
ABRAHAM'S FAMILY AS A PROTOTYPE FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM

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Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all children born of the same Father and reared in the bosom of Abraham.

—Francis E. Peters, *Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam*, 1982.

My brothers, you descendants of Abraham's family, and others who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent.

Acts 13:26 (NRSV)

INTRODUCTION

Most of us who are interested in interfaith discussion will find the epigraphs above inviting at first glance. I have chosen them, however, not just for their promise as invitations to dialogue, but also because they trouble me. The first statement acknowledges that the patriarch Abraham stands at the head of the three scriptural faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, yet it also points to the fact that Abraham represents patriarchal religion, where the dominant representation of God is masculine. How can we reconcile this with the Bible's teaching that we must accept no image, male or female, human or otherwise, in place of God (e.g., Deut. 4:15–19)? How can we explore the meaning of Abraham for our religious heritages while rejecting the patriarchal frame of reference that sets a male divine authority over humanity and correlatively marginalizes women who belong to the faith?

The statement from Paul's speech in Acts 13 might appear—excepting gender considerations—to be an inclusive invitation, but only because I have lifted it out of context. Paul is portrayed here addressing the synagogue, and soon he will scorn the Jews for their failure to accept his message:

It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you
 Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life,
 we are now turning to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46) ¹

With such a history, how can Christians appeal to Abraham in a spirit of respect and appreciation for Judaism and Islam?

While I have no illusion of holding the answers to these questions, my view is that the issues raised by the two epigraphs—the marginalization of women on the one hand, and ethnic and religious claims of superiority on the other—are related, and in the following remarks I would like to explore them together. With respect to gender inequality, I will maintain that the figure of Abraham contributes to both oppressive and redemptive tendencies in the gender ideologies of the biblical tradition. Regarding mutual respect among ethnic and religious groups (or the lack of it), I will suggest that the biblical Abraham has served both inclusive and exclusive purposes. My claim is that we are most faithful to our heritage when we first distinguish between limiting and emancipatory moments in the Bible, and then inquire how we may affirmatively appropriate our traditions for the present.

SOME INTERPRETIVE ASSUMPTIONS

At the outset I need to explain the presuppositions that guide my interpretation. First, each of the faiths involved in our dialogue, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, should be respected as a religion *sui generis* with its own integrity. There should be no false harmonization of our traditions; in seeking agreement we must compromise neither intellectual honesty, nor critical acuity, nor fidelity to our specific religious heritages (Beker 1990, 61). The clear recognition of diversity will, I believe, contribute to a deeper mutual appreciation of the particularities of our faiths. Likewise the common ground we establish in this manner will be firmer.

Secondly, I wish to acknowledge that the particulars of the biblical tradition are historically contingent; indeed they are fre-

¹ It should be made clear that the speech quoted here is a literary creation, attributed by the biblical author to the character of Paul in the narrative of Luke Acts. The historical Paul (i.e., the author of the authentic Pauline epistles in the New Testament), would not have addressed the synagogue in this way. For a helpful review of the differences between Paul, the author of Romans, Galatians, etc., and the Paul of Luke-Acts, see Johnson (1986, 231–236), Vielhauer (1968, 33–50), and Bornkamm (1968, 194–207).

quently at odds with one another (cf. for example Exod. 20:13 and Exod. 32:27-28). Aspects of the biblical tradition assume normative status only within a larger interpretive framework and community setting. The hermeneutical context from which I speak includes (1) the Protestant confessional heritage;² (2) feminist critical concern; and (3) a commitment to constructive dialogue among cultures (western and nonwestern), diverse ethnic groups, and religious traditions (non-Christian and Christian).

Finally, while I will assert that the traditional figure of Abraham has served both oppressive and redemptive tendencies, I will take such a critically evaluative stance only toward my *own* tradition, i.e., the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures (New Testament), chiefly as they have been interpreted by my own religious forebears (Matt. 7:3-5).

ABRAHAM: ARCHETYPE OR PROTOTYPE?

