



Shakespeare and Abraham

Ken Jackson

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In *Shakespeare and Abraham*, Ken Jackson illuminates William Shakespeare's dramatic fascination with the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac in Genesis 22. Themes of child killing fill Shakespeare's early plays: Genesis 22 informed Clifford's attack on young Rutland in *3 Henry 6*, Hubert's providentially thwarted murder of Arthur in *King John*, and Aaron the Moor's surprising decision to spare his son amidst the filial slaughters of *Titus Andronicus*, among others.

However, the playwright's full engagement with the biblical narrative does not manifest itself exclusively in scenes involving the sacrifice of children or in verbal borrowings from the famously sparse story of Abraham. Jackson argues that the most important influence of Genesis 22 and its interpretive tradition is to be found in the conceptual framework that Shakespeare develops to explore relationships among ideas of religion, sovereignty, law, and justice. Jackson probes the Shakespearean texts from the vantage of modern theology and critical theory, while also orienting them toward the traditions concerning Abraham in Jewish, Pauline, patristic, medieval, and Reformation sources and early English drama. Consequently, the playwright's "Abrahamic explorations" become strikingly apparent in unexpected places such as the "trial" of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* and the bifurcated structure of *Timon of Athens*.

By situating Shakespeare in a complex genealogy that extends from ancient religion to postmodern philosophy, Jackson inserts Shakespeare into the larger contemporary conversation about religion in the modern world.

"Ken Jackson's *Shakespeare and Abraham* poses a powerful model for how a biblical hero can be recovered within a number of divergent dramatic contexts—both Shakespearean and medieval—as well as in philosophy and theology. Writing with great clarity about challenging ideas, Jackson has led us a great deal closer to understanding the meanings that the binding of Isaac held for Shakespeare." —**Julia Reinhard Lupton, University of California, Irvine**

"Ken Jackson's powerfully argued book challenges us to rethink what religion may have meant to Shakespeare and what it may yet come to mean for us. Neither secular nor orthodox, neither skeptical nor pious, Jackson's Shakespeare is nevertheless a passionately committed playwright deeply aware of the inescapably religious dimensions of everyday life. Through a series of startling readings, Jackson shows Shakespeare bearing witness to a desire for pure generosity that quickens even as it unsettles the three great monotheisms. *Shakespeare and Abraham* is high-stakes criticism sure to provoke." —**Gary Kuchar, University of Victoria**

"Ken Jackson's timely book makes a forceful case for attending to Shakespeare's engagement with the Abrahamic roots of monotheism as a way of looking anew at some of the most perplexing moments in the plays. Reevaluating the playwright's attitude toward religion without getting bogged down in debates over doctrinal commitments, Jackson gives us a Shakespeare deeply invested in religious questions, if not religious controversy. Moving effortlessly among theological, literary, and philosophical works from antiquity to the present, Jackson reveals that Shakespeare's response to Abraham raises urgent questions about the intersections of religion and culture in early modern England that are no less relevant today."

—**James A. Knapp, Edward Surtz, S.J., Professor of English, Loyola University Chicago**

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