

Readings

Genesis 12:1–4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1–5, 13–17; John 3:1–17

Now the LORD said to Abram..., “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:3)

All page references in parentheses below are in reference to the book by Bruce Feiler, Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths (New York: HarperCollins, 2002, 2004).

Bruce Feiler, in his book, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, observes that in Judaism alone there are about eighty different ways to see Abraham. And if that is true of Judaism alone, then there are surely at least as many to be discovered in the other great religions that recognize their descent from Abraham, that is, Christianity and Islam. If that is the case, then there must be at least two hundred forty different faces of Abraham.

He is a very complex character, mentioned at length in the Bible and the Qur’an, and discussed in depth in commentaries and traditions that exist outside those works.

Jews recognize Abraham to have been the first Jew; Muslims certainly account him the first Muslim. And Christians, we say that Abraham is our spiritual father.

Paul developed the Christian identity for Abraham to its fullest, persisting in letter after letter that Abraham lived our ideal of faithfulness. The author of the letter to the Hebrews also exalted the paragon of virtue that Abraham was considered to be. And in the first verse of the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus, though also “the son of David” is affirmed as “the son of Abraham.” (Hebrews 1:1)

So, Abraham is foundational, fundamental, for three of the world’s great religions, the three great monotheistic faiths. Feiler observes, “At every transitional moment in the evolution of religion, each subsequent incarnation of monotheism chose to link itself back to the same man.” (117)

For Jews, the person of Abraham unites them with the past as well as with their present. This has been so from the beginning of the prominence of Abraham in Jewish national identity.

At the time that the Bible was being brought together into a recognizable whole, around the middle of the Fifth Century before Christ, Abraham was coming to be recognized as one who inherited the homeland but was not tied to it the way that Moses was. For this people had discovered the importance of retaining their common identity even in a world that was not particularly favorable to them.

Abraham was like them. “A wandering Aramean was my father,” the saying goes. Each time the people of Israel went into exile, or people from Israel went away from their homeland, they could recall how it was that Abraham had done the same, but it was never as though God left them alone.

Stories about Abraham began to grow, to accompany the texts about him in Genesis. A few short decades after the ministry of Jesus, the Temple was destroyed and Jews were forbidden by the Roman government to populate Jerusalem. Thus was Judaism formed very much like that faith as we know of it today. There was a reaffirmation of the covenant for God’s people, and a reappropriation by that people of the character of their father in faith. One teaching that arose at that time was that the world was created for Abraham. “But for thee I had not created the orb of the sun,” says the voice of God in one ancient commentary. (125)

In another the setting is heaven at the end of time. God is seated with the Messiah on the

right and Abraham on the left. When Abraham asks why he is seated at God's left, God replies, "Because I am seated on *your* right." (126)

Abraham thus had become not only the first Jew, but the premier Jew.

A certain problem developed, however, in that, by the Middle Ages, Jewish folk took Abraham's press so seriously, they began to understand themselves exclusively favored by God, even to the exception of other peoples — regardless of who else may have been descended from Abraham, as the Arabs also were, according to Hebrew legend. (128)

Some of this was necessary for the purpose of retaining a sense of connection and heritage. You can imagine young Jews in a majoratively Christian or Islamic country arguing that, if Abraham was the first Jew and yet he did not keep Kosher because he lived before Kosher law was established, then can't you be Jewish and not follow dietary law? This they did. To the contrary the rabbis were able to argue that the young people were clearly missing the point of the story, and deliberately using sacred text not as a pretext for their licentious desire or irresponsible behavior, not as a reference for right living. (129)

Those who follow Islam, but especially Arabs, as I have said, believe that they are descended from Abraham as well. He fathered not only Isaac but also Ishmael.

Muslims therefore believe that Abraham was the first Muslim. They point out also that Abraham was the first monotheist, that he turned his back on his father Terah's tradition of paganism and idol worship. Terah had believed that there were in fact many gods. While still a youth, one story in the Qur'an goes, Abraham smashed his father's idols, then blamed the iconoclasm on one of the idols. His father replied, "Why do you mock me?" to which Abraham replied that his father must know as well, therefore, that idols have no effect, cannot speak, cannot act.

