

Jesus and Abraham

The Role and Place of Abraham in Jesus' Teaching

Danijel Berković
Bible Institute, Zagreb, Croatia
danijel.berkovic1@inet.hr

UDK:232; 234.3
Review paper
Received: September, 2013.
Accepted: October, 2013.

Summary

This short study outlines and illustrates the importance of the person of Abraham as fundamental to Jesus' teaching, esp. in view of his own Jewishness in addressing his fellow citizens. In the four gospels, the name of Abraham, and particularly the phrase "son of Abraham", served as a technical term for genuine Jewishness and religious identification.

Frequently, in the context of disputes between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders of the time, Jesus persistently returned to the person of Abraham as a paradigm of faith rather than primarily a reference to the father of the nation. In the Old Testament, Abraham is constantly referred to as the friend of God, a believer par excellence. This attribute seemed to have been lost in the days of Jesus and the New Testament times. Jesus thus wishes to re-establish this role of Abraham, especially for the Jews.

Key words: Abraham, gospel, Jesus, Christianity, teaching, Jewishness

The Issue of Abraham

The issue of Abraham is a theme which played an exceptional, even a key role in many aspects of Jesus' teachings and those of his contemporaries for the enforcement of his teaching. This is not uncommon if we take into consideration that Jesus, a Jew from Nazareth, referred to the character and work of the patriarch

Abraham not only as the father of the nation, but based his teaching on Abraham as a paradigm of faith. The latter, the dimension of Abraham as a believer, by all indications seems to have been suppressed in Jesus' time for some reason.¹

Sometimes we overlook the fact that some of the harshest confrontations between Jesus of Nazareth and the milieu did not happen only with the Jewish religious leadership (Pharisees and the Sadducees) and the broader layers of common people. Some of the harshest conflicts happened with precisely the Jews "who had believed him" (cf. Jn 8:31; 12:11). The atmosphere was at a fever pitch around the topic of Abraham as the patriarch and Jesus' intention to reinstate Abraham as the original and true believer and a father of the faith. This was opposed to the Jewish ill-considered reliance on the cult of Abraham which John the Baptist calls a *ridged reliance*. In one Croatian Bible translation, Rupčić calls this a *delusion* (cf. Mt 3:9).² It was exactly those Jews who were faithful to Jesus who were ready to throw stones at Jesus to stone him (Jn 8:59). Raymond Brown and other commentators annotate that maybe here the issue is about those who had *believed him* (dative), but not believed *in him* (εἰς, preposition with accusative) (cf. Brown, 1966, 354).³

1 In this regard, we have two precedent characters in the genesis and development of the Jewish nation and religion: Moses and Abraham. Moses could be qualified as a lawgiver and conveyor of the Torah. Allusion and invocation of *Moses' Law* is often found in the New Testament (cf. Lk 2:22; 24:44; Ac 28:23 etc). Moses, thus, should be regarded primarily as the forefather of the Jewish religion, Judaism. Abraham is, on the other hand, within this same religious system, a Jewish paradigm of the faith. This was certainly supposed to be implemented in the Jewish people, faith and religion.

As far as Moses is concerned, Leon Roth (1960, 18) rightfully asserts that Moses was not a mere lawgiver and a conveyor of the Torah (the Law): "We are accustomed to think of Moses as the lawgiver, and to contrast the 'spirit' of prophecy with the 'letter' of law as if legal 'externality' had to be swept away by prophetic 'inwardness' before religion could be born. This is not so in the history of Judaism, and that for the reason that in Judaism these factors were never dissociated." This statement by Leon Roth sounds quite convincing, however, as we will prove in the case of Jesus and Abraham, in the actuality and reality of religious practice in New Testament times, this had not proven to be effective except for the relatively small number of believers, or as the Old Testament calls them the "faithful remnant".

The biblical text, indeed, calls Moses a prophet as well (cf. Nu 12:6-7; Hos 12:13) and a man of God (Dt 33:1). He is even compared to the coming great prophet who is to be followed: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him" (Dt 18:15-18).

2 "And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'" (Mt 3:9).

3 C. H. Dodd gives a good remark on this, thus showing a suspicion that whether they believed Jesus, or believed in him, neither explanation gives sufficient reason for them to attack Jesus with the intention to kill him.

The Evangelists and Abraham

The allocation of names and the mention of Abraham in the four Gospels is somewhat unusual and indicative. Namely, Abraham is mentioned most often in Luke (15 times), then in John (10 times), in Matthew (7 times), and the least in Mark's gospel, only once (1 time).⁴

In *Luke*, Abraham is mentioned 15 times. Out of those, in Luke 16 (16:19-31) alone, his name is mentioned 6 times, in the narration on the *stingy rich man and poor Lazarus*. In this narration, the stingy rich man will be buried after his death, while the beggar Lazarus will be taken upon his death to "*Abraham's side*" (16:22).

