

SOUL BROTHERS

*Men in the Bible
Speak to Men Today*



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Foreword by
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Abraham

*The Father
of All Faithfulness*

It happened some time later that the word of Yahweh was spoken to Abram in a vision, “Have no fear, Abram, for I am your shield. Your reward will be very great.”

“My Lord, Yahweh,” Abram replied, “what do you intend to give me? I am childless.”

Then taking him outside, Yahweh said, “Look up to the heavens and count the stars if you can. Such will be your descendants. . . .”

And as the sun was setting Abram fell into a deep sleep, and terror seized him . . . and when the sun set and darkness had fallen, there

appeared a smoking furnace and a firebrand that moved between the halved animals [of sacrifice]. That day Yahweh made a covenant with Abram.

Genesis 15:1-2, 5, 12, 17



A primeval story. A primal man. So much so, that it becomes a founding myth for all three monotheistic religions—but really quite amazing, since it has nothing to do with a hero in any classical sense. There is no great adventure here, no conquering of lands, monsters, or villains. Abraham does nothing special at all. To the typical male it is a quick read, and maybe more than a bit disappointing. Abraham's glory is not in his giving or conquering or achieving, but totally in his receiving and non-achieving. He might be called a patriarch, but this story is rather un-patriarchal. In fact, this patriarch is

even willing to kill the centerpiece of all patriarchy—the son who would inherit it all. What is going on here? Why would this anti-story so capture the religious imagination of Jews, Christians, and Muslims together?



While we consider some elements of the several accounts about Abraham in Genesis, let us keep an eye on a man facing left or backward rather than the typical manly pose facing right and forward. Note also the little ram caught in the thicket.

I am told that the history of religion has run parallel to the history of violence. We always needed some guise to take away our guilt about killing, and God turned out to be the best cover possible. Just kill for God, and it is all right. Then you can remain hateful and self-centered, but actually think of yourself as saved and su-

perior. Historians of religion say that there is evidence of human sacrifice on every continent if you go back far enough. Virgin daughters were thrown into Mayan wells, and eldest sons in the Bible were sacrificed to rally the fighting spirit of the hometown team (see 2 Kings 3:26-27 for a perfect example of the power of sacrificial killing). The sacrificial or heroic instinct lies very deep in the human psyche. For some reason, we believe that God can be persuaded or bought off by various forms of gratuitous killing. It makes one wonder what we think of God? The only reason the story of Abraham and Isaac can be told at all is that fathers did kill sons to placate an angry, distant, and scary god. Except in the view of the mystics of every age, God has not been a very likable person in most of history.

The violence moved from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice (“rams caught in thickets”—Genesis 22:13), which is where we are at the time

of the Bible. Cultural anthropologists estimate that as much as ninety percent of the economy of the city of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus had to do with the buying, penning, feeding, herding, and butchering of sacrificial animals and with hauling their dead carcasses out of the temple. Humans believed they were paying off some kind of huge debt to a god who kept them perpetually in debtors' prison. Sacrifices satisfied that tit-for-tat need, that mercantile instinct, which is how the dualistic mind operates until its logic is broken down by unearned gratuity. No wonder Jesus said so strongly, "Go learn the meaning of the words, what I want is mercy and not sacrifices" (Matthew 9:13). And the centuries seem to have shouted back to him, "But what we want is sacrifices and not mercy!"



I guess you could consider it to be some level of human development, but later centuries

largely transferred the notion of sacrifice to ideas of a heroic self. If we were ascetic, abstemious, mortified, and anal retentive, this was supposed to win God's favor, for some reason. It took the form of Stoicism, Manichaeism, Jansenism, Puritanism, Victorian duty, and black-and-white moralisms of every stripe. Anything rather than receive God's obvious love as a free gift. Anything rather than the erotic language of the bride and bridegroom, the wedding banquet of rich wine, the intimate encounters of the mystics, a religion based on communion instead of fear. "The Son of Man comes eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners,'" says Jesus (Matthew 11:19). *How did Christianity end up so utterly different from Jesus?* becomes the disturbing question after a few years of studying the New Testament.

Well, one answer might be that we forgot

about Abraham, whose “faith is the father of us all” (Romans 4:1, 16). As Paul goes on at great length to teach (the rest of Romans 4), Abraham’s faith was the exact opposite of any kind of performance principle. Or, as Hebrews puts it, “Abraham obeyed the call to set out for a country that was merely promised to him as an inheritance, and he set out without knowing where he was going. . . . They lived there in tents, while he looked forward to a city founded, designed, and built by God” (Hebrews 11:8, 10). Now this is a genuinely new notion of religion! No ego payoffs. This religion meant living in the “in-betweens” of life, energized by the experience of one God, waiting in confidence and hope for a God who seems distant and demanding. This is considerably different from the prosperity gospel and “prayer-of-Jabez” (1 Chronicles 4:10) kind of religion that we tout today. Strangely, we end up with no sacrifices

demanded of anybody—except perhaps for the underdeveloped countries who have to subsidize our Cadillac faith, our oil wars, and our pretentiousness.