At this point it is necessary to clarify the sense in which I will apply the categories of archetype and prototype to the figure of Abraham. Most dictionaries treat the terms "archetype" and "prototype" as synonymous. For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "archetype" as "the original pattern or model from which copies are made; a prototype;" while, "prototype" is defined as "the first or primary type of anything; . . . a pattern, model, standard, exemplar, archetype." A helpful distinction between the two terms, however, is articulated by the New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza:

Both archetype and prototype denote original models. However, an archetype is an ideal form that establishes an unchanging timeless pattern, whereas a prototype is not a binding timeless pattern or principle. A prototype, therefore, is critically open to the possibility of its own transformation (1989, 33; and cf. Fiorenza 1984, 10-11).

Since Judaism, Christianity, and Islam offer diverse portraits of Abraham, it seems appropriate to view Abraham in each instance as a prototype, open to transformation within the religious community. Is it then possible to identify an archetypal Abraham to whom the Judaic, Christian, and Islamic traditions appeal in common?

² I identify my heritage as Protestant in the broadest sense; in particular I belong to the Religious Society of Friends (Quaker).

An answer might be sought in the “historical Abraham,” the actual patriarch invoked by all three faiths. The historical Abraham, however, has become increasingly elusive in recent research. Until recently critical consensus had placed the historical Abraham securely in the Middle Bronze period, around 1800 B.C.E., but this historical judgment is no longer sustainable. Parallels between archaeological data from the Middle Bronze period and the Genesis narratives are now seen to have been overdrawn, and the view of Pentateuchal origins which sees the ancestral stories as a reliable record of earliest Hebrew experience has increasingly lost ground. Joseph Blenkinsopp summarizes: “In the current state of our knowledge there is no realistic expectation of establishing the historicity of the ancestors” (1992, 127). My own view is that in all probability there was no unified account of Israelite national origins before the period of the Babylonian Exile, ca. 550 B.C.E. The Abraham of Genesis thus bears no necessary relation to an historical “patriarchal age” of the mid-second millennium. The biblical Abraham is a narrative character, formed finally in the religious imagination of the later biblical community, much like the biblical Job.³

Such a view accounts for many salient features of the Abraham tradition in the Hebrew Bible. For example, the Hebrew name *’avraham* is an Aramaicized—thus linguistically later—development of the apparently earlier form *’abram* (Gen. 17:5). The predominant biblical form of the name, *’avraham*, thus belongs to the linguistic milieu of the middle of the first millennium rather than the second. Outside the Pentateuch, the figure of Abraham has little importance in the Hebrew Bible until the exilic and postexilic periods. The great eighth-century prophets, for example, Amos and Hosea in the north, Isaiah and Micah in the south, show no familiarity with an Abraham tradition (Isa. 29:22 and Micah 7:20 are later supplements from the exilic to postexilic periods). The Abrahamic covenant becomes important, however,

³ This was already essentially the view of Julius Wellhausen, who synthesized the classical documentary hypothesis of Pentateuchal origins, positing distinct Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomistic (D), and Priestly (P) sources in the Pentateuch. The difference between Wellhausen’s view and the perspective adopted here is that today the “JEDP” schema is becoming increasingly untenable. Even those who still maintain the existence of a “Yahwist” author are likely to posit a date several centuries later than Wellhausen maintained. For overviews of the recent paradigm shift in Pentateuchal studies, and the move toward later datings of the Pentateuchal writings, see Blenkinsopp (1992, 1–30) and Rendtorff (1992).

in the exilic and postexilic completion of the prophetic corpus (Ezek. 33:23–24; Isa. 41:8; 51:2; 63:16), in the later Psalms (Ps. 105:6ff, 42), and the postexilic historical writings (1 Chron. 16:16ff, 29:18; 2 Chron. 20:7, 30:6; Neh. 9:7; cf. Clements 1967, 61–77). The promises of land, numerous descendants, and blessings to the nations given to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) would have spoken more eloquently to sixth-century Judeans in Babylonian exile, for whom all such hopes would seem to have been lost, than they would have to the presumed audience of the hypothetical Yahwist author, Israelites and Judeans of the tenth-century B.C.E. among whom there was little sense of national identity, outside the royal court of Jerusalem (see Thompson 1974, 1987; Van Seters 1975; Ahlström 1993; and for an opposing view, Milard 1992).

