



Dr. Marvin R. Wilson



Dr. Marvin R. Wilson is the Harold J. Ockenga Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Gordon College, Wenham, MA. He holds an M.A. (1961) and Ph.D. (1963) in Semitics and Mediterranean Studies from Brandeis University. His teaching specialty is Old Testament, Jewish Studies, and the Hebraic origins of Christianity.

Wilson's extensively used textbook *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* was singled out by *Christian Century* magazine as an "all-time bestseller" in the field of religion. In 2000, a highly-awarded TV documentary with the title "Jews & Christians: A Journey of Faith" was produced which was based on Wilson's book.

Wilson has written or edited nine books—the most recent *A Time to Speak: The Evangelical-Jewish Encounter*, coedited with Rabbi A. James Rudin—and more than 200 articles. In his more than four decades of teaching, he has been honored five times with the "Excellence in Teaching" award.

Wilson is actively involved in building bridges of understanding between Christians and Jews. He organized and cochaired four national conferences of Christians and Jews (1975, 1980, 1984, 1995). He serves on the Committee on Church Relations and the Holocaust at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C. The Jewish Federation has twice honored Wilson with its Holocaust Center Interfaith Service Award and its Shield of Abraham trophy for creative interfaith programming.

S *habbat Shalom:*
Dr. Wilson, what
does Abraham
represent for you?

Marvin Wilson: Christianity 101 starts with Abraham. I think the New Testament speaks clearly on this: "If you belong to Christ, then are you Abraham's seed." Abraham is one of the key names which link the Testaments together (Matthew 1:1). Paul uses the metaphor of an olive tree to symbolize Israel. Accordingly, Abraham is the father of the Jewish people into whom all non-Jewish believers are grafted. Abraham represents the oldest and deepest root of the olive tree, Israel. The prophet Isaiah uses a different figure for Abraham: he is the rock from which all are hewn. Abraham is the first monotheist, a man who was chosen "to direct his children after him" (Genesis 18:19). So I see Abraham as a

spiritual paragon of sorts; he sets a direction for all his children in the path of the one true God. Thus, as A. J. Heschel correctly observed, Abraham is not an idea or a principle but is a “life to be

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continued . . . We are Abraham.” In what sense is this possible? Well, I believe Abraham represents more than a physical seed; his name is synonymous with a covenantal relationship between God and man. Bound by blood (circumcision) to that covenant, through this one man Abraham (the particular), God plans to bless all people (the universal). El Shaddai, Abraham’s God, commissions Abraham and his people, as it were, to be a channel of gifts to the world. We Christians see Jesus as the most striking and important of those gifts. As Abraham’s family is enlarged and expanded among the nations, that family is called to embrace and live out the virtues of this exemplary patriarch. Thus Abraham’s life is that of a representative character; he serves as a model of one “whose faith and actions were working together” (James 2:22). The Psalms succinctly characterize Abraham in three words: “the LORD’s servant.” Regrettably, the church has often related to the Jew with an arrogant attitude; it must change its ways and seek to emulate the servant-like actions of father Abraham. This means we in the church, as members of Abraham’s expanded

spiritual family, must be a just and compassionate people, willing to intercede with God on behalf of the unrighteous of our generation as Abraham did for those in Sodom in his day. To have a servant’s heart is to be willing like father Abraham to care for those different from us. I believe if we take our Abrahamic connection seriously, we will more and more reflect in some very concrete ways the positive virtues and exemplary lifestyle of this extraordinary human being. He is our father; we are his children. We cannot escape our identity, struggle as we must do with what this means.

Shabbat Shalom: The title of your most popular book is *Our Father Abraham* (William B. Eerdmans, Publisher). What was on your mind when you chose this title? What message do you want to convey with it?

