



Magonet, Jonathan | 11.08.2008

Abraham can be the starting point for a shared experience

Jonathan Magonet *

All three monotheistic religions have turned to Abraham for their particular purposes. Both Christianity and Islam, in seeking to link themselves to that original revelation, have gone to Abraham. For Islam it is because he is the first believer and, in their understanding, one of a series of prophets from the Biblical period, later including Jesus, who are bearers of the divine word and forerunners of Muhammad, the last of the prophets.

Moreover, Abraham existed before the creation of the Jewish people, who had what Muslims regard as a narrow and exclusive view of who belonged within the covenant with God. Through Ishmael, the other line of descent, Muslims can find their direct link with Abraham and a greater universalistic faith that can include the whole of humanity. For Christians, following Paul, Abraham pre-dates the giving of the Torah at Sinai and all the requirements of commitment to the law. [Earlier in his address Rabbi Magonet pointed to the Jewishness of Jesus as evident from the narratives about his life and the record of his preaching and teaching. "Indeed the genealogy of Matthew (1:1-17) clarifies his descent from Abraham generation by generation."]

For Jews, it is significant that Abraham is called Avraham avinu, "Abraham, our father," whereas Moses is Moshe rabenu, "Moses, our teacher." We want to retain the emphasis on the biological descent, since we are both a people and a faith community. Those who convert to Judaism receive the name ben or bat avraham avinu, "son or daughter of Abraham, our father," as if they are literally adopted into the family.

Yet, great as Abraham is, his legacy is not without problems. All three of our traditions have had to work out their relationship with the story of the near sacrifice of his son, be it Isaac or Ishmael. All three are forced, by the authority of Abraham as a central figure in their respective traditions, to justify his act. All three can find his submission to the will of God, even to such an extraordinary degree, praiseworthy, and indeed model, behaviour. Fortunately the child is not actually sacrificed, though Christianity will see in the death of Jesus the ultimate fulfilment of this act of faith.

Medieval Jews, suffering from the mass slaughter that accompanied the Crusades, claimed that they were tested even more than Abraham because Isaac lives, whereas their children were indeed killed because of their loyalty to their ancestral faith in God.

Muslims can emphasise submission to the will of God as an absolute value; indeed the word Islam itself is understood to carry precisely that meaning of "submission." Moderns can read the Biblical account as a protest against the contemporary practice of child sacrifice.

However, I would make the point that the Biblical version does present the call to sacrifice Isaac as a test. The conventional reading is that Abraham's willingness to kill his son is proof that he passed the test. But this is the same Abraham who is to teach the values of righteousness and justice to the world and to inculcate these values to his descendants. With this task in mind, it can be understood that Abraham failed the test, allowing his obedience to God to override his own human compassion and morality. Indeed it is possible to read into the text God's horror that Abraham was prepared to go all the way, hoping till the very last moment that Abraham would refuse. Only the urgent

intervention of the angel when the knife was about to descend saved Isaac! Paradoxically, it is God who had to prevent Abraham becoming so God-intoxicated that he will even murder in God's name!

Other Contemporary Issues

There are other passages [about Abraham] in the Hebrew Bible that have significance for contemporary issues between the three faiths. A positive example is the encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek, the priest of Salem, which represents the first respectful interfaith dialogue. Melchizedek worships El Elyon, the "Most High God," and Abraham recognises in this God his own one, so much so that the name El Elyon becomes incorporated into Jewish liturgy.

Another example is more challenging. Isaac and Ishmael meet again when they come together to bury Abraham, which is a reminder of the family ties that bind us but also of our shared responsibilities. But we only have to remember that this took place in the town of Hebron to realise how complex and fraught the relationship can be, particularly when issues of land, property and inheritance stand between us. There remain many lessons and values that need to be explored when we evoke the name of Abraham.

Perhaps the only conclusion we can reach is that we all own Abraham in our own particular way. But none of us own him exclusively.

But what is more important even than our particular claims is the recognition that we need to find points of contact, of sharing and of mutual respect between our three monotheistic faiths for the sake of our collective survival.

Abraham offers us a point of shared reference to the past. A variety of different interpretations within our respective traditions may speak to our present relationship, both positively and negatively. Future interpretations will be needed that will allow us either to come closer together or indeed define in acceptable and respectful ways our differences. The righteousness and justice that Abraham is to bring to the world belong to our shared task and responsibility as his descendants, whether physical or spiritual. And the blessing that is to be shared by all the families and all the nations of the world is a promise and hope that is yet to be achieved but one to which we all aspire.

Editorial remarks

* Rabbi Professor Jonathan Magonet is the recently retired Principal of Leo Baeck College (LBC) and now Emeritus Professor of Bible. First he studied medicine, then entered the rabbinic program at LBC, and his subsequent thesis, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah*, was a pioneering work in the new literary approach to Biblical studies.

He edits the journal *European Judaism*, broadcasts on the BBC World Service and German radio and has published popular books on Biblical narrative and poetry. A pioneer in interfaith dialogue, he has for over 30 years organised a Jewish-Christian Bible week in Bendorf, Germany, at the same time as co-organising that city's annual Jewish-Christian-Muslim Student Conference.

In 1999 Professor Magonet was awarded the Federal Republic of Germany's Cross of the Order of Merit for "the unceasing and dedicated contribution he has made to interfaith relations between Jews and Christians and to German-Jewish reconciliation."

He spoke to many interfaith gatherings in Australia and New Zealand, as the guest of the Union for Progressive Judaism. At Temple Beth Israel in Melbourne people from the three great faiths heard him consider the question "Who Owns Abraham?"; The text above is a part of that address.