Inspired by the pioneering archaeological synthesis of William F. Albright (see Albright 1957, 236–41; and 1961), the scholars of the American Biblical Theology movement of the 1950s and 1960s placed great stock in the historicity of the Abraham of the Middle Bronze Age. These commentators believed themselves to be writing objective history, but they were unaware of the ideological and theological commitments in their work which led them to create this Abraham in their own (Euro-American, Protestant) image. They described an Abraham who was more a Pauline hero of justification by faith than an authentic figure of ancient Near Eastern history. While Protestant Christians might be edified by this picture of Abraham, we should resist the tendency to enshrine this Abraham as an historical archetype. Such a construal of the historical Abraham functions—largely unwittingly but no less effectively—as a sort of cultural imperialism, coopting the experience of other religious communities who have equal claim to Abraham as their ancestor.

The assertions I have made here concerning Abraham might appear to be negative, but in fact they are so only from an historiographic point of view (where negative conclusions are often the most scrupulous). The irrecoverability of the historical Abraham is an aid rather than an impediment to interreligious dialogue, for now we need not adjudicate competing claims to the historically “archetypal” Abraham. The three Abrahams of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are equally rooted in history—the history of the development of their respective faith communities. So now I will turn, keeping in view the particular interests I named at the outset, to the Abraham of the Bible.

ABRAHAM'S FAMILY IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

As a first step toward compensating for the androcentric orientation of the biblical text, I choose to expand our focus to include "Abraham's family," for after all, the promises to Abraham depend as much on Hagar and Sarah's ability to bring children into the world as they do on the actions of the patriarch. It is well recognized that the Abraham narratives of Genesis portray a patriarchal social arrangement from an androcentric point of view. J. Cheryl Exum (1985, 75) characterizes the narrative setting:

In the patriarchal world, males are the significant figures: Abraham follows the divine call to the promised land; Sarah is "taken" with him (notice how Sarah is objectified and repeatedly "taken" in Genesis 12). Women are simply ignored in numerous scenes: the Genesis narrators are interested in Abraham's faith, not Sarah's (Gen. 22); Jacob wrestles with God in "face to face" combat (Gen. 32:30), while Rachel's "mighty wrestlings" are with her sister (Gen. 30:8).

There is, however, some ambiguity in the presentation of these female characters. On the one hand it can be argued that Genesis presents both of the women associated with Abraham unsympathetically, giving them the blame for a conflict which arises as a result of the situation *imposed* upon them (Fuchs 1989). Thus Sarah is presented as a cruel mistress (Gen. 21:10), Hagar a jealous and vindictive rival (Gen. 16:4-5).

On the other hand, I think it is appropriate to affirm that the women in the biblical narrative of Abraham's family are fully developed characters, not just cardboard props for a story revolving around men. As Exum comments (1985, 75):

When the matriarchs appear as actors, they come to life as fully developed personalities, whose struggles and determination are deftly sketched and whose joys and sorrows become real for us. In such stories, they are not appendages of the patriarchs but rather persons in their own right.

The female characters in Genesis possess remarkable vitality, intelligence, and initiative, leading the contemporary literary critic Harold Bloom to speculate that the author of these narratives might have been a woman (Bloom and Rosenberg 1990, 17-35). Constrained as they are by the setting, the women of Genesis repeatedly subvert or circumvent the patriarchal social order (Niditch 1992). Even God reverses the typical pattern of male authority, issuing the unc customary command to Abraham: "What-

ever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you" (Gen. 21:12). This passage should not be taken as evidence that women as a rule possessed such authority in biblical Israel, nor should it be viewed as a record of the special status of a "historical Sarah" (thus Teubal 1984, 3-18). Rather, the text is significant for the narrator's resistance against the prevailing social assumptions of gender and authority. The text itself subverts the cultural rule of male superiority.