Marvin Wilson: I am very grateful and encouraged at the ongoing response to this study text from both the Christian and Jewish

*From Abraham the Israelites received
“the courage to be a minority.”*

communities. The book is now in its fifteenth printing and recently was made into a two-hour television documentary titled “Jews and Christians: A Journey of Faith.” The documentary, which captures many of the themes of *Our Father Abraham*, has aired on most public broadcasting stations around the country and is available on video or DVD with the detailed, time-coded study guide I prepared. I love the opening scene, one we filmed in Israel; it depicts Abraham riding his camel on top of a hill in the rugged Judean desert toward the close of the day. In the background is heard the “Our

Father Abraham” theme song for strings, specially composed for the television program. When I began the manuscript of *Our Father Abraham* I intended to title it “The Root That Supports You,” an expression from Romans 11 which alludes to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the deepest faith-filled patriarchal roots of the olive tree (Israel). At the last minute, however, shortly before the book went to press, my publisher called me suggesting a possible change to “Our Father Abraham.” For some time I had set my heart on the other title, so it took me a few weeks to become convinced a change would be wise. I am very glad in the end we all agreed to make the switch to “Our Father Abraham.” Why? I think the expression has a warm biblical ring to it (Luke 1:73; John 8:53; Acts 7:2). I also like “Our Father Abraham” because it is not abstract but personal and living; it epitomizes the deep spiritual link every Christian has with the Jewish people. At the

heart of Scripture is relationship. But I believe the relationship of Christianity to Judaism is more than seeking to relate to theological concepts and teachings; it is to relate to a people. “Our Father Abraham” is a reminder every Christian has a “people connection”; we non-Jews are wild olive branches grafted into Israel. Israel’s history in a real sense is our history, its heroes of faith are our heroes, its living and active God is our God. If “those who believe are children of Abraham” (Galatians 3:7) and through faith “Abraham is father of us all” (Romans 4:16), then I think we had better get to

know our relatives; there should be a “family resemblance” between Christians and Jews. We have the same father, Abraham, in the family album we share. In sum, although Abraham himself is not the principal focus of my book, the title, *Our Father Abraham*, I believe, describes its main thrust: an exposition on what it means for today’s Church to be part of Abraham’s spiritual family.

Shabbat Shalom: What is the difference, if any, between Christians and Jews in how they refer to Abraham? In other words, what is their different view of Abraham?

Marvin Wilson: Jews have the annual Torah reading cycle which

Christians recognize Abraham as the first person in the Bible to be called a Hebrew (Genesis 14:13). But Muslims, following the Koran, claim Abraham was not a Jew but rather the first believer of the Islamic faith. In Jewish tradition, the Abrahamic covenant is appealed to as foundational for support of Zionism: God promises the whole land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants as an “everlasting possession” (Genesis 17:8). Christians, on the other hand, tend to emphasize the more “spiritual” blessings of God’s covenant with Abraham rather than its territorial, earthly or physical dimensions. This difference is in keeping with the fact that Jews

pilgrim, his living in tents, having no homeland but anticipating a heavenly homeland. The Fourth Gospel points out that Abraham even saw Christ’s day and rejoiced in it (John 8:56). Finally, in the early Christian centuries, with the Church’s strong emphasis on supersessionism and replacement theology, the Church tragically moved toward a Christian Abraham who disinherited his children, the Jews.

Shabbat Shalom: Here is a question from your book that you like Christians to consider: What does it mean to claim spiritual kinship with Abraham and the Jewish people? What does it mean for you?

