

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

Romans 11:1

August 14, 2011

There was a man, a wandering Chaldean, a keeper of sheep and goats and cattle, who lived and moved from place to place among the mountains and plains and deserts of the eastern Mediterranean forty centuries ago. He was born within the borders of modern Iraq, but spent time in Syria and Egypt as well before settling in the land of Canaan, Palestine, modern-day Israel.

He fathered many children and his children fathered and mothered many children and their children bore children too. He was the father of a nation. His great-grandsons gave their names to the clans, the tribes, that together would subdue and resettle and fill the land of Canaan, making it their own land, their own nation, at least for a time.

They were known as the Hebrews, and later, the Jews. They were the descendants of Jacob and his father, Isaac, and his father's father, the wandering Chaldean himself, Abraham.

The Hebrews were people of the land, grounded and earthy and physical. Their earthiness is reflected in their speech. Theirs is a beautiful language, but it is full-bodied and guttural, not lilting and song-like. They did compose songs and poems, but their songs and poems were about houses and vineyards and grain fields, about cedar trees and rock cliffs and mountain goats, about sex and war and bearing children and growing old.

Their eyes were directed downward, focussing on the land beneath their feet and the people gathered around their tables. They did look to the sky, but only to see if it might bring rain for their crops or a storm to remind them of the fragility and vulnerability of their lives on this earth.

They were not myth-makers, but covenant-makers, not spinning tales, but forming relationships. They weren't philosophers. They didn't like to puzzle out the secrets of the universe or speculate about the meaning of life. They were doers, concerned about the issues of life right there in front of their noses, issues of survival and of justice and fairness and peace.

They didn't dream of other worlds. They dreamed of this world, of safe and full and fulfilling lives in this world. They dreamed of shalom.

And when they talked about God, they didn't talk about God! They talked to God, and their language was not delicate. They complained and argued and made demands. They talked to God about their fears and their failures, their desires and their disappointments, their loves and their longings.

They addressed God with reverence and respect, but also with a sense of entitlement and expectation. They expected God to listen. They expected God to care. They expected God to do something, to do something for them and with them.

And that really is what is most distinctive about the Hebrews and their religion. They felt that they had been claimed by God, chosen by God, singled out by God. They called themselves God's people, God's own people.

God's own people! Remarkable! Different groups of people have always had their own gods. There were the gods of the Canaanites, the gods of the Greeks, the Norse gods, the Hindu deities. There is nothing unusual about that. But this is a God who has his own people! This is a God who chooses them!

This is a different sort of God ...

This is not a god up there somewhere, out there somewhere, hidden and elusive. This is not a god waiting to be found, the ultimate revelation at the end of some spiritual quest or journey of enlightenment. This is not a god people seek, but a God who seeks people.

This is a God who initiates the relationship. The spiritual movement is all down, not up: God coming down, God getting dirty, God all wrapped up in the comings and goings of his people. This is the God the Hebrews met as they worked and played and loved and fought, the God who made himself known to them -- his passion, his love, his will, his justice, his heart -- claiming them, challenging them, making demands of them, expressing his desires for them.

This is the God of the Hebrews, the God who made the Hebrews his own people, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And this is our God too. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God of Shelli and Steve and Brittney. The God who claimed the Hebrews as his own people claims us. We didn't discover or invent the God we worship. God found us and made us his own people, the very same God who found the Hebrews and made them his own.

This is important because sometimes we do worship a god of our own making, a god we do invent. That god is a generic, unremarkable god, there to keep the world running and to answer us in time of need, an all-powerful and benevolent provider, somewhere out there.

But the God of the Hebrews is not generic god. The God of the Hebrews has a personal name -- Yahweh. The God of the Hebrews is not an impassive, all-powerful, benignly benevolent force, but a jealous and possessive and demanding Lord, one who wants his way done, no arguments, because his way leads to life. This is a God of the particulars, a God who reveals himself in the particulars, through the history of a particular people, and through the life and death and resurrection of one particular human being.

That's the scandal of the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the scandal of our God. This God is particular,. This God takes sides. This God is this and not that -- for righteousness and against evil in all its forms, for life and against death in all its forms, for justice and against oppression and unfairness, for compassion and against indifference and selfishness and greed.

This God is what he is, not whatever we believe him to be or want him to be or perceive him to be, and we must choose, each of us, to be for him or against him.

But the good news is, what matters most in the long run is not our choice, but God's.

Did God reject his own people? Certainly not!

God has not rejected the Hebrews, the Jews, the people God chose for his own. Our "Christian" God is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Christians and Jews are more than distant cousins. We are members of the same immediate family, children of the same Father.

Christianity is not a new religion, a different religion. Christians are merely children newly adopted into the Jewish family tree. That's why Christian anti-Semitism in any form is simply ludicrous. We are nothing without the Jews!

But it's not about us or them anyway. We are chosen and claimed, Jew and Christian alike, by the God whose name is Yahweh and whose ways are the ways of truth and grace. So we have no grounds for pride, no basis for making distinctions, no justification for parading our own righteousness.

The God who chose Abraham chose him in order to bless all peoples. The God who chose the Hebrews appointed them to be a light to all the nations,. The God who came to us in Jesus Christ comes for the sake of any and all who will receive him and love him and serve him. This has been the plan from the beginning. This particular God -- the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Hebrews, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, our God -- has from the beginning planned to bring all of creation together.

That's why our job, as people claimed by this God, is to witness to the truth that has been told us and shown us. It's our job to tell and retell the story of the grace and goodness of the God who claims us in all its particularity and singularity.

But it is never --never -- our job to suppose or to suggest that our name "Christian" sets us above or apart from any other human being. The One who made us his own, can and surely will make them -- whoever and whatever they are -- his own too. Thanks be to God!

Our job as Christians is not to change what other people think and believe in order to get them into heaven. Our job as Christians is to change what we think and believe in order to heal the wounds that have divided person from person and all of us from God, and to make of this world the place of blessing that God intends it to be.