History ping-pongs from one extreme to the other, either moral asceticism or religious imperialism, but both are a refusal to trust in the goodness and faithfulness of God; we try instead to trust in our own. Both extremes avoid and fear the transformative “terror,” “darkness,” and “setting sun” that are referred to deliberately in Genesis. Abraham is not a man who is afraid of hell, like so many modern Christians—what we see is a man who has been through hell. Those hellish journeys allowed him to receive the gifts and promises of God in freedom and desire. Until we are led to the limits of our own resources, we do not know what our Real

Resource is. Yahweh does not tell Abraham that he will not be tried or tested; Yahweh simply says to Abraham: “Do not be afraid. I will be your shield” (Genesis 15:1). That is a very different message from such statements of “ascent” as “I will do it by will power, effort, and good works” or “I will use my religion to hold sway over others.” Abraham’s religion is all surrender, trust, and letting go—a path of descent not ascent, subtraction not addition.



According to Ken Wilber,¹ religion has always performed two very important but very different functions, but most people stop after the first and never go on to the second. The first function of religion is that it gives meaning, boundaries, and identity to the private self. This

¹See Ken Wilber, *One Taste: Daily Reflections on Integral Spirituality* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), journal entry for February 11.

is good and necessary to get one started on the religious journey. We see the same approach to religion in much of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It is the important first stage of knowing that you are chosen, special, and even set apart. Psychologically, you have to have an ego before you can let go of your ego. Yahweh satisfies that human need for a “narcissistic fix” by telling Abraham that his descendants will be as many as the stars of the heavens and the sands of the seashore. “I will bless you and make your name so famous that it will be used as a blessing” (Genesis 12:2). First God inflates you, so that you can handle the later and necessary deflation. God lets you know that you are a beloved son or daughter, and then God gives you the freedom to choose it and believe it consciously, which is always through some form of terror, darkness, or setting sun.

But the second function of religion, accord-

ing to Wilber, is the real goal, the second half of life's clear task. It is usually lived by a small minority of every religion or denomination, he says. It is Jesus' "narrow path that few walk upon," his way of descent, the picking up of our cross and entering into solidarity with him and humanity. Here the task is not affirmation of the ego but surrender of the ego, not self-control but giving up control, not flattering exclusivity but humiliating inclusivity. It is not about winning but about losing, not "I am good" but "God is good"—not sacrifices but mercy. This is the full and complete Abrahamic journey, and it will always be a minority position, not a state religion. The monotheistic religions were correct in their intuition about the archetypal nature of Abraham. But when they tried to mass produce it, membership in a group became more important than participation in a real journey of transformation.



We see Abraham's transformed self most beautifully represented in the final stages of his saga, when he and Sarah are "well on in years." First we see that he has become the essence of hospitality; he "hastens," "bows," and "runs" to serve the three strangers in the heat of the day at Mamre (Genesis 18)—more feminine than patriarchal, it seems. He then guides and accompanies them like a humble servant on their mission to Sodom, and only then does he discover that two of them are angels and one is actually Yahweh in disguise! This becomes the key text for that ever-surprising discovery of "entertaining angels unaware," which is actually the story of our whole life.



Finally, we have the almost shocking story of Abraham haggling and bargaining to keep

Yahweh from destroying Sodom. It risks making Abraham look more loving and merciful than God! And what is more, Yahweh relents to Abraham's final offer, "I will not destroy the city for the sake of even ten just men" (Genesis 18:32), God says. It is the beginning of the unfolding and surprising theme of the remnant, the minyan, the salt of the earth, and the yeast hidden inside the dough. It seems that God just needs a few willing partners to assist in the redemption of the world. The Great Lover needs only a few conscious lovers to join in a giant yes to life. It is these ecstatic ones, these few who bother to answer the invitation, who seem to be enough to turn the world from its path toward mutual and self-destruction. These are the sons and daughters of Abraham "raised up from the very stones" of creation instead of any religious lineage or group (Matthew 3:9). All God needs, it seems, is a critical mass or,

as Jesus puts it, “two or three gathered in my name” (Matthew 18:20).

Abraham did not finally argue with God because he imagined that he himself was good and merciful. He argued with God because he had learned that God was good and merciful. Such full-circle faith will always save us from the need to create sacrifices and scapegoats. Abraham does not even need that poor ram caught in the thicket. He looks straight ahead to life, sandy seashores, and stars uncountable.