This Evangelist regularly places Abraham in a context in which there are also 'outsiders' of the then society. Those are people who are, for one reason or another, socially or religiously 'marked' and marginalized individuals. Included on this list of outsiders in *Luke* are: the Good Samaritan (Lk 10), the ill and paralyzed woman (Lk 13), the prodigal son (Lk 15), the widow and the unjust judge (Lk 18), the unpopular Zacchaeus (Lk 19), and the generous widow (Lk 21). To this list of socially insignificant people, we can add children and Jesus' relation toward children (Lk 18), and the aversion toward tax collectors (Lk 18).

Mary's song testifies to the tendency of Luke to put the oppressed and rejected in the same context with Abraham where she spoke "*in favor of Abraham*". This is a program by which God will look upon the insignificant, and oppose the arrogant.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors (Lk 1:51-55).

Then, in *John*, the name Abraham is less mentioned, 10 times altogether. All 10 appearances of the name Abraham in John appear in one single chapter, and that is in John 8 (8:31-58). In this text, Jesus confronted the "*Jews who had believed him*" (Jn 8:31). The conflict happened around Jesus' statement that for everyone who remains in his teaching (λόγος), this will be a sign and liberation (from sin) (8:31). The reaction of the believing Jews was to be furious, and the discussion revolved around the fact that all of them were "*Abraham's descendants*", therefore, they had

4 The mention of Abraham in the four Gospels: Matthew (7x): Mt 1:1.2.17; 3:9*2; 8:11; 22:32; Mark (1x); Mk 12:26; Luke (15x): Lk 1:55.73; 3:8*2.34; 13:16.28; 16:22.23.24.25.29.30; 19:9; 20:37; John (10x): Jn 8:33.37.39*2.40.52.53.56.57.58.

never been enslaved by anyone. This was, of course, far from the historic truth.

Matthew mentions Abraham 7 times, and he is the only one out of the four evangelists who begins his gospel with a broad description of Jesus' genealogy. In that context, in the first chapter alone, *Mathew* mentions Abraham three times (1:1.2.17).

The evangelist *Matthew* writes from a clear Jewish-religious position. Thus his gospel is often called the "Jewish" gospel. The very beginning of this gospel gives evidence of *Matthew's* intention. Namely, he endeavors to present Jesus' genealogy in detail, and he mentions right away that Jesus is "the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1). By this, *Matthew* clearly wants to emphasize Jesus' *Judaism*, but also his *messianism*. To be a son of Abraham means to be a Jew; while "the son of David" was a *terminus technicus* for the Messiah.

It is uncommon that in his gospel, *Mark* mentions Abraham only once. This is in the context of Jesus' controversy on the resurrection of the dead (Mk 12:18-27) which involved the Sadducees "who say there is no resurrection" (12:18). Jesus explains the resurrection and eternal life to the Sadducees, referring to their 'Jewish' God as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (Mk 12:26) who is "not the God of the dead, but of the living" (12:27).⁵

The Cult of Abraham

Can we actually link Abraham with a *cult*? What exactly is a cult, and from where does this concept come? In the Croatian language, we would probably use the synonym *adoration* (or worship) for the word *cult*, and perhaps refer to a ritual which serves as a religious-existential reliance.

Abraham as a character is highly positioned as a paradigm of the faith and as a believer in all three Judeo-Christian religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). However, he only acquired a cult following in Judaism.⁶ To answer the question regarding whether Abraham can be linked with a *cult*, we should first of all explain exactly what a cult is.

The term cult originates from the earliest stages of development of religion and the related ritual forms. The etymology of the word cult clearly points to the religious-historic correlation with an early agricultural and sedentary way of living, including the adoration of ancestors and deities, along with the dependable ele-

5 In a way, Jesus here actually compares this God of Abraham as the God of the living and life, with himself as the one who points toward eternal life and resurrection (Cf. Cole, 1997, 208-209).

6 I have submitted a synopsis of the overall positioning of Abraham in the Judeo-Christian religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) in my work under the title "*Abram, Abraham i Ibrahim: skica za portret u židovstvu, kršćanstvu i islamu*" (Zagreb, 2013). The work is published in a collection of papers anent to the retirement of ef. Ševko Omerbašić in a publication of the Zagreb Islamic center.

ments of ritual.⁷ Contrary to the contemporary language synonyms for *cult* (= adoration, observance, religious reliance), in the biblical Hebrew tradition, the word *cult* is usually explained by the verb to serve someone or something, or the noun service (*abodah*). Thus Moses was bound by YHWH to tell the Pharaoh to let the people go in order to serve the Lord (YHWH): “*This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: ‘Let my people go, so that they may worship me’*” (Ex 9:1) (Cf. de Vaux: 271).

It seems that among the contemporaries of Jesus’ of Nazareth, there are indications that when it came to Abraham, there was a real cult. Indeed, there are no indications of elements of Abrahamic rituals or displays of adoration, nevertheless, it is evident that the person of Abraham occupied such a strong position as a religious-existential as well as a national reliance of the Jews, that indeed, we can speak of a form and a kind of cult reliance. New Testament texts, including the gospels, indicate that Abraham was such a personality cult to which Jesus’ fellow citizens strongly relied in a national and religious sense of meaning. To put Abraham under a question mark one way or another, or to equate oneself with him was actually blasphemous even unto death, as is evident in the case of Jesus.