Marvin Wilson: First and foremost it means for me to acknowledge with a true sense of indebtedness, appreciation and thankfulness the spiritual gifts which I have received from Abraham and the Jewish people. Indeed the New Testament affirms, “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). As a Christian, everything important and of eternal spiritual value has been bequeathed to me through the Jews. My value system, ethics, concept of worship, creation, covenant, faith, justice, kingdom of God, resurrection, and my view of history which sees this world moving toward a great and glorious climax—all these and more derive from Jewish minds and pens. In short, Jews wrote the Book and a Hebrew Lord is head of the Church. All this means I would be greatly impoverished without the vast spiritual legacy of the original Abrahamic people. For Christians, spiritual kinship with the Jewish people is to acknowledge and understand we grew out of them, not they out of us; it is to be so closely

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focuses each fall on Abraham in fifteen chapters of the Genesis narrative. Thus no serious Torah-reading Jew can escape several intense, concentrated weeks of studying Abraham each year. The Jewish commentaries speak in virtual unison that Abraham is the founder of the Jewish faith, the first Jew. Abraham is the one who breaks with the pagan deities of his age and embraces monotheism; he becomes the first great missionary in the world. In the words of Samson Raphael Hirsch, from Abraham the Israelites received “the courage to be a minority.” In Judaism, Abraham becomes a supreme inspiring example of dedication to God, recalled especially at Rosh Hashanah in the story of the binding of Isaac. In Christianity, the story of Isaac, Abraham’s beloved son, is reflected in the sacrifice of Jesus, God’s beloved Son. Both Jews and

usually place greatest emphasis on their physical or natural descent from Abraham whereas Christians tend to emphasize the spiritual or faith connection. Jews refer to circumcision as the “covenant of Abraham.” Circumcision is the oldest rite of the Jewish people, truly a “covenant in the flesh.” For Christians, however, the New Testament turns circumcision into a spiritual figure, namely “circumcision of the heart,” a work accomplished through the indwelling Holy Spirit. There are yet other differences in how Christians view Abraham. For example, it is Abraham’s faith, obedience and trust in God which is pivotal for the New Testament writers: “He (Abraham) obeyed and went even though he did not know where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). Accordingly, Christian teaching places particular emphasis on Abraham’s life as a

related that when Jews feel pain we as Christians hurt; it is to understand on the deepest level our interconnectedness to them. Abraham's God is our God. The Jewish Scriptures are the backbone of the biblical canon which guides our lives. Our calling is to understand and live the teachings of Jesus, a Jewish rabbi from Nazareth. For Christians to have kinship with the Jewish people is to acknowledge shared roots, common ancestry and a profound family likeness. By this I mean we have the same grandparent (Israelite religion of Moses, David and the prophets), the same parent (Second Temple Judaism, the religion of Jesus and the Twelve), and we have been engaged in an intense sibling rivalry (synagogue and church) using similar theological vocabulary—though often nuancing it differently—for nearly two thousand years. It is no accident therefore that our commonalities as Christians and Jews far outnumber the things which divide us.

Shabbat Shalom: Abraham is called the father of believers. In what way is he father of believers?

Marvin Wilson: A great myth exists for many in today's Church, the myth that Christianity was invented out of whole cloth. Christianity began as a movement within Judaism, not apart from Judaism. During the first twenty years of the Church one had to be a Jew or convert to Judaism in order to belong to the Church. In Romans 4, Paul emphasizes that Abraham is father of all who believe—both Jews and Gentiles. Paul's position in this chapter is not one which argues that now that Jesus has come there is a new way to salvation, a new way to

acquire a right relation with God. On the contrary! Paul in effect says to the Romans, "You've got to do things Abraham's way or you have done it the wrong way." Paul then cites Genesis 15:6 in sup-

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port of his argument: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." In Paul's view, a right relation with God comes by faith, by trusting Him as Abraham did. His was a pilgrim attitude of relying on God and His word. Abraham had no biblical text to go by. As father of believers, Abraham thus sets a pattern for all believers to come. In sum, Abraham is a paradigm of faith. He walked by faith. But faith, to Abraham, was

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more than an attitude of trusting God; faith was also an action. It is really a hollow presumption to claim Abraham as father and not do his deeds. Abraham ventured into the unknown with the full expectation that God would be there to meet him. He left Ur and God "found his heart faithful" (Nehemiah 9:8). On the deepest spiritual level Christians understand the fatherhood of Abraham

in relation to belief in Christ and obedience to his words.

Shabbat Shalom: How could we explain that hatred disputes exist among the three Abrahamic faiths?

Marvin Wilson: Abraham is a mixed blessing. By this I mean he becomes a point of both convergence and divergence for the three monotheistic religions. I do not believe Abraham himself is the problem. Rather disputes are often fueled because those who have sought to make Abraham exclusively theirs have in the process demonized the others. Children do not always follow in the exact same path as the parent; sometimes they radically differ. The three Abrahamic faiths worked over the Abrahamic materials for their own interpretive purpose. Each religion took Abraham and adopted him in some unique or special way: Jews, primarily through rabbinic sources, Christians, through the New Testament and Islam, through the Koran. Over time, hatred disputes have emerged due to pride, arrogance and intolerance. I believe these disputes happen all the more when a group claims it has a divine word or holy sanction to support its point of view. Too often, divinely revealed absolutes become theological nonnegotiables which leave little space for recognizing the conflicting claims of another and treating that one with justice, compassion and respect. Judaism, Christianity and Islam may claim Abraham as father but, in the opinion of each respective faith, the adherents of the other Abrahamic faiths may not live and act in a manner becoming to the patriarch. Such is frequently the case when radicals and extremists within each group

make political and nationalistic agendas of more importance than doing what is just, right and promotes the good of all humanity. Having a “divine mandate” to support what amounts to hateful or terrorist actions of one religion towards the other does not annul the priority of justice and the need to

love one’s neighbor. I think the great paradox about the religions who look to Abraham as father is that they are usually selective in what they emphasize and teach about him. For example, they may find common ground in Abraham’s rejection of pagan idols or in his obedient response to the God who called him. But if Abraham is the best possible figure for “peacemaker” among the three faiths, why is there not more interest in Abraham the servant, Abraham the model of Middle Eastern hospitality, Abraham the man who compassionately pleads with God in behalf of a people (the Sodomites) who were different from him? It seems to me these and other aspects of Abraham’s life could be discussed with profit by religious educators when dealing with the theme of what we teach about each other.

Shabbat Shalom: How could the knowledge that Abraham is our father help in the present Jewish-Moslem conflict?

Marvin Wilson: I think that instead of battling over Abraham with a point of view which insists, “Abraham is ours, not yours,” or warring over the land promised Abraham’s descendants,

or fighting over Abraham and Sarah’s burial plot, the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron, Jews and Muslims must come together and find renewed meaning in

Abraham’s name. Abram (“exalted father”) becomes Abraham (“father of many”) precisely because God intended to enlarge the covenant and fulfill His promise that through Abraham “all

peoples on earth will be blessed.” The word “father” in the ancient Near East meant a position of respect, honor and sovereignty. The patriarch had life-and-death control over his family, the binding of Isaac being but one notable example from Abraham’s life. Just as the Rechabites (Jeremiah 35) continued unswervingly to honor the memory of their ancestor (“We have obeyed everything our forefather Jonadab son of Rechab commanded us”—verse 8), so these peacemaking words of Father Abraham must be honored, “Please let there be no strife between you and me” (Genesis 13:8). Jesus emphasizes that to be authentic children of Abraham

one must do the works of Abraham. Deeds reveal true parentage. In the spirit of father Abraham, strife between Jews and Muslims must eventually give way to a willingness to sacrifice what is most cherished, dearest or best in life—even life itself. Jews and Muslims must be willing—whatever the cost—to risk their best

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for peace in the spirit of their father Abraham. Will the present Jewish-Muslim conflict ever be resolved? I believe it will. Abraham is an eschatological figure, a symbol of hope. In the Christian Scriptures Abraham appears at a heavenly banquet sitting at table with the righteous; people come from the four corners of the earth; it is a banquet prepared for all peoples (Luke 13: 28,29; cf. Isaiah 25:6). This is in accord with Isaiah’s vision of peace (chap. 19) where Egyptians and Assyrians and the people of Israel worship together and are all “a blessing on the earth.” Here is the ultimate triumph of Abraham. The struggle of Abraham’s children is not permanent; in the end God’s kingdom will prevail over all.

Shabbat Shalom: What should we do to promote a better understanding of our ties as children of Abraham?

Marvin Wilson: First, we need to educate the Church that our self-identity as Christians is directly tied to Abraham and the Jewish people. All too frequently Christian identity is found in a denomination, one of the Reformers or Church Fathers, or in an influential contemporary movement within the Church. Without Israel the Church would collapse; we grow out of them, the venerable people of God, not they out of us. This means a paradigm shift is needed in the thinking of those Christians who see no vital connection between the Church and Judaism. The roots of Christianity run deep into the soil of Judaism. Christians who are content to

pluck only the flower, but have little or no appreciation of the root system and stem, end up with a faded and often diseased understanding of Christianity. I believe the Church must educate believers that the Old Testament is foundational to everything in the New. As children of Abraham, our ties to the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) ought to give us a point of unity which must take precedence over our denominational diversity. The Bible is of Semitic origin and Christianity is Jewish. Christians must come to understand that the foundation “rocks” upon which our faith is built are more than Peter (Matthew 16:18) and Jesus (Ephesians 2:20); Abraham is also one of these rocks (Isaiah 51:1, 2). This metaphor therefore suggests that Father Abraham is not optional for Christians, for he represents the solid, reliable and enduring bedrock upon which we, his children, must find common support for building our future. I have emphasized that education is the vital key to building understanding. But in addition to the Church studying its Hebraic biblical heritage and the Jewishness of Jesus, the Church must also engage the Jewish community in dialogue. This means building Christian-Jewish relations by activities such as rabbi-pastor pulpit exchanges, joint commemoration of *Yom Hashoah* or *Kristallnacht*, and taking inter-faith tours to Israel. Also in-depth understanding of our Abrahamic ties may come through reading and discussing the Torah face-to-face with the Jewish community whose ancestor was the original Abraham in the flesh.

Shabbat Shalom: Which event in Abraham’s life touches you

most? Why?

Marvin Wilson: I find many events very moving. Among them are Abraham pleading with God over the destruction of Sodom and the testing of Abraham’s faith in the binding of Isaac. But the event which probably touches me most on a personal level is Genesis 24, where Abraham secures a wife for Isaac. The marriage of Isaac is an issue of great concern to Abraham. I am impressed with how he is taken up with the details, especially seeking God’s guidance in the matter. After praying, Abraham’s chief servant (probably Eliezer) is sent to the home country to find the woman God had for Isaac. The part of the story I like best is the last verse of the chapter, “Isaac brought her [Rebekah] into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her.”

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Within the Jewish community this verse has been a marked text for centuries. It puts an emphasis on the need for love to come after marriage, not simply before. In the modern West, we have placed more emphasis on marrying the person we love rather than learning to love the one we marry. In this first biblical example of an arranged marriage, we encounter another dimension of Abraham’s

world. Here we are reminded that in the Eastern culture of patriarchal times love was more a commitment than a feeling; it was a pledge rather than an emotional high. Few of us would like to turn the clock back to Abraham’s time. Who would want to live in his tent or a tent beside him? We must not forget, however, the timeless truth found in this beautiful story of the marriage of Abraham’s son Isaac. This modern, sensate world in which we live often equates feeling with love, something which can be deceiving. While the Bible affirms the goodness of the romantic side of love (witness the Song of Songs), there is another side to love which the Bible also strongly underscores. It is found in this story. We are reminded that once Rebekah’s veil comes off, she and Isaac had to commit themselves to start growing in love with each other. “So she became his wife, and he loved her.” First the pledge, then the feeling, an important emphasis needed for balance and the preservation of marriage in any age.

*This interview was conducted by Martin Pröbstle.