Most importantly, women in the Genesis narratives define the paradigmatic role of the socially marginalized whom God favors. The Hebrew Bible discloses God fundamentally as the one who protects the most vulnerable and oppressed of human society. God's will is revealed definitively in the deliverance of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, but the divine prerogative is disclosed first in the redemption of the women of Abraham's family, Sarah, Hagar, Leah, Rachel, and Tamar. In a society where the value of women is predicated upon their childbearing capacity, infertility is the greatest misfortune. Thus the "barrenness" of the mothers of Israel is a prominent theme in Genesis (cf. 16:1-2; 25:21; and 30:1-2). In each instance the woman's inability to bear children is attributed to divine providence—the Lord has "closed her womb"—but we should notice that never do the ancestral narratives in Genesis admit the possibility of male infertility. This is striking because the biblical narrators clearly understand the indispensability of the male contribution to conception (cf. Gen 38:9). Thus while childlessness might be attributable (biologically speaking) to infertility in either partner, biblical narrative reflects the tendency of ancient Near Eastern cultures to place the blame for "barrenness" uniformly upon the woman.⁴ Not only are women devalued for not having children, they are also blamed for the further marginalization that results.

Ultimately, however, the biblical story refuses to endorse this patriarchal blaming of the victim, because God vindicates those who are downtrodden. It is precisely because a woman without children is despised that God sides with her and redeems her situation. Sarah is the first of many memorable examples in the Bible (Gen. 21:1-7; cf. Hannah, 1 Sam. 1-2; Elizabeth, Luke 1). Repeatedly in Genesis, God champions the cause of women who

⁴Unlike the biblical text, Jewish tradition recognizes the possibility that Isaac's impotence or infertility could be the actual cause of Rebekah's "barrenness" (Fass 1992).

are rejected by Abraham or his descendants. In the case of Jacob's wives, we read initially that Jacob loves Rachel and hates Leah (Gen. 29:18, 30). Consequently "seeing that Leah was hated, the Lord opened her womb, but Rachel was barren" (Gen. 29:31). What kind of logic, we might ask, is at work here? *Because* Leah is despised by the patriarch, the Lord blesses her with children. Clearly the divine intent is to subvert masculine prerogatives. God discerns among women those who are neglected and oppressed and sides with them. Consider Tamar: Cheated out of her rightful offspring by Judah (Gen. 38:1-11; cf. v. 14b), she resorts to deception and illicit sexual relations in order to have a child, yet she is vindicated by God as she does conceive. Even Judah finally defends Tamar's course of action, saying "she is more righteous than I" (Gen. 38:26).

The Genesis narratives do not transcend the patriarchal circumstances of their origin; redemption still comes in the form of motherhood for the women in these stories. But this makes it all the more noteworthy that so many subversive women are affirmatively portrayed by the Genesis narratives and that God is seen as being on their side. Surely we are faithful to this tradition when we struggle to redeem the suffering perpetuated by gender inequities in patriarchal cultures.

If we now turn to the question of ethnic difference in the Abraham traditions, the female characters remain an interpretive key. Among the marginalized women whom God saves in the book of Genesis, two are—in the view of the Hebrew narrator—foreigners: Tamar is a Canaanite woman, and Hagar is Egyptian. As non-Hebrews, both women are subject to distrust and scorn, but they are embraced no less than the Hebrew women by the redemptive turns of the narrative. Hagar's story is exemplary. She is afflicted most acutely not by childlessness but by slavery. As the slave of a Hebrew family, the young Egyptian woman Hagar has no hope of having offspring among her own people. Yet because she is oppressed, Hagar too is given offspring:

Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son; you shall call his name Ishmael ["God hears"]; because the Lord has given heed to your affliction (Gen. 16:11).

Finally, as Cheryl Exum observes (1985, 77), Hagar the slave woman "becomes the mother of a great nation characterized by its refusal to be submissive" (Gen. 16:12). In our reading of the

book of Genesis, Christians and Jews often focus on the story of Sarah, our foremother. But Hagar is an equally important ancestral figure for the Islamic tradition, and our reading of Genesis is enriched by the recognition of the fact that in our Scripture God earnestly heeds Hagar's cry. The compassion shown by the God of Israel for Hagar the Egyptian reveals that God's salvific purposes know neither ethnic nor gender boundaries.