In this respect, in the historic context of Jesus’ life and teaching, we can indeed speak of elements of a cult of Abraham.

Abraham in the Jewish Tradition

Abraham as Father of a Nation

In the Jewish (pre)history, individuals such as Moses, David and Elijah were highly positioned. However, only one, Abraham, is identified as a father of the nation. Here it must be said, that which will be revealed by the context of the narration of the primary events around Abraham, that he was paradigmatically destined, even at the beginning, to be a father of the faith. In a moment, regardless of the

7 The etymology of the word *cult* (as well as of the Croatian words *culture* and *cultivate*) comes from the Latin *cultus* (= tendency, nourish). *Cultis* is a participle of the verb - *colo* (*colui, cultum*, 3). This ambiguous verb in its basis draws all of its meanings from agriculture and worship. Its primary meaning is: (1) to work, to plant, to compost, and than (2) to abide, to sit, to dwell (here especially about the gods which dwell in a certain place) and finally (3) to attend, to take care of something or to gain someone’s affection. Out of all these derivatives, we have the word and term *culture*, as in the agricultural vocabulary when we speak of the agricultural cultures which are being planted in the fields (cf. Divković, 1900, 203, 264).

chronological distance and the religious-historical development, Abraham and Moses are no longer *al pari*. Moses becomes the one who reveals God, who brings the Torah, and thus a founder of the organized religion of Judaism. Abraham will, therefore, always remain as the father of the nation, but also, it seems, primarily a paradigm of the faith. In the religious-historical view of Judaism, both of these figures, Moses and Abraham, hold a paradigmatic value. Moses strongly remains a *religious* paradigm and reference. Abraham, along with his role as the father of the nation, remains as a paradigm of the *faith*. It is precisely the latter which represents that upon which Jesus' teaching regarding Abraham is based.

The national Jewish history and their ethnic identity begin with the strong mandate the Lord referred to Abraham: "*Leave your country.*" This, the Lord's instruction "*leave*", would not have been sufficient if it were not for the crucial "*counter-effect*" in Abraham's reaction: "*So Abraham left*" (cf. Ge 12:1-3). Gerhard von Rad gives a sense of the entire abundance and dynamics offered by the literary analysis of this event. He describes it as the core of all that would follow.⁸

In most of the texts in the gospels, Abraham appears as a symbol of Jewish ethnicity. That is, he is an anchor for their national and religious assurance. Because of this, the Jewish religious leadership repeats their ethnic-religious cliché in the middle of the most intense discussion of the faith and the confrontation with Jesus of Nazareth: "*We are Abraham's descendants*" or "*Abraham is our father*" (cf. Jn 8:33.39). This Jewish apostrophized repetition of their national-religious belonging which they were proud of, is completely opposite to that which we find in Isaiah 63:15-16. In Isaiah, appealing to God, they allege that YHWH is their true father: "*But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us*" (Isa 63:16; cf. 64:8).⁹ Then, when they are in trouble, they plead: "*Look down from heaven and see from your lofty throne, holy and glorious...your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us*" (63:15). Now, along with their national sentiment as sons of Abraham, their faith in God as their heavenly Father is reawakening.¹⁰

To the Jews who disliked Zacchaeus, Jesus confirms that this Zacchaeus too is a "*son of Abraham*" (Lk 19:9). Therefore, he is a real Jew, although as a tax-collector

8 "Abraham obeys blindly and without objection. The one word wayyelek ('and he set out') is more effective than any psychological description could be, and in its majestic simplicity does greater justice to the importance of the event" (von Rad, 1972, 161).

9 כִּי-אַתָּה אֲבִינוּ כִּי אֲבֹרָהֵם לֹא יָדְעֵנוּ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֲבִינוּ נֹאֲלָמְנוּ מִעוֹלָם שְׂמֹךְ: (Isa 63:16).

10 The reason why God is so rarely called a father in the Old Testament lies in the fact that the religions which surrounded Israel called their gods heavenly fathers, and this actually generated mythology and mythological elements. Namely, in the religious spheres, mythology and myth imply (i) a polytheistic background, a world of gods, (ii) their world is equated to Earth, to the entanglements of people's lives which are passed onto the gods, including the family life of people/gods (cf. Westermann, 1969, 393).

of the Roman occupational government, to his fellow citizens, he is a hated apostate. By his statement that Zacchaeus is a “son of Abraham”, Jesus actually does two things which are characteristic of his attitude regarding Abraham. Jesus, as a Jew, wants to reinstate Zacchaeus as a Jew; but more important, he wants to “reinstate” Abraham among the Jews as the father of faith. Since it is on the basis of Zacchaeus’ faith and “conversion” that he also becomes a son of Abraham—the believer, hence, Jesus states in his home, “*Today salvation has come to this house*” (Lk 19:9).

