

The good, the bad and the ugly - Abraham

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- When I think of people like Abraham, I think of him as one of the giants of Christian faith. But also of the Jewish faith and of Islam.
- You think of Abraham in the same light as people like Moses, King David and other big names of the Old Testament.
- So what is it about these heroes of the faith that we talk about apparent bad and ugly sides to them. Good we don't mind, but bad and ugly? Abraham?
- One of the things I heard some years ago about the major leaders in the Bible, and that has stuck with me, is that they all went through difficult experiences. All of them.
- So why do we talk about the bad sides of people like Abraham? Why do we need to? Do we just get disillusioned when we hear of their failings, that they even have failings?
- Australians are known for the tall poppy syndrome, for knocking somebody off their perch when they're up there too long. But when we see the failings of people we look up to, we can actually relate to them much easier, because they're more like us. They're not some person way up there who we can't touch. They are suddenly just like us, with all our failings.
- And so we see this with perhaps the greatest figure of monotheism – Abraham.
- Known as the father of the faith, indeed the father of the three great monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam.
- Over 3 billion people in the modern world cite Abraham as the "father" of their faith.
- Abraham was promised by God descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky, but today two branches of his family, Jews and Muslims, continue to battle for his birthright.
- In the Bible, his story is found in Genesis, but is also commented on in the New Testament.
- In the Koran, Abraham can be found mentioned throughout, revered as one of the great prophets of the Muslim faith. In all three faiths, Abraham is

revered as a father and a founder.

- The Koran tells of a time when Abram confronts his father about his idol worship and is condemned to burn in a furnace by King Nimrod of Babylon, but God protected him.
- His family left Ur—in modern day Iraq—to travel northwest along the trade route and the Euphrates River to the city of Haran.
- Abram settled down in Haran—in modern day Israel—with his family. He married Sarai and entered into a lifelong partnership with her.
- Abram was in Haran at age 75 when he got the call from God to leave his home and family behind and follow God into a strange land that He would give him.

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- Abram took his wife, his nephew, Lot, and his possessions and departed. Abram moved south into the land of Canaan, a land inhabited by the Canaanites. God told Abraham his descendants would inherit the Canaanite land (Genesis 12:7)
- And then comes this:

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- There is a famine in the land which forces Abram and his people to move to Egypt. Abram, fearful that Pharaoh would kill him for his beautiful wife, Abram asked Sarai to pretend she was his sister instead. He says, “tell him you’re my sister”. Then Pharaoh takes Sarai as his concubine.
- For this, God struck the Pharaoh with a plague and revealed Sarai's true identity. Angry with Abram, Pharaoh returned Sarai and asked them to leave Egypt. **UGLY?**
- So, God steps in and has to expose Abram’s cowardice, for pimping off his wife to the Pharaoh. And God uses the arch-enemy, the Pharaoh, to do it. This is how God works. Throughout the Scriptures God often works through people who are not known as his people.
- But here’s another thing. Nothing is ever black and white. For Abram, the Pharaoh was going to take Sarai anyway, so what is he doing wrong? What

would you do?

- Abram returned to Canaan with Lot and Sarai, but Lot and Abram had a dispute over grazing land for their herds.
- Breaking with tradition, Abram allowed Lot—the younger of the two—to choose the land he would take. Lot chose the fertile plain to the east, and Abram took the hills to the west.
- Lot's land included the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. After Abram was again settled, God came to Abram and renewed his promise; that Abram would inherit for his descendants all the land he could see in every direction.
- So, again, God shows his generosity despite Abram's up and down life, despite his contradictions.
- Lot moved to Sodom and was captured when local tribes attacked the city. Abram—who had grown wealthy and distinguished—armed his men and pursued Lot's kidnappers, regaining Lot and his possessions.
- Again God affirmed his promises to Abram, Abram now being well advanced in years and without offspring.
- God reaffirmed that He would give the land from the Nile to the Euphrates to Abram's descendants, but only after they had spent 400 years as slaves.
- With God having more than once affirmed his promise of numerous progeny to Abram, Sarai made a suggestion.
- In the ancient world, it was a custom to offer a substitute to bear a child to ensure the continuation of the family. Sarai offered her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, to Abram to bear them a child. Abram consented, and at the age of 86 Hagar bore him a son, Ishmael.
- Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, God once again appeared to Abram and renewed His covenant with him and even expanded the promises: if Abram would "walk before [the LORD] and be upright" then God would make Abram the "father of a multitude of nations." God changed Abram's name to Abraham, which means "the father of many nations," and He changed Sarai's name to Sarah, meaning "princess."
- God's grace is shown again, giving the greatest of gifts without any effort from Abram.
- God also revealed that the promises would not come to Abraham through Ishmael, but through another son that would be born to Sarah in a year's

