

# **A Kiss of Heaven: Abraham, Global Blessing, and Civil Society.**

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For followers of Jesus preparing for a life of cross-cultural blessing, Abraham is no stranger. The blessing of Abraham (Gen. 12:2-3) is foundational theology in mission training. Unfortunately, missiological analysis of the life of Abraham often does not go beyond this initial call. It is a regrettable oversight, for in a remarkable way Abraham's life demonstrates key aspects of the way a Christian is to bring blessing to the nations.

Looking at Abraham's life from another missiological angle involves engaging with Samuel Huntington's ideas regarding his infamous *Clash of Civilisations*. Whether or not one agrees with Huntington's analysis of the current global situation, one thing is certain: there is extreme religion loose in the world and it is endangering the planet. How do Jesus followers - called to bless the nations - bring healing and reconciliation, spiritual and social blessing, to a fractured world?

The life of Abraham provides an important part of the answer. The Abraham cycle is wonderful narrative theology, rich like the pattern of a tightly woven Afghan carpet. Its intricate design is full of poignant elements vital for the life and mission of serious Jesus followers. I would like to reflect on four socio-missiological and theological aspects of the life of Abraham. This is no speculative exercise: Walter Brueggemann says that real theology involves life and death implications. The pattern revealed in Abraham should grip the hearts of all longing to find constructive solutions to the current global crisis... and to the ubiquitous brokenness present in humanity.

## **Journey**

Journey is fundamental to the life of Abraham. His journey is a pattern for us... a pattern of faith (Heb. 11:8-12). This worldview-creating journey indicates that existential divine encounter, cross-cultural encounter, danger, and sacrifice, are the stuff of a robust and normative faith. Let us look at these four aspects.

Existential divine encounter is woven throughout the Abraham story. Enlightenment-infected Christianity, bred insipid through an over-indulgence of rationalism and the systematic breeding out of regular, sometimes quiet and sometimes electrifying spiritual experiences of the presence of God, does not have a category for Abraham's experiences. But for those longing to experience an authentic biblical pattern of meaning, Abraham is a model. He experiences God directly on eight different occasions (Gen. 12:1, 6-7; 15:1, 12; 17:1; 18:1; 21:21; 22:1-2) over a period of one hundred years (cf. 12:4; 25:7). This includes dreams, visions, theophanies, and other types of communication. The pattern for us is that there is no pattern in the way God reveals himself. The encounters deny formulation. They simply happen as we seek God, as we step out of the door and into the infinite variety of experiences that characterise the Kingdom journey. Without a foundational existential encounter with God, there is nothing of enduring, eternal value to offer the world caught in the convulsions of the current global crisis. But with real divine experience energising and guiding there is a depth of healing, a significant touch of blessing, a level of freedom and liberation, that is otherwise unknown. And this salvation, this kiss of heaven, does not simply benefit individuals, but benefits societies as well.

Secondly, in Abraham's paradigmatic journey he encounters many nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues (cf. Rev. 7:9). Abraham encounters Canaanites (Gen. 12:6), Egyptians (12:10-20), Amorites (14:13), various West Semitic kings (14:1-18), Philistines (20:1-18; 26:1; 21:32-34), and Hittites (23:1-20). Other nations issue from Abraham and his relatives such as

Moabites, Ammonites (19:36-38), and the Arab nation of Ishmael (21:18). In the powerful crescendo of salvation history Paul, the paradigmatic embodiment of journey and mission in the New Testament, picks up Abraham's journey. Abraham's gritty life of faith indicates that failure is a normal part of journey. This failure creates *curse* for other cultures and civilizations rather than blessing. But the humility embodied by Abraham, coupled with the commitment to make correction, yields blessing in most cases for people in other cultures.

Thirdly, the journey is often fraught with danger (Heb. 11:17, 25, 29, 31, 33-38). Issues of injustice and oppression require a response (Gen. 14:15-16), and issues of human frailty cause serious problems for all involved (12:10-20; 20:2-16). Abraham experiences the full range of these dangers... and so do we.

Finally, the journey with God requires sacrifice. There is a general human tendency to want to settle. For most people a lifestyle of moving brings hardship. From what we know of Abraham's cultural context, it was abnormal to leave the father's household. More than this, the incident with Isaac on Mount Moriah must have tested Abraham to the limits (Gen. 22:1-15). Sacrifice remains a characteristic of Kingdom journey (Luke 9:23). We move now to the second socio-missiological and theological aspect of Abraham's life.