Abraham the Believer

In the overall biblical text, Abraham is certainly strongly anchored as a reference point for the faith and the believer. In the New Testament texts, especially in Jesus’ teaching, Abraham is regularly presented as paradigm of the faith and the believer, obedience and trust *par excellence*.

According to the teachings of the Jewish Jesus, every true Jew shall find his/her ideal in Abraham the believer, and not so much or only in Abraham as the forefather of the nation. Abraham (Ibrahim) is presented in all three Abrahamic religions in a similar way as the father of faith. As far as New Testament times Judaism is concerned, especially in the texts of the four *gospels*, Abraham’s ethnicity had completely overcome this aspect of Abraham—the believer, neglecting his status in regards to faith and putting it in second place.¹¹

The Apostle Paul gave Abraham the title “*Abraham the believer*” (Gal 3:9). In their accounts, the New Testament authors portrayed Abraham from different angles and with different emphases, but all of them simply recognized Abraham as the “father of faith”. According to the words of the Apostle Paul, those who are true believers are “*of the faith and they are being blessed by Abraham the believer*” (Gal 3:9).

Where does Abraham’s biography as a believer begin? It begins with the call directed to Abraham to leave his father’s home without hesitation and to move to an unknown new ‘world’. In this text (Ge 12), the dynamics of faith are felt even in the literary structure of the text: “*The Lord had said to Abram, Go*” ... “*So Abram went, as the Lord had told him*” (12:1.4). Then follows the text in Genesis 22 with a far more severe test of the faith than the one in Genesis 12. The dynamics of Abraham’s faith are again remarkably outlined through the rhythmical sequence: “*Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ ‘Here I am,’ he*

11 The reasons for this should most probably be searched out in the politically given historic moment, but certainly also in the appearance of the new religious movement and the provocatively a-national teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

replied” (22:1). The promise of a son to the old couple, to Abraham and Sarah, is yet another test of trust and faith (Ge 18).

The outcome of all of these accounts is the establishment of a unique friendship and trust between God and Abraham, thus Abraham becomes a “friend of God” (Jas 2:23) from whom God does not intend to hide any of his plans (cf. Ge 18:17-18). All of these are real outcomes of the faith of Abraham—the believer and the biblical father of faith on whom Jesus himself, the Jew from Nazareth, bases his teachings in many aspects.

Abraham’s Side

In Jesus’ teaching, Abraham is not only a father of the nation and of faith. In many instances, when Jesus speaks about eternal life, hell and paradise, he again refers to Abraham.

One of the special phrases where Abraham is mentioned is in the expression “*Abraham’s side*” (κόλπον Ἀβραάμ) (Lk 16:22). In the narrative about the beggar Lazarus and the abundantly rich man, after the death of Lazarus, it is said that Lazarus was taken by the angels “to Abraham’s side”, while of the deceased rich man the text says, “The rich man also died and was buried.”¹²

Some commentators believe that this passage is referring to the feast at which Lazarus lies at the table next to Abraham, taking into consideration that at that time the custom was to sit/lie around the table. As Morris puts it,

“the bliss of the saved once is presented by a portrait of a great feast where a special privileged person lies with his head leaning onto the chest of the great patriarch” (cf. Morris, 1997, 274).

Thus, in John 13 we read that “*One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him*” (ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ). Or, as it is translated by Karadžić, “he was seated at the table by Jesus’ side”, or as Skarić phrases it in archaic Croatian language: “There was the disciple whom Jesus loved dearly dining at his side” (Ivan Matija Skarić) (cf. Jn 13:23).¹³

12 The noun in masculine gender κόλπον signifies a special and continuous closeness, as in the prologue of John’s gospel where the relationship between the One and Only Son who rests in his “Father’s side” is described (εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς) (cf. Jn 1:18). Some authors suppose that this is about that state of bliss and the feast of blessings at which Lazarus now abides around the abundant table with Abraham.

13 *The Holy Scripture of the Old and the New Testament*, by Ivan Matija Skarić, Vienna, 1861.

Jesus and Abraham

Jesus is before Abraham?

Abraham as a believer was crucially relevant to the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. To Jesus, Abraham was not only a Jew, a forefather of the Jews in their ethnicity, nor exclusively a corner stone of Judaism as a religion. Therefore, his intention was not so much a demythologization of Abraham's cult among his contemporaries and nationals as it was a restoration of Abraham as a real paradigm of the faith and the believer.

At every sacramental gathering of the people or verification of the cult of the temple, the Israelite king and the people invoked and referred to the God "of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". Throughout their entire national and religious history, the continuity and the uninterrupted sequence of the family tree of the nation (and the faith), was crucially important. Out of the three said descendants (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) in the Israelite national-religious continuity, the most important place belongs to Abraham. He is a bearer and a propagator of all of God's promises; the writer of the book of Hebrews distinguishes Abraham as "him who had (all) the promises" (τὰς ἐπαγγελίας εὐλόγηκεν) (cf. Heb 7:6) (Millard&Wiseman, 1980, 150). In this uninterrupted genealogical sequence, the Apostle Paul goes even a step further and says that Abraham has only one true descendant – Jesus Christ.