What then of the patriarch himself, Abraham? The Lord's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 likewise demonstrates the breadth of God's mercy beyond all ethnic distinctions. The promise includes three elements: (1) receiving land, (2) becoming a great people, and (3) mediating blessings to the other peoples of the world (for the background and development of these themes, see Westermann 1980). The translation of the third element (Gen. 12:3b) from the Hebrew is problematic; it might be taken to indicate either Abraham's agency or that of the other nations: "and by you [or, 'in you'] all the families of the earth shall be blessed [or, 'shall bless themselves']." In any event, it is clear that the very promise which assures Abraham of his progeny also extends God's blessings to humanity beyond Abraham's descendants. A focus of controversy between early Christians and Jews during the first centuries of their mutual self-definition was the competing claim of each community to this promise. But before considering the New Testament reading of God's promise to Abraham, especially Paul's reading, I want to consider further its place in the Hebrew Bible.

Israel's election is perhaps the determinative moment for the Hebrew Bible. At Sinai God declares "you shall be my special possession" (Exod. 19:5), and the prophets uncompromisingly invoke this election: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2). But as the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, Israel's election reveals the merciful divine purpose for all humanity. The Lord is first Israel's deliverer, but closely connected with Israel's liberation is the redemption of all peoples. Israel, God's Servant in the arena of world history (Isa. 49:3) is given as a "light to the nations" (Isa. 42:6).

For all the particularity of the covenant relationship between God and Israel, the Hebrew Bible sets a magnificently broad salvific compass among the peoples of the earth. God's messengers, the prophets, are also sent to the nations, most dramatically in the figure of Jonah, who despite his resistance is com-

pelled to bring redemption to Nineveh (of all places!), capital city of the Assyrians, historically the fiercest scourge upon Israel (cf. e.g., Nahum, Isa. 10:5). The definitive example in the Hebrew Bible of *hesed*, a term which includes "loyalty, mercy, loving kindness, and faithfulness," and which is at the heart of the Lord's covenantal demand of Israel (Hos. 6:6), is the story of Ruth, a Moabite (non-Israelite) woman. Through her loyalty and kindness Ruth becomes a member of the Israelite household of Boaz and is remembered as an ancestor of King David (Ruth 4:13-22; Matt. 1:3-6).

It must be recognized that exclusivist appeals to Abraham also appear in the Hebrew Bible. We know, for example, that the Judean community in Babylonian exile was challenged by those who were not deported. The Judeans who remained in the land after the Babylonian conquest claimed that the exiles had lost God's promise, and the figure of Abraham was their rallying point:

Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess (Ezek. 33:24; cf. 11:14-15).

During the postexilic period, there appear groups of Judeans who are excluded by the larger community, thus they raise their cry to God:

For you are our father.
Although Abraham disregards us,
And Israel has disowned us,
You, oh Lord, are our father.
Our Redeemer From of Old is your name (Isa. 63:16).

The identity of this excluded group is obscure. My view is that the passage is a postexilic protest (not an exilic lament as some maintain) against the tendency of the Restoration community to define itself narrowly by means of genealogical registry (cf. e.g., Neh. 7:61-65; for a different theory, see Hanson 1979, 79-99).

These echoes of conflicting claims to Abraham sound strangely akin to the divisive appeals to the patriarch found in the New Testament (e.g., John 8:33-58). But we ought not to be dismayed by the fact that Abraham was an object of conflict even in biblical Israel. Perhaps we should appreciate this aspect of the Bible's realism, its recognition that Abraham's descendants during the biblical period did not always enjoy harmony among themselves.