## **Blessing**

The Hebrew word for blessing, *beraka*, is a rich word used to communicate all the good that God bestows upon humanity. It includes salvation blessing, reconciliation with God and humans, practical material blessing, and supernatural signs demonstrating the power and love of the Kingdom of God. Aspects of God's blessing are only experienced by those living in submission to the rule of God. Other aspects of God's blessing are unconditionally granted to humanity simply because God is good. One foundational aspect of God's blessing is that it is normally dispensed by means of God's people. Abraham's life models this for us. In Brueggemann's words Abraham is a "prototype for all disciples."

There are five instances of Abraham channelling blessing cross-culturally. Each of the stories is gritty. They include failure and cowardice as well as courage and inspiration. They are authentic human dramas.

First we see Abraham involved in a land dispute displaying peace-making skills and selfless generosity toward his nephew Lot, the father of the Ammonites and the Moabites (13:7-9). This provides inspiration for Christians in mission to position themselves in socially influential vocations which aid in arbitration and reconciliation.

Secondly, we find Abraham involved in armed conflict in order to free his nephew Lot and a number of West Semitic kingdoms from the injustice and oppression of Kedorlaomer of Elam and his allies (14:15-16). The fundamental point here is that Abraham took up a decisive position against forces of injustice and oppression. Liberation theology notwithstanding, Jesus followers will look for ways to be a prophetic and normally non-violent voice for those suffering injustice. Vocations in a variety of types of relief and development work demonstrate this.

The third example of cross-cultural blessing was Abraham demonstrating his peace-making skills once again bringing reconciliation between his community and that of Abimelech the Philistine (21:22-32). In today's clash of civilisations, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that it is not secular leaders who will bring peace to various religious communities. Religious leaders are best positioned to broker peace. They are the ones possessing credibility with the religious majority of the world. Jesus followers must understand that in today's milieu of religious extremism, they are uniquely positioned to arbitrate peace. Realising this, the UN has recruited world religious leaders, including Christians, to participate in the Alliance of Civilizations. This alliance aims to address the widening religio-cultural gulf separating

peoples. Christians filled with the Spirit of reconciliation are well positioned to be bridges for peace which lead to the Prince of Peace. Jesus followers specialising in international relations would be well positioned to aid in this way.

The fourth example is Abraham's intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah (18:16-33). Abraham as the pre-eminent Old Testament symbol of cross-cultural blessing reveals what is most valuable in the eyes of God and thus shows that God chose the right person to be the 'father of the nations.' Sodom and Gomorrah were far removed from Abraham culturally, religiously, and morally. Yet Abraham's persistent intercession on their behalf reveals the true heart of the Christian in mission... love, compassion, and grace. Abraham errs in understanding God's plan for these two tragically fated cities (19:24). But he errs on the side of mercy, not of judgment (cf. Matt. 23:23; James 2:12-13).

The last example to analyse involves Abraham and the Hittites at Hebron (23:1-20). Abraham insists on purchasing land from the Hittites that God had already promised him (13:15)! For Abraham, preserving good relationships with the *other* was of primary importance. Later Mosaic laws stress that there would be a diversity of people living in the land of Israel who must receive the same justice and love experienced by the Israelite community (Lev. 23:22; Num. 15:15-16, 29; 35:15; Deut. 1:16; 10:18-19). In a trip I took to violently unsettled Hebron, I heard an ironically different story from a small group of religious extremists. They stated that the tens of thousands of resident Arabs would be driven out by any means. A tragically small number of Jews, Muslims, and Christians, like Rabbis for Human Rights, the Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement, and Christian Peacemaker Teams, have courageously embraced the way of Abraham and risk their lives in non-violent ways to bring justice and peace. Israel and Palestine call out to Christians to bring the blessing of salvation, spiritual transformation, reconciliation, and authentic Kingdom community that are found so powerfully and mercifully in Jesus. But while Israel/Palestine is filled with Christian pilgrims, Christians in mission are strangely absent in places like Hebron. Abraham shows us the way. In the next socio-missiological issue the particularism of Abraham's community and their pluralistic context is made clear.