"The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ" (Gal 3:16).

In this context of cultic expectations, the Jews ask Jesus about his various statements: "Are you greater than our father Abraham?" (Jn 8:53). In response to this question, Jesus incited the Jews, aligning himself with a completely unusual genealogical position. Namely, he says, "Before Abraham was born, I am!" (ἐγὼ εἰμὶ), adding that Abraham has actually already seen his (Jesus') 'day' and rejoiced over it (Jn 8:58.56).¹⁴ Therefore, it is not uncommon that the people gathered at that moment were taken up by such a provocative and blasphemous statement and

14 Rabbinic traditions interpret Abraham as a kind of 'all-seeing' person. Namely, they hold that Abraham was allowed to have an insight and a seeing of all days, times and events that were yet to come in history. This was so especially concerning the events which applied to his future descendants. For example, Rabbi Natan (around 160 A.D.) writes that Abraham has already seen the waters of the Red Sea being parted in order to make a way for the Israelites (cf. Dodd, 1953, 261).

“they picked up stones” to stone Jesus (8:59).

But, it is evident that Jesus did not intend to speak on the timely genealogical sequence and the positioning within that sequence. He was speaking of other categories and not merely the chronological temporal. The writer of the book of Hebrews speaks of and testifies to this when he speaks of Christ as the one who “*helps Abraham’s descendants*”, but not necessarily those strictly determined by the ethnic sense (cf. Heb 2:14-18).

Abraham is, thus, a kind of a religious-historical beacon for the Jews and Judaism. This gets taken all the way to the level of him being exalted as part of an all-national ‘Abrahamic cult’. This is confirmed by John the Baptist’s swift reaction at the sight of the mass approach of Pharisees and Sadducees to ‘John’s baptism’. In his account, John reminds them of the prophet Isaiah who equates Abraham to “the rock from which you were cut” (cf. Isa 51:1-2):¹⁵

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham” (Mt 3:7-9).

This is a quite clear indication as to what religious, popular, and populist extent the cult of Abraham had become established. Moreover, the Pharisees and Sadducees, perpetual enemies, acted together only when it was about issues of general national or religious importance and critical challenges. By his swift statement toward both of these groups of people, John the Baptist showed that they were united around (the cult of) Abraham. This is exactly how united they were in their action against the controversial Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Mt 16:1).

Jesus: The Son of David and the Son of Abraham

It seems that at that time many were already inclined to identify Jesus of Nazareth with the expected Messiah, thus, according to the accounts of all four evangelists, they addressed him with the messianic titular: “*the Son of David*” (esp. Mt 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 22:42; Lk 20:41). Matthew particularly testifies to this when he shows a greater tendency and readiness than the other evangelists

15 “Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many” (Isa 51:1-2).

for describing Jesus as the “*Son of David*”.¹⁶

Besides the messianic titular bestowed to Jesus, he was certainly a Jew too. Therefore, according to a traditional ethnic identification he was also a “son of Abraham”. Matthew, in his Jewish gospel, is the only one of the four evangelists who presents Jesus’ genealogy in detail. In this family tree of Jesus of Nazareth, he wishes to point clearly and directly to Jesus as a Jew, but also to indicate his status as Messiah. Therefore, Matthew begins his gospel as follows, “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham” (βίβλος γενέσεως) (Mt 1:1).

This βίβλος γενέσεως (= genealogy) Matthew probably took as an association to the well known *toledot* (family tree, generation) from the Old Testament. In the literary structure of the Old Testament, the *toledot* signifies genealogy cycles, family trees, but it also signifies a new era which follows the individual originator of a new family tree.¹⁷ Thus in the book of Genesis we have the *toledot* of Adam (Ge 5:1), then the *toledot* of Noah (Ge 6:9), then the *toledot* of Abraham (Ge 25:19), etc. In Genesis 2:4, as a conclusion to the creation, Genesis 1 reads, “*this is the history of the creation of the heaven and earth*” (Šarić), or simply, “*this is the creation of the heaven and earth*” (KS).

If we consider that *toledot* means more than the mere genealogical listing of descendants (in which respect we have sufficient literary and theological material on the basis of said biblical texts), then the *toledot* should be understood as a *period* or as a *history*. In this sense, Matthew probably intends to emphasize the coming of the period (or history) of Jesus Christ (Cf. France, 1997, 76-77).

His intention was not primarily to release Abraham from his ethnic determinant and national-religious belonging. Jesus wanted to restore and recognize Abraham as the true forefather of the faith.