I think it is clear that such disharmony is finally a matter of regret in the canonical context (cf., e.g., Isa. 56:1-8), and this makes Abraham's family an even more apt model for interfaith relations today. The purpose of the biblical promise to Abraham is to assure both Israel's unique role as well as God's merciful intent to all humanity. When our relations within Abraham's family (i.e., among Christians, Jews, and Muslims) have been unfriendly, we have been untrue to that larger purpose.

ABRAHAM'S FAMILY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

I have suggested both with regard to gender equity and ethnic-religious harmony that the Abraham tradition of the Hebrew Bible embodies a limiting history as well as an emancipatory impulse. The same is true of Abraham's family in the New Testament. Abraham can be invoked as a symbol of patriarchal authority to which women should submit:

Holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by accepting the authority of their husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord (1 Pet. 3:6).

While this New Testament passage alludes to Gen. 18:1-15, the author is more materially influenced by the household code inherited from Hellenistic Stoic philosophy. According to this perspective, the placement of the male head in strict authority over the women, children, slaves, and wealth of the household is a necessary social order, purposefully created by God (For discussion of 1 Peter and the Hellenistic household codes, see Balch 1981 and Fiorenza 1989, 260-266). The biblical author's adoption of this perspective is the consequence of a particular, historically contingent cultural influence upon early Christianity. Biblical interpreters in service of the Church who are committed to realizing the full humanity of women are free to reject it (Gal. 3:28).

A second appeal to Abraham's family in the New Testament which requires critique is Paul's allegorical argument in Galatians 4:21-31. Here Paul recalls Abraham's two sons, one by a slave woman (Hagar) and one by a free woman (Sarah). For Paul, these figures represent the divine economy before and after Christ: Hagar stands for the Old Covenant, Sarah the New. Not only does Paul here invoke uncritically the institution of slavery in his reading of Genesis (cf. my remarks on the house-

hold code in the preceding paragraph), he also introduces a problematic scheme of dualistic categories. The son of the slave woman is born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise (Gal. 4:23). The slave woman from Sinai represents the earthly Jerusalem in bondage, while "Jerusalem above is free" (Gal. 4:26). Paul's argument here inscribes an archetype of domination and subordination which subjugates the flesh to the spirit, the earth to heaven, bondage to freedom, and—as is clear from the broader context of Paul's thought—the female to the male. Maybe, like the author of the Apocalypse, we need to envision a "new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1; cf. Isa. 65:17, 66:22) where all of God's worldly creation is seen as good (Gen. 1:31), where no one is a slave, and where all God's children, women and men alike, can claim their own good life. Such a picture would be truer to the redemptive ends of God as portrayed in the Hebrew narratives of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar.

There is a New Testament context, however, where the gender relations of Abraham's family are cast in a redemptive light. As we noted above, the Hebrew Bible focuses its attention on Abraham's faith to the exclusion of Sarah's. In contrast, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews credits both ancestors with the role of pioneer in faith:

By faith Sarah herself, though barren, received power to conceive, even when she was too old, because she considered faithful the One who had promised (Heb. 11:11).

Here Sarah, no less than Abraham, receives the promise actively through her faith in God.

The complex question of early Christianity's bearings toward religious and ethnic exclusivism is beyond the scope of this paper (for a range of helpful studies with much additional bibliography, see Richardson and Granskou 1986, Wilson 1986, Gager 1983). Fortunately the role of Abraham in this history has been described by the recent study of Jeffrey S. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy* (1991). In the remaining paragraphs I would like briefly to summarize his work (see especially pages 185–198) and draw its implications for our dialogue. Siker examines the appeals made to Abraham through four generations of Christian exchange with Judaism, ca. 50 to 150 C.E. The central concern of Paul, who represents the first generation of Jewish-Christian dialogue, is Gentile inclusion with-

in the promises given to Abraham. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul argues that since Abraham was reckoned righteous on the basis of his faith, the true basis of inclusion for Gentiles in Christ is faith, not law observance (Gal. 3:6–9). Galatians has little to say about the status of non-Christian Jews. In Romans, Paul repeats his argument that Gentile inclusion was part of God's promise to Abraham (Rom. 4:1–25), but he also asserts God's continued election of non-Christian Jews (Rom. 11:1–32).

