-130
- Portions of Philo, Josephus, Dead Sea Scrolls and Talmud

*Assignments:*

- Journal entry or study sheet due at the end of the week
- Keep working towards project 5



### Week 5: Modern Judaism

Guest speaker—Rabbi from Bloomington area synagogue

- How has Judaism changed and developed over time?
- What fundamental beliefs, traditions, and rituals has it retained?

*Read:*

- One or two selections from “The Jew in the Modern World”

*Assignments:*

- Journal entry or study sheet due at the end of the week
- Project 2 due *last* day of class this week
- Keep working towards project 5

## Topic 3: Abraham Born Again: The Birth and Development of Christianity

### Week 6: Early Christianity—The New Testament

- What were key beliefs and practices of Early Christianity?
- How did their understanding of Abraham differ from other Jewish groups?
- How was it similar?
- What claims to Abraham does Christianity make?

*Read:*

- “Introduction to Christianity” by Weaver, pp. 21-58
- Portions of New Testament texts (i.e. Hebrews, Galatians, Romans)

*Assignments:*

- Journal entry or study sheet due at the end of the week
- Submit final research project plan including bibliography

### Week 7: Abraham in the Christian Tradition

- How did various Christian communities imagine the Abraham story?
- What historical circumstances would have encouraged them to remember Abraham in this way?
- What role did the Church Fathers have in defining the direction of the early Christian church?

*Read:*

- “Introduction to Christianity” by Weaver, pp. 59-113
- Portions of Christian texts (church fathers, etc.)

*Assignments:*

- Journal entry or study sheet due at the end of the week
- You should be interviewing, researching and writing in preparation for project #5

### Week 8: Modern Christianity

Guest speakers—leaders from two different Bloomington area Christian denominations

- How is Christianity today similar to ancient Christianity? How is it different?
- What are the similarities and difference among Christian groups today?
- Do they agree upon Abraham?

*Read:*

- “Introduction to Christianity” by Weaver, pp. 203-263

*Assignments:*

- Journal entry or study sheet due at the end of the week
- Project 3 due last day of class this week
- You should be interviewing, researching and writing in preparation for project #5

## Topic 4: Abraham Renewed: The Rise of Islam

### Week 9: The Rise of Islam

- When did Islam get its start?
- What are basic beliefs and practices of Islam?
- What claims to Abraham does Islam make?
- What does Islam share with Judaism and Christianity?
- How is it different?



#### *Read:*

- “The Middle East Yesterday and Today” by Miller & Moore, pp. 65-100
- Select passages from the Qur`an

#### *Assignments:*

- Journal entry or study sheet due at the end of the week
- You should be interviewing, researching and writing in preparation for project #5

### Week 10: Abraham in the Islamic Tradition

- How did the Islamic faith grow, develop, and spread?
- How did it compete with or cooperate with other lives of Abraham (Judaism and Christianity)?

#### *Read:*

- “The Middle East Yesterday and Today” by Miller & Moore, pp. 100-130

#### *Assignments:*

- Journal entry or study sheet due at the end of the week
- You should be interviewing, researching and writing in preparation for project #5

### Week 11: Modern Day Islam

Guest Speaker—Imam from Bloomington area Mosque

- What role has Islam played in the development of the Middle East?
- How had Islam spread throughout the world?
- How is American Islam similar or dissimilar to Islam in the Middle East?

#### *Read:*

- “The Middle East Yesterday and Today” by Miller & Moore, pp. 131-196

#### *Assignments:*

- Journal entry or study sheet due at the end of the week
- Project 4 due last day of class this week
- You should be interviewing, researching and writing in preparation for project #5

## **Topic 5: Abraham Lives Today: Abraham at the Crossroads of Contemporary Religious, Social and Political Issues**

### **Week 12: Modern Middle East**

Guest speaker—Lisa Rampton Halverson, Stanford graduate in Middle Eastern Studies (Thesis on “Contested Religious Sites—Hebron and the Tomb of the Patriarchs”)

*Read:*

- “The Middle East Yesterday and Today” by Miller & Moore, pp. 196-278

*Assignments:*

- Journal entry or study sheet due at the end of the week
- You should be interviewing, researching and writing in preparation for project #5

### **Week 13: Abraham in America**

- What is the state of religious dialogue today in America among the three different faiths discussed?
- How are Abraham’s children divided? United?
- Why?
- What are some ways in which Abraham has been misread

*Read:*

- Two short articles on interfaith dialogue
- One article on “child sacrifice” in America

*Assignments:*

- Journal entry or study sheet due at the end of the week
  - Journal assignment: attend an interfaith dialogue forum and report on your experience
  - Or study sheet: to be handed out in class
- You should be writing in preparation for project #5

**Week 14: Can Abraham Live with Himself?**

Our reading and class assignments will be grouped into one activity—discovering Abraham on the internet. We will gain skill in effectively finding information on the internet, judging its value and reliability, analyze several recreations of Abraham that exists on the internet, and synthesize our findings. More details and instructions to be given in class. Class time this week will be devoted to discussion, showing, and sharing of our discoveries on the internet.



*Assignments:*

- Study sheet this week only...to be tied to the internet project
- You should be completing final drafts of researching and writing for project #5

**Week 15: Abraham in the Bloomington Community 1**

*Assignments:* Presentations of project 5

**Week 16: Abraham in the Bloomington Community 2**

*Assignments:* Presentations of project 5