Abraham in the Gospels

Abraham in Matthew’s Gospel

Matthew’s Gospel is often called “Jewish” or “Jewish-Christian”. It is expected, therefore, that Matthew mentions Abraham, the father of the nation, more of-

16 Matthew uses this titular for Jesus ten times, (Mt 1:20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30.31; 21:9.15; 22:42) which is incomparably more than the other evangelists. This is especially in relation to Mark who uses this titular for Jesus only three times (Mk 10:47-48; 12:35).

17 The Croatian translators would usually say that this *toledot* is concerned with the “*list of descendants*” (Šarić), “*history*” (KS) or “*the tribe*” (Daničić). “*This is the list of Adam’s descendants*” (Šarić), or “*This is the history of Adam’s ancestry*” (KS), or “*This is the tribe of Adam*” (Daničić).

ten. The mentioning of Abraham in *Matthew* is more evenly situated, than, for example in *Luke* or *John* who mention Abraham all together, mostly in one or two chapters (Lk 16 and Jn 8).

Biblical commentators agree concerning the fact that Matthew's Gospel is of Jewish character written by a Jewish Christian to Christians who are Jews. Compared to the other three gospels, there are sufficient indications for such a conclusion (Hill, 1972, 39. France, 1997, 21).

Matthew included religious semitisms which are easily understood within Judaism, but which to the followers of other religions sometimes seem meaningless or are not easily understood. In Matthew 27:6, he uses the term *korbanan* which is translated as 'temple treasury' (NAB) which is not equal to the term *korbanan*. It is similar with the *phylaktēria* (Mt 23:5) which in the Croatian translations is translated inadequately as "they expand the accounts" (KS/Šarić). Only in Matthew does it stand that Jesus sent his disciples explicitly to the "the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt 10:5-6).

As Hill rightfully notes, even when this evangelist attacks the theory and the practice of contemporary Judaism (cf. Mt 23), Matthew still emphasizes the fulfillment of the Law (cf. Mt 5:18ff) or the observance of the Sabbath (Mt 12:1ff).¹⁸ For all such details, France concludes that they:

Reinforce the impression that the Gospel is in the first place, intended to the Jews. Therefore, it has been often noticed that, along with the Book of Hebrews, the Gospel of Matthew is the "most Jewish" book of the New Testament (France, 22).

While people were flooding to John the Baptist for baptism, Matthew clearly pointed out that John the Baptist quite boldly intended to settle things about the cult of Abraham. The continuous appeal to Abraham, while expecting an assurance of God's blessings, generated a furious reaction in John the Baptist by which he calls those that are being baptized a "*brood of vipers*", and tells them that their very reliance on Abraham is a barren delusion (Mt 3:7). Similarly, although not so furiously, Jesus reacts when he reminds that Abraham is after all not solely Jewish property. In the instance when Jesus is approached by the occupant Roman centurion (Mt 8) with complete devotion, faith and trust, amazed by his faith, Jesus concluded,

Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the

18 Hill offers a number of references from Matthew's gospel which indicate the Jewish character of this gospel – for example, the commands of the Law should be observed (19:17); The Law should be observed in its entirety (5:18); Sabbath should be observed (6:16-18); the temple taxes should be paid (17:24ff).

subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 8:10-12).

Similarly, in *Mark* (Mk 12:26), through *Matthew* (Mt 22:32), Jesus' teaching repeatedly mentions Abraham's God as the God who is not a God of the dead, but of the living. Such an utterance on the resurrection amazed the listeners because it goes on to say that "*When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching*" (22:33).

Matthew's Abraham is undoubtedly oriented toward Judaism. Nevertheless, the way the evangelist ends his gospel should also be noticed. This same Jewish Matthew clearly acknowledges that Jesus' Gospel is as much Abraham's as it is Jesus' concluding commission to make all the nations his disciples (Mt 28:19). This, of course, would in no way mean that all the nations would primarily become Jews in order to inherit Abraham's blessings.

Abraham in Luke's Gospel

We have already mentioned that in his gospel the evangelist Luke regularly places Abraham in a context in which the strong and the weak are confronted, the 'orthodox' believers and those who are different. This biblical author is typically sensitive to such social and religious oppositions. Only in his gospel can we find narratives about the faithful centurion (Lk 7), about the Good Samaritan (Lk 10), about the prodigal son (Lk 15), about the poor widow and the unjust judge (Lk 18), and about the widow who gave her last coins (Lk 21). Along with these paragraphs, are also those in which Abraham plays an important role in favor of such social outcasts, eccentrics which are different, unwelcome and rejected. Luke includes Abraham's tradition in several key narratives.

In the narrative on the obsessed and ill woman of infirmity, which Jesus calls a "daughter of Abraham" (13:16), it is about a person who was socially outcast for almost two decades.

It is similar in the story about the rich man and Lazarus (16:24). Lazarus, as a poor man, at that time was a kind of symbol of a curse, and in no way a symbol of blessing; thus contemporary language might phrase the idea of this passage: poor people, you are a burden even to God. According to the preaching of the evangelist Luke, in this narrative, Abraham even speaks personally in answer to the rich man's prayer which he directs to him (!).