## Particularism and Pluralism

Since the beginnings of Christianity the relationship between biblical particularism and its pluralistic social context have been variously understood. Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture* provides an analysis of the ways followers of Jesus have understood this critical relationship. Abraham provides a model of horizontal social inclusiveness and vertical divine exclusiveness similar to Niebuhr's *duality* model. The greatest commandments support this inclusive/exclusive dialectic. Abraham enjoyed healthy relationships with diverse cultures and religions including Egyptians, Philistines and various West Semitic kingdoms. This did not mean the absence of serious problems. But it did mean that when relationships faltered, Abraham mediated reconciliation. He modelled inclusiveness toward the *other*, while maintaining a deep devotion to God. Another way of saying this is that Abraham loved God with his whole being as well as loving his neighbours. Abraham founded and remained in a distinct community, with boundaries flexible enough to allow others to join, while remaining on good terms with other distinct communities. Moreover, Abraham defended those communities, including Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham's love of the *other* was unconditional. This brings to mind Jesus' habit of unconditionally blessing any with needs. He healed the sick and cast out demons without regard to faith commitment (Matt. 4:23-24). The ten lepers narrative is paradigmatic for Jesus' behaviour toward the *other*. Excepting a lone Samaritan, the lepers displayed an astonishing ingratitude toward him (Luke 17:12-19).

In short, we learn from Abraham that passionate devotion to God does not mean excluding those who do not embrace him. Indeed, the opposite is true. Whilst our purpose is to see people from all nations worship before the Lamb, we respect the freedom that God gives all

to reject him. God demands an account from all humanity, like Sodom and Gomorrah, but that is God's job and not ours. Like Abraham, our job in mission is to bless the nations. Let us now turn to the next socio-missiological implication of Abraham's life.

### **Socio-political implications**

In *The Desire of the Nations*, Oliver O'Donovan challenges us to reflect deeply on the political aspects of theology. He maintains that evangelical theology must be political. Understanding the socio-political implications of Abraham's life is critical for all Christians, but especially for those engaged in blessing the followers of Islam. This is because traditional Islam understands religion in a concrete political way. In order for Christians to bridge Islam and Christianity's worldview gap they need a more nuanced understanding of the biblical political worldview. Abraham's life offers a political model which has much continuity with Jesus and the New Testament. Five socio-political observations can be pointed out concerning Abraham.

First, Abraham is unconcerned with establishing a kingdom. He establishes a community, but leaves the political structure loose and informal, along the lines of clan or tribal organisation. It appears to be a sort of eldership rule, informal and relational. Although he relates to other kings as an equal (Gen. 23:6), he neither sets up himself nor his progeny in a monarchical structure. He seems to be content to let God be king of the community. Abraham seems secure in the authority he naturally possesses.

Secondly, there is a lone situation in which Abraham subverted a certain type of political reality involving aggression and injustice. This concerned the antagonism of King Kedorlaomer and his allies, including the kidnapping of Lot and his community, and the confiscation of his property (14:4, 14-16). A modern analogy might be the opposition of many Christians, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to Hitler's Nazi regime. But this type of activity in the life of Abraham was unusual. The typical way Abraham relates politically to other communities leads us to the third observation.

Abraham shows no inclination to assert rule over neighbouring communities. In most of his relationships with other political powers, he is supportive and collegial. He neither relates to other societies from a position of power nor plots to overthrow their authority structures. He does not relate to these political entities from within, but benevolently from without. His relationships are characterised by blessing... and reconciliation when relationships suffer. Moreover, Abraham subverts what Niebuhr describes as the universal tendency toward 'tribalism.' Called 'distinctiveness theory' in the social sciences, Huntington holds that it generates the current clash of civilisations. Tribalism is when social groups view themselves as possessors of superior status among the world's diverse cultures. This hubris has dangerous implications when other groups are deemed less than human and undeserving of respect. Abraham displays a complete absence of this type of nationalistic attitude. He neither demonizes nor excludes the Egyptians, Hittites, Philistines, or Amorites. Abraham eschews the ethic of *real politik* that normally characterises relations between nations.

Fourthly, Abraham respects the freedom of his neighbours to make their own religious and cultural choices. There is no evidence that Abraham sought to coerce his neighbours into accepting his faith or belief system. This is a divinely rooted ethic. The God of the Bible grants all freedom of choice. Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares illustrate this. Christians in mission follow this pattern, avoiding extremist religious behaviour that denies others the freedom to differ.

Finally, Abraham lives with the tension of dual authority (cf. Matt. 22:21; Rom. 13:1-2). God secures Abraham's ultimate allegiance. But Abraham respects the authority which his neighbours' possess. He pays for Sarah's burial plot at Hebron even though God previously promised that the land was his.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on Abraham as a model for mission, we see a man significantly encountering God. He journeys with God in community. His purpose is to bless various peoples. He affirms their liberty of choice, but does not denigrate them when they do not choose God. In fact, he intercedes for blessing on their behalf. Abraham does not give us the total picture of mission. In our day, we add to that the power and message of the cross, the power of the indwelling Spirit of God, and the gifts and richness of the community of Jesus. But Abraham's life provides an essential picture of mission, a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, a kiss of heaven.

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