

RECONCILING FALSE DIVISIONS

A SERIES EXPLORING THE SHARED ABRAHAMIC ROOTS OF THREE FAITH TRADITIONS

PART I: JEWISH ROOTS

By John Bennison, Rel.D

A Presbyterian politician who wants to be the leader of the free world claims to have written a great book; second only to the Bible. He has promised to “protect Christianity,” and ban all Muslims outside the United States from entering. It remains unclear if he expects all radical Jihadists to self-profess at the border; instead of, say, swearing to be as Presbyterian as he is.

Equally unclear is how Mr. Trump feels about the former U.S. marine who was recently reunited with his family on American soil, after being captured and held prisoner in Iran the last four years. Amir Hekmati had gone to visit his extended Muslim family in Tehran.

Beneath the superficial din of such political idiocy, an appreciative consideration of the shared Abrahamic roots of three great faith traditions might be helpful in finding ways to reconcile the false divisions that the most strident voices of ignorance seem to propagate.

Over a dozen years ago, in his book, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (2002), Bruce Feiler wrote, “The great patriarch of the Hebrew Bible is also the spiritual forefather of the New Testament and the grand holy architect of the Koran. Abraham is the shared ancestor of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He is the linchpin of the Arab-Israeli conflict. He is the centerpiece of the battle between the West and Islamic extremists.” Feiler then asked, “Who is Abraham?”

In the Hebrew scriptures there are numerous stories told about this figure; gathered from a much larger trove of ancient, oral traditions that contained hundreds more apocryphal tales. If one thought the scholarly quest for the authenticity of sayings and doings attributed to the historical Jesus was a tough slog, the legends about Abraham that spanned centuries makes it clearly apparent we are talking about a character of mythic – and not necessarily historic -- dimensions.

If there was one thing all such “Abrahamic” stories shared in common it was that there once emerged a mythic figure that came to represent the progenitor of these three great monotheistic faith traditions. But furthermore, each of these faith expressions would make of this composite character whatever suited them; or best described their interpretation of this character’s symbolic importance.

If there was one thing that *all* these “Abrahams” seemed to represent, it was the belief and understanding that this symbolic figure could fathom and then bear witness to a central, experiential reality: There was only one “god.” That is, there was one essence, one all-encompassing totality of all that is, known and unknown. And in that totality, an archetypal figure such as Abraham would seek to explore and understand the confounding “oneness” of what some would call “God.”

For the Hebrews, it would be YHWH. For Christians – in one way or another -- it would be a Galilean sage; who from the beginning of what we now call the ‘common era’ came to so closely represent an expression of that same totality that they would somehow be seen as being one in the same thing. For Muslims, it would be the revelatory experience of a whole line of prophets beginning with Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and ending with Muhammad emerging toward the end of the sixth century, CE.

But any seeming differences would not end there. *Within* each of these faith traditions, of course, different interpretation and application would emerge in sometimes quarrelsome disputes over what constituted heresy or orthodoxy.



The bosom of Abraham – medieval illustration from the Hortus deliciarum of Herrad of Landsberg (12th century)

In my own faith tradition, for example, it's probably a good bet that the Jesus character that I would strive to follow as "lord" of my life is not the same one to whom several contemporary Christian politicians would likely choose to bear any allegiance.

So, with so many branches to the family tree of Abraham, there would seem to be such a split down the trunk that finding any common root structure might seem an insurmountable obstacle. How to get around it?

Within the Christian faith tradition, certainly there are vastly different understandings of what it means to be *Christian*. Just ask a so-called *progressive* Christian like myself, who finds so much orthodox doctrine obsolete, arcane and unhelpful; not to mention Christian fundamentalists -- whom I once considered naïve and uninformed about a deeper understanding of scripture as a scholarly pursuit -- as now being downright dangerous. The fact is, the same is true in Judaism and Islam.

Yet all of Judaism, Christianity and Islam share the same *Abrahamic roots*. And from those roots there not only remains the capacity to expose the false divisions that are clearly propagated both within -- and outside -- each of those traditions; but offer, as well, the hope and possibility of a renewed, shared vision for humanity in this time of dire divisiveness. It is to be found in the shared ethical teachings and wisdom sayings in which all three traditions are rooted. As well as the demonstrated moments each traditions expresses or enacts a willingness to resist remaining fixated in any one place beyond its usefulness, value or meaningfulness.

When I was a boy, we'd sing songs around the campfire; making no distinction between those tunes that were completely silly and secular, and others that were overtly religious. We'd sing *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, and *Do Lord, Oh Do Lord, Oh do you remember me?* right along with *99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall* and *John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt*. And we'd sing *Rock My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham*.

*So high, I can't get over it, So low, I can't get under it,
So wide, I can't get 'round it, Oh, rock-a-my soul.*

That insurmountable obstacle -- the seeming impossibility of ever arriving at that place forever sought -- never occurred to me around my childhood's campfire. Only much later would I learn that the metaphor "to be in Abraham's Bosom" was derived from the custom of reclining on couches at table, which prevailed among the Jews during and before the time of Jesus.

At celebratory feasts, each guest would lean on one elbow, leaving the other arm free. As two or more guests lay on the same couch, the head of one could rest on the breast of another; as if lying "in the bosom of Abraham." More so, it was considered a mark of special honor and favor for one to be allowed to lie in the bosom of the master of the feast, in the master's home; and from whom the same invitation had been given. The customary injunction for such gracious hospitality and shared communion is just one of the common roots found in each of the three great faith traditions.

There are innumerable stories about the character of Abraham, both within and outside scripture. Many of them are unbelievable; like Abraham's span of years, Sarah's barrenness, or Isaac's near sacrifice. But credibility, of course, is not the point. The entire root structure of the shared Abrahamic traditions is intended to take us deeper; so that firmly rooted, our shared lineage might give us confidence (or trust, or faith) to leave behind those false divisions that have so numerously sprung up all around us.

Of all the Abrahamic stories, these two might best illustrate this point:

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ... So Abram went, as the Lord had told him. [Gen. 12:1-2, 4a]

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram ... He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. [Gen. 15:1, 5-6]

There is not only the shared ethical teachings and wisdom sayings in which all three traditions are rooted, but the demonstrated moments in which each tradition expresses or enacts a willingness to resist remaining fixated in any one place beyond its usefulness, value or meaningfulness.

The call of Abraham is about venturing forth from the well-worn place of settled familiarity with all its limitations, to journey to a new and yet-unknown place of promise and fulfillment. It is the archetypal journey and homecoming that comes to represent the separate pathways of three great religious faith traditions that express separate, parallel paths with a shared destination. And, despite some idle assertions of knowing the unknowable, that destination is not some heavenly home in the sweet by-and-by; but meant for the here and now (see [Heaven on Earth](#)).

Each time a pilgrim stops and pitches one's tent for too long, it becomes a place of fixity, and an illusion of absolute certainty that soon leads to conflagration and destruction. The oft-used term used nowadays to describe this condition when the pilgrimage becomes instead a crusade is radical religious extremism.

Instead, like Abraham, we might leave behind former times and places; and resume the journey once again on fresh paths, under the canopy of a million, billion stars that have been cast before us. Doing so, we might discover ways over, under, and around false divisions; with the hope of a homecoming feast, a shared communion of sorts, in *the bosom of Abraham*.

Note: Part II in this Series will consider the shared Abrahamic roots and a path forward, more specifically from the perspective of the Islamic faith tradition.

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