Finally, the narration about the obnoxious national outcast Zacchaeus (19:1-10) also belongs in the Abrahamic tradition. To the Jews' disgust, Jesus showed his attitude regarding Abraham in the example of Zacchaeus who had betrayed his nation in the eyes of the Jews. Zacchaeus, although a Jew, served in a Roman

office, namely, in the most detested department - in the position of a tax collector. Such people as Zacchaeus were properly and steadily involved in the service of the occupying Roman government, so they frequently and openly despoiled their own people. In the Gospel of Luke, Zacchaeus is recognized by his nationals as a 'sinner', and about Jesus they say, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner" (Lk 19:7). After realizing his own state and misdeeds in wrongful gain, he offered to give back fourfold to all he had deprived. To this change/conversion of Zacchaeus, Jesus reacts as follows: "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham" (Lk 19:9).

Abraham in John's Gospel

One of the most frequent incidents between Jesus of Nazareth and the Jewish religious leadership happened around the issue of Abraham. For Judaism at that time, Abraham was not only a specific ethnic symbol, but also the sign of an exclusive divine election of their community. To Jesus as a Jew, Abraham was not a negligible factor ethnically, however, to him this was not a crucial factor. Moreover, to Jesus, the Abrahamic symbol was a symbol of trust and faith, and only then a symbol of ethnicity. In this context, Jesus additionally emphasized deliverance from the bondage of sin, thus his insistence on freedom (from sin) and conversion seemed like exaggerated religious 'bombardment' to the Jews of that time.

He says to them, "*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*" (John 8:31-32). The people gathered there understood this as an open provocation. In their reaction, then, they evoke the fact that they are true and free Jews because: "*We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?*" (John 8:33). Undoubtedly, they placed his words in a *political* instead of in a *moral* context. Or did they? It is unclear here that by their reaction they actually declared a mere political and historical absurdity. It was precisely slavery (Egypt, Babylon, Rome) which was one of their sad historical constants. We can assume that their declaration was more related to and evoked the eternal assurances of God and the promises given to Abraham (land, descendants, a blessing) and all of his future descendants. In this respect, they probably showed thus, that regardless of their painful national history they could never truly be slaves, whatever the historical reality may be.¹⁹

19 Here we should consider that Jesus in his statement and appeal to the truth, along with the moral and religious aspects in a connotative sense of meaning, actually argued that it is true and an acknowledgment of reality, the real state of affairs, which can be achieved, according to him, exactly by and through him alone. For more details, see the discussion of C. H. Dodd on

Abraham in the New Testament Texts

The Apostle Paul and Abraham

The theme of the Abrahamic tradition is extremely important for the overall teaching of the Apostle Paul, however, it is a vast New Testament area which is beyond the scope of this paper to be explored in detail.²⁰

The formerly assured and inveterate Jewish persecutor of the Christians, Saul, after becoming the Apostle Paul and a servant of Jesus of Nazareth, upon his conversion, but also because of his Jewish heritage, regularly pointed to Abraham. By his conversion, Paul did not become a-national (*"I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham"*, Ro 11:1; cf. 2 Co 11:16-33). However, he too, as Jesus, does not speak of Abraham primarily as the father of a nation, but as a believer. Paul, indeed, pointed to Old Testament portraits of Abraham as a friend of God. But this apostle also persisted in the fact that the real status of Abraham is defined before God, not by the righteousness of his deeds or by his ethnic determination, but exclusively by trust and faith.

"So also Abraham 'believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham" (Gal 3:6).

The Apostle Paul in no way intends to 'merge' God's promises and assurances to Israel into the inheritance through Abraham's ethnicity, but by faith. In the given context, for his Jewish listeners, he asserts in a slightly presumptive way, "*Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children*" (Rom 9:7). As an apostle of Christ, he then says, "*If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise*" (Gal 3:29).

Paul's language, in respect to Abraham, in multiple ways emphasizes that the issue is not the concept of faith as a religious science. Abraham, namely, is not simply *justified* by faith; he is continuously and actively the *faithful* Abraham.

Abraham in the Book of Hebrews

In the New Testament book of Hebrews, the account of Abraham is exceptional in many ways (Heb 11:8-12). First of all, in the chapter on faith (Heb 11), the

John's understanding and the frequent usage of the word *truth* in relation to Hebrew linguistics and mentality (*emet*), as well in relation to the semantics of the same term in the Greek language and mentality (cf. Dodd, 176ff).

20 In the opus of the Apostle Paul, some of his texts in relation to the Abrahamic tradition occupy a distinguished place, as for example: Ro 4, 9, Gal 3, 6, etc.

author gives Abraham disproportionately larger space than all the other ancient examples of faith. This writer, again, regarding the Abrahamic tradition, evidently expects the same attention from both the Jews and the Christians.