time. Abraham laughed at this seemingly absurd promise, because Abraham was 99 at the time and Sarah was 89. When Abraham laughed, God said the boy's name would be Isaac, which means "he laughs."

- God came again to speak to Abraham, in the guise of a traveler with companions (who were two angels). They were on their way to Sodom to destroy the city for its wickedness.
- Abraham boldly bargained with God on behalf of Lot, and God relented: if there were just ten righteous people in Sodom, God would not destroy it.
- So, Abraham talks with God and God seems to change his mind. Not the sort of characteristic you would attribute to God. God listens and is compassionate.
- Later, God could not find even ten righteous in Sodom, but spared Lot's family by warning them to leave before he destroyed the city. Lot's wife was turned to a pillar of salt when she turned to view Sodom as she fled.
- Then Abraham meets with a ruler called Abimelek and again passes Sarah off as his sister.
- A year later, Sarah gave birth to Isaac.
- Sarah grew increasingly jealous of Hagar and Ishmael, and Abraham relented to allow Sarah to send them out into the wilderness.
- God saved Hagar and Ishmael and promised Ishmael would also father a great nation through 12 sons, assumed by tradition to be the 12 Arab tribes.
- Once again, God steps in and saves Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's cowardice.
- According to Christian and Jewish scripture, God stipulated, though, that the covenant would flow through Isaac's line.
- According to the Koran, Hagar and Ishmael made a journey to Mecca where they build a home and Abraham often visited them.
- Abraham was asked in a test of faith by God to take Isaac onto Mount Moriah and sacrifice him as a burnt offering.
- At the time, children were often sacrificed as burnt offerings to a variety of deities. Abraham submitted, despite the fact that he "loved" his son. He took the son up on the mountain and prepared to sacrifice him. At the last moment, God told him to stay his hand and a ram appeared in the bushes. Abraham and his son slayed the ram as an offering, instead.

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- God reiterated His promises to Abraham again, at this point. Because Abraham had faith in the One God, God showed Himself different from other gods who desired human sacrifice.
- This story is also seen as a fore-shadowing of the sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God. It can be seen in that sense as a father sacrificing his son. But is that what God is like? I'll leave that one there.
- Abraham sent a servant to find a suitable wife for Isaac among Abraham's relatives. The servant returned with Rebekah and Rebekah married Isaac and had Esau and Jacob.
- The Jewish covenant would pass down through Jacob, who would have twelve sons who would become the twelve tribes of Israel. Likewise, Jacob's sons would include Joseph and Judah, and the birthright would continue through Joseph and the scepter through Judah, which is important for the establishing of Jesus in the line of the covenant.
- There has been a trend in the 1990s and 2000s to use Abraham as a figure and tool for reconciliation. Interfaith activists have scheduled Abraham lectures, Abraham speeches.
- It has been noted that if Muslims, Christians, and Jews are ever to respect and understand one another, a key road leads through Abraham.
- Muslims and Jews have two totally different stories on which son was exalted and inherited the birthright.
- The Koran also claims that Abraham was the first Muslim, not a Jewish prophet.
- Abraham though is most famously thought of as the father of monotheism. The stories describe his hospitality and peaceableness and, most important, his faith and obedience to God.
- The story of Abraham is typical of human nature. We all have our contradictions and good and dark side. It's an interesting commentary in these last few weeks of terrorist attacks and the subsequent talk of Islam. Just like good and bad has been done in the name of Christ over the years, good and bad has been done in the name of Islam. Abraham himself, the father of our faith and of Islam, is a good metaphor for the truth of the following quote:

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- “The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts.” - Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn