

Returning to Abraham

Text and photography by Adam Shamash



Lo! I have appointed thee [Abraham] a leader for humanity!

(Qur'an, Al-Baqara, 124)

Regardless of whether or not one is personally interested in religion, it would be difficult for anyone to deny the immense impact that one particular religious figure has had on the course of history. From the founding of the monotheistic traditions to the principle of human equality, one man's ideas have arguably made him the most influential person to have ever lived. His titles are many: Patriarch of the Prophets; Father of the Faithful; the Friend of God; the Pure Believer. Yet to most he is known simply as *Abraham*: a seer; a prophet; a fount of living inspiration.

What is it that makes Abraham's message so revolutionary, his story so profound, that he has endured some 4,000 years to the present day? Moreover, in an age when man has the awesome power to walk on the moon, to splice genes and, indeed, to annihilate entire cities in the blink of an eye, what is it that a shepherd from the desert can teach us? And how is it that Abraham's most ardent followers—Jews, Christians and Muslims—seem locked in deadly confrontation? Such questions beg meaningful inquiry.

We might start by trying to understand who Abraham was. Despite subtle differences in their outlook on Abraham, all three of the Abrahamic faiths unanimously celebrate his significance. Jews call him *Avraham Avinu*—“our father”—and believe he was the progenitor of the Jewish

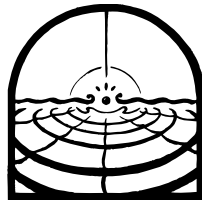


Clockwise from top left: Abraham's footprints can be found throughout the Middle East; the Station of Abraham (*Maqam Ibrahim*) in Mecca; Abraham's cave of birth in Sanliurfa, Turkey; Abraham's oak at Marme; a marker from the tomb of Abraham dating back to the Hellenistic period (50 BC-400AD); an Arabic inscription over Jerusalem's *Bab al-Khalil* ("Jaffa Gate") praises Abraham, the "Friend of God."

people through the line of Isaac. The New Testament mentions Abraham 74 times, and Christians see him as one of the major harbingers of Christ. The Qur'an describes him as "a nation" unto himself (16:120), and calls Muhammad to follow in his way (16:123). Abraham's legendary journey encompasses some 10 countries in the modern Middle East, and there remains to this day a veritable constellation of sacred sites and folklore dedicated to him throughout the region—an area that spans from Iraq to Egypt, Turkey to Saudi Arabia.¹ From the custom of male circumcision to the idea of the "Promised Land," from the precedent of kindness to the stranger to the rites of the Islamic *Hajj*—indeed, so much of Western religious culture has been imbued with reference to Abraham and his family. Over the centuries he has been an inspiration to countless religious figures, statesmen, philosophers, and even pop stars (both Louis Armstrong and Bob Dylan have penned songs about him!). And his influence continues.

¹ It is said, for instance, that the Syrian city of Aleppo (*Halab* in Arabic, meaning "he milked") is named after a story involving Abraham. Whilst on his journey, Abraham found the city overwhelmed by famine. In response the Patriarch milked his cow, causing an abundance of milk to miraculously flow, which he then distributed to the hungry townsfolk.

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