In this, in many ways unique description, Abraham is placed in the context of three destination points which completely define his life and action. This includes his obedience to God (“*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went*”) and his slightly unimaginable faith and trust (“*even though he did not know where he was going*”), even with the risk of being a foreigner wherever he went. Finally, the reason for all of this is the pivotal point, God’s promise; without which, all that had been mentioned in Abraham’s activity would have been interpreted as the impossible mission of a possessed fanatic. Under the influence of such an Abraham, this text says that “even Sarah believed” (11:11).

Conclusion

The syntagme “the son of Abraham” is actually a *terminus technicus* of the national-religious determinant. Nevertheless, in Jesus’ teaching, this phrase occupies a new-old disposition of the faith and faithfulness, of Abraham the believer. Jesus advocates for some reason, to bring back Abraham, who was neglected, as a *paradigm of the faith*. This is regardless of the fact that most of the Old Testament writings usually present Abraham primarily as the *father of the nation*, and only then as the *father of the faith*. In his psalm of lament anent to the all-national gathering and a kind of establishment of Judaism, Nehemiah calls Abraham (*ne’eman*, נְעִיִּם), a believer:

“You are the Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him...” (Ne 9:7-8).

In many of the Old Testament biblical accounts, Abraham is presented as the righteous one who “*will live by his faithfulness*” (Hab 2:4); he “*believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness*” (Ge 15:6). Here righteousness and righteous are not primarily moral-ethical categories which rely on the moral integrity of the righteous one. In Habakkuk 2, this refers to the strict abiding to the word of (God’s) promises as opposed to the (Chaldean) haughtiness and selfishness (Keil, 1984).

There are many and certain biblical illustrations of Abraham the believer which Jesus endeavors to reinstate in his teachings. Jesus alludes to Abraham in many different ways. In John 15:12-15 where Jesus calls his believing followers as friends, it is undoubtedly an allusion to Abraham, the friend of God (cf. Isa 41:8; Jas 2:23). YHWH himself wants to disclose his intentions to Abraham because he does not want to hide from his friend that which he is planning to do (cf. Ge 18:17-19).

“Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed” God and thus become the father of many nations (cf. Ro 4:18). Therefore, he became not only a father of one nation, but many. With an almost blind trust in God, Abraham agreed to become a foreigner in the name of inheriting God’s promises:

“By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:8-10).

Undoubtedly, such attitudes would not have been well received by Jesus’ Jewish listeners given the fact that they were convinced that as Abraham’s descendants, they “*have never been slaves of anyone*” (Jn 8:33). Therefore, it is not strange that exactly over the theme of Abraham there were the most open sparks between Jesus and his fellow Jews.

Besides Abraham the believer, in his teachings, Jesus referred to Abraham whose God is a God of the living and not of the dead (Mk 12). Therefore, even when he speaks of the resurrection and eternal life, he refers to Abraham.

Bibliography

- Brown, R. E. (1966). *The Gospel According to John*. Doubleday, New York.
- Cole, R. A. (1997). *Evandjelje po Marku*. Logos, Daruvar.
- Divković, M. (1900). *Latinsko-hrvatski rječnik*. Zagreb.
- Dodd, C. H. (1953). *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*. CUP, Cambridge.
- France, R. (1997). *Evandjelje po Mateju*. Logos, Daruvar.
- Hill, D. (1972). *The Gospel of Matthew*. Marshall, Morgan&Scott, London.
- Keil, C. F. (1984 rep). *Commentary on the OT, vol.10*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Millard, A. R. & Wiseman, D. J. (1980). *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*. IVP, Leicester.
- Morris, L. (1997). *Evandjelje po Luki*. Logos, Daruvar.
- Oesterly, W. O. E. & Robinson, T. H. (1937). *Hebrew Religion: Its Origin and Development*. SPCK, London.
- Rad, G. von (1972). *Genesis*. SCM, London.
- Roth, L. (1960). *Judaism: A Portrait*. Faber&Faber, London.
- Vaux, R. de (1973). *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*. DLT, London.
- Translated from Croatian by Ljubinka Jambrek*

Danijel Berković

Isus i Abraham: Uloga i mjesto Abrahama u Isusovu nauku

Sažetak

Abraham, njegov lik i djelo od presudne su važnosti u tri religije: židovstvu, kršćanstvu i islamu. Svaka od njih ima Abrahama (Ibrahima) kao svojevrsni potporanj njihove nacionalne ili vjerničke identifikacije. Za Židova i njegovo židovstvo, kao etnička odrednica, to je označeno sintagmom biti „sin Abrahamov“ (Lk 19,9) ili „kćer Abrahamova“ (Lk 13,16). Za razliku od tog židovskog etničkog određenja, Abraham je u kršćanstvu i islamu primarno vjernik i oličenje nepokolebljive vjere i pouzdanja u Boga. Ovaj tekst prikazuje važnost koju je Abraham zauzeo u Isusovu nauku te načine kako Abrahama nalazimo prikazanim u tekstovima četiri Evanđelja i kako ga Isus iz Nazareta, kao Židov i Učitelj, koristi da bi promicao svoj nauk.