The second generation of Christians, represented by the authors of Matthew, Hebrews, and Luke-Acts (ca. 60–90 C.E.), remains chiefly interested in Abraham as the first bearer of God's grace to the Gentiles (e.g., Matt. 3:7–10; 8:5–13). In the third generation (ca. 90–120 C.E.), Gentile inclusion becomes a tacit assumption, while Abraham is increasingly invoked to justify Jewish exclusion from God's grace. In the gospel of John, for example, Abraham is no longer the true father of the Jews; their father is the devil (John 8:44). This trend is completed with the fourth generation of Christian writers (ca. 120–150 C.E.), represented above all by the apologist Justin Martyr, who in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* asserts that the promises to Abraham no longer apply to the Jews; rather they have been transferred to the Christians, Gentile Christians in particular (*Dialogue*, 119).

Siker (1991) sees this theological development in early Christianity as historically understandable, but unnecessary, regrettable, and reversible. The way for Christians to heal their self-imposed alienation from Judaism, Siker urges, is to take seriously *both* halves of Paul's formulation concerning non-Christian Judaism in Romans 11:28. Here Paul asserts not only that the Jews are opposed to Christians because of the gospel, but also that "as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors" (Rom. 11:28b). In other words, Christians need to rehabilitate their own sense of God's continued election of the Jews. As for the post-Pauline developments, where Christians claim to have superseded Jewish inheritance of the promises to Abraham, Siker suggests that "contemporary Christians would do well to consider the question: Can those who have been adopted as children of Abraham legitimately appeal to their adopted father in order to disinherit Abraham's other children?" (1991, 198). I agree with Siker that it is long past time to give up such a Christian stance. I would suggest that the introduction of Islam into the dialogue clarifies the conclusion: The truest appeal to God's promises to

Abraham is one that defines Abraham's family in the most inclusive terms, respecting the uniqueness and legitimacy of each of its members.

CONCLUSION: ABRAHAM'S FAMILY AS A PROTOTYPE FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

In conclusion I would like to relate a story of Abraham which, I am told, is well-loved in Islamic tradition: Once during a famine Abraham sent to a friend in Egypt for grain. The friend refused his request, saying that he would have sent food for Abraham's family, even if there were famine in his own land. But the friend knew that Abraham, according to his usual generosity, wanted the grain to feed his guests and give to the poor. Abraham's messengers were ashamed to return from their mission empty-handed, so they filled their sacks with fine white sand. Upon their return, Abraham was so distressed to learn of their failure that he collapsed in exhaustion. While Abraham slept, Sarah, not knowing what had happened, opened one of the sacks, found good flour inside, and set to making bread. As he awoke and smelled the baking bread, Abraham asked Sarah where she obtained the flour. "From your friend in Egypt," she said. "No," said Abraham, "it could have come only from my Friend God Almighty" (Sale 1891, 90).

This picture of Abraham as the "friend of God" is found in each of the scriptures of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, (Qur'an 4.125; James 2:23; 2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8). I see Abraham's family in the story as a promising prototype for relations among the three faiths, each of which holds the belief that the poor, the oppressed, the excluded, all those who most need mercy in the face of the world's cruelty, are especially favored by God. In the biblical tradition, Abraham's compassion is a hallmark of his character, from his tender hospitality toward the strange visitors in Genesis 18, to his impassioned intercession to God for the fate of the innocent in the city of Sodom, to the parable of Luke chapter 16, where Abraham welcomes the poor man Lazarus into heaven. In the present story from Islamic tradition Abraham's household is likewise an exemplary place of hospitality and compassion. Even in the midst of famine Abraham seeks food for the stranger and the weak. God's mercy is effected not through the patriarch alone, but through Abraham's family, and

specifically through the indispensable agency of his wife Sarah. I would like to suggest that adherents of each of the three faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, can find their home in this household. Might we build a global community of faith, like Abraham's family, where women and men are equally respected and cherished, where friendship with God means an open house, where the stranger is welcomed, and where the poor find sustenance?⁵

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