Abraham, Muslims say, once he realized the Power behind the moon and sun and stars and all creation, submitted himself to God before others even knew God existed. Everything he did from his moment of realization, on through the rest of his life was done as a result of his submission and devotion.

Sheikh Abdul Rauf: "To be Abraham in [one's] being. . . is to show complete devotion to God, even if it means leaving your own family and leaving your town. On another level, making your own contractual agreement with God. Each of us has a covenant to make with God, 'I will worship you as my God and you will take care of me.'

"And finally, knowing yourself on the deepest level. The prime objective of religion is to know God, but the only way to do that is to discover God within our own consciousness. This happened to Abraham, and it can happen to us. And anybody that happens to will choose to live a life in accordance with God's practice." (46–47)

All three of the great religions drawn from the Middle East recognize that in Abraham, God was doing something new and different. And each of us wants to claim at least some part of that difference for ourselves. But what was it? What was this special difference?

Faith. Faithfulness, really.

One may be drawn to wonder: How many people did God go to before arriving at Abraham? Well, we know of at least one — his father, Terah, who answered God's call but only got as far as an area of Mesopotamia called Haran. That place was named after his son, Abraham's brother Haran, who died there. We imagine that the grief of that loss took the thrill out of Terah's quest for the promised land.

But Feiler notes that "[God] clearly wanted Abraham to accept [the] proposal. Indeed the breadth of [the] offer suggests [God] *needs* Abraham as much as Abraham needs [God]." (42) Consider the very attractive components of the offer. God says, "I will make of you...

1. Father of a great nation.

2. Blessed.
3. A great name.
4. Abraham's name will even be a blessing for others.

He was God's choice, over all!

We consider Abraham in much the same way as the Jews and Muslims do. He is, pretty much, the first Christian. Indeed, in some circles he is considered the first Trinitarian. When Isaac's birth was announced, the story goes, Abraham greeted three strangers who brought to him the message from God that Sarah would become pregnant. No one of them was God alone, but the three of them together... (Genesis 17)

You can pretty well guess what Christian interpreters did with this imagery, from early on. They claimed that the three messengers, rather than being angels, were the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit given corporeal form.

And even if Abraham as a Christian or a Trinitarian is not what you believe about him, Paul and the other apostles so understood Abraham's complete receptivity of God and obedience to God, that they professed Abraham's faithfulness to be the pinnacle of Christian understanding.

So many of their converts were coming from the Gentile nations that these newcomers had no knowledge of the Law and could not be expected to follow it. The momentum of the early Church would have been lost on remedial Torah lessons left to far too few teachers, considering the number of students that were signing on for study!

Paul realized that there was a solution: encourage faithfulness of the kind that the first person who was ever faithful to God observed. Thus for Christians, the Abrahamic covenant came to outweigh the Mosaic covenant, making each believer like a new Abraham, fit for service simply because of belief, however little practice may have indicated.

And when I talk with you about your faith, you will find me use the language the Bible uses about Abraham and his faith. I will say things like

“God called you.”

“How is God speaking to you?”

“Where are we being directed to go?”

This is crazy talk, according to most standards, like the stuff that Jesus spoke to Nicodemus in that dark night: “The wind blows where it wills, and you know neither where it comes from nor where it goes. . . and so it is for us who are born of the Wind.” It is crazy, but it speaks to a profound truth we know from within.

And it's important to have such talk. The purpose of religion is, as the Islamic scholar said, to know God. How else shall we be able even to begin to plumb the depths of the realities we face? For, therein lies the meaning and the purpose every human being seeks. Each of us is wandering, like that Aramean Abraham and his wife and household; each of us is approaching a promised land; each of us is seeing whether the Voice that has spoken will prove faithful or not...

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. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Eighty faces of Abraham in Jewish tradition, eighty more (surely) in the traditions of Muhammad and Jesus. Two hundred forty faces of Abraham, and nowadays according to the Christian ideal, how many millions more? Our God has proven faithful to the promise, over and over so many times. Others need that hope, and long to be children of a promise as well. Let's just say they already are, and maybe just need the right people to assure them so.