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A Brief History Of The God Of Abraham

*Dedicated to the memory of Lot's wife – a loving woman, forgotten by history
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LONG AGO AND FAR AWAY - somewhere in the highlands of East Africa, Homo sapiens first appeared - a better looking species than the Neanderthal Man - definitely better posture and a lot more intelligent. It didn't take long before these smart new human beings ventured out of their caves, gazed at the stars, and migrated to every continent on earth.

This is where our saga begins...

During the ensuing millennia mankind invents the wheel, harnesses the power of fire, and masters the rudiments of crop rotation, with only minimal guidance from stone idols or flying dragons - rarely seeking help from an omnipotent deity, certainly not one who demands that you sacrifice your first born child or grovel before him (or her, or it).

Aside from occasional plagues, pestilence, famine, and skirmishes with neighboring clans (usually over the carcass of a woolly mammoth - or the favors of a local virgin) life is tranquil and relatively uneventful, with the exception of two colossal events: (1) a major flood where the human race is miraculously saved from extinction by Noah, a descendant of Adam, who builds a gigantic ark and convinces all land animals to be fruitful and multiply, and (2) the complete and total destruction of Sodom (the birth-place of sodomy) and Gomorrah - two sexually perverse little towns, and the related story of Lot's wife, who refuses to listen to the advice of an angel and foolishly looks back to catch a glimpse of the carnage and rubble, whereupon she is turned into a pillar of salt.

Not long after the salt incident (which nobody actually saw because if they were stupid enough to look back they'd also be turned into a pillar of salt) things were about to change, **big time!**



One starry night in Ur, an obscure village in Babylonia, an elderly shepherd named Abraham told his friends, neighbors, and anyone who would listen, that Yahweh (*the original name of God*) "spoketh unto him" whilst he was tending a flock of sheep and made an offer he couldn't refuse. According to the terms of this agreement, known to history as the "Covenant of Abraham," all male infants had to be circumcised.

"Say what?" exclaimed Abraham's friends. "Haven't we told you to go easy on the giggle juice?"

Side note: Not that it matters – but according to Genesis: 20:10, Abraham's wife, Sarah, was his half-sister (*same father, different mother*) - he also shared his marital bed with two concubines - Hagar and Keturah.

The old shepherd, soon to be revered as the "Patriarch," raised a goat-skin flask in the air and proclaimed, "let the word go forth - as a reward for this small token of love the children of Ur shall be known now and forever as the 'Chosen People,' blessed by Yahweh with a beautiful new home in the 'Promised Land' of Canaan."

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

"That sounds great," responded the people of Ur, "but what about the Canaanites? Are they OK with this? And what does your friend Yahweh say about your sleeping arrangements?"

Abraham grumbled. "Methinks my private life is not thy concern – a man's home is his castle. So sayeth Yahweh."

"C'mon Abe – you know he didn't say that." The men winked and the women blushed.

"Well, if he didn't – somebody else did." Abraham smiled, a sheepish grin. "And as for the Canaanites - we'll cross that bridge when we get to it." Then, with a far away look in his eyes as though he could see into the future, he glanced upward to the stars. "Imagine there's a heaven up there instead of only sky."

The people were confused. "What's a heaven?"

But many were comforted by Abraham's prescient vision, especially those who lost friends and relatives in Sodom and Gomorrah – those who feared that Ur was next in line, headed for the same fate (*for the same reasons*). There were also a few skeptics in the village - young libertines who argued that crawling abjectly on the ground, cowering before an invisible god, was regressive - a roadblock to free-thought.

"What the hell is free-thought?" exclaimed the supporters of Abraham.

After several days of bickering many of the local herders (*drinking buddies of Abraham*) started blowing loud riffs on their ram's horns.



Side note: According to local gossip, a few of the horn blowers were having carnal knowledge of Keturah, the younger concubine of Abraham.

And the people bowed and prayed when they heard the shrill sound of the horns – men danced in the street and women shouted: "start packing, we're moving to Canaan."

Thus began monotheism, an auspicious new chapter in the history of mankind.

Unfortunately, the faithful supporters of Abraham, who called themselves Hebrews, would not live to reach the Promised Land because the Patriarch's great grandson, Joseph, known in Ur for wearing the same multi-colored robe every day, told the people of his village to go forth unto the land of Egypt to avoid a seven-year famine that he foresaw in a dream (*bad decision*). The Hebrews (*now called Israelites*) were forced into bondage to help the Pharaohs build a few pyramids.

Eventually, a tall handsome prince who looked like a Greek god came to the rescue and infested the land with boils, locusts, and frogs (*plus a few other plagues*) and renegotiated Abraham's contract with Yahweh. After a brief discussion with a burning bush, ten amendments were added to the original covenant.

"Make it eleven," said the bush. "Thou shall not eat the meat of the pig."

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

"Forsooth," responded the handsome prince, "why doth we have to stop eating pork?"

"Because I am Yahweh, king of the universe, and I sayeth so."

The Israelites took an impromptu vote and adopted all but one of the new amendments. However, prohibition of adultery was hotly debated.

"That's an infringement on our rights," complained a few vocal protestors. "What's so wicked about an occasional dalliance?"

The prince clenched his teeth. "Perhaps you prefer returning to your old jobs, lugging quarried blocks of limestone up the pyramids?" His warning struck a chord and the adultery provision was enacted, although some who voted approval did so with fingers crossed behind their back.

Finally, when all ten amendments (*plus the pork provision*) were formally ratified the Israelites cried out: "Hear us, oh handsome prince - now that we're giving up the meat of the pig and promise to stop coveting our neighbor's wives - will you please lead us out of this godforsaken land?"

"In due time," replied the prince, as he opened a golden scroll and pointed to a long parchment upon which he had inscribed 613 additional rules. And the people cast their eyes on the new rules - in wonderment and awe. Men covered their heads with tiny black skullcaps (*some wore white*) - and amidst a wail of endless chanting they codified, deified, glorified, memorized, and sanctified the sacred "Laws of Moses" - then they bowed toward the Promised Land and gave thanks to Yahweh.

"Hey, what am I, chopped liver?" exclaimed the prince. "Was it not I who wrote the 613 laws?"

And it came to pass that the handsome young prince grew a distinguished gray beard as he patiently mediated scores of trivial disputes between those who wore black skullcaps and those who wore white - always looking to the heavens for celestial signs and omens. At last, when the planets and stars were properly aligned, the bearded prince confronted Pharaoh and demanded: "**Let my people go.**"

To the surprise of everyone the mighty Pharaoh (*annoyed by the boils, locusts, and frogs*) agreed to the exodus and proclaimed: "So let it be written; so let it be done."

After a brief interlude of mirth and merriment the Israelites fled from Egypt faster than a speeding chariot, even faster than bread could leaven. They passed through the parted waters of the Red Sea and wandered 40 years in the desert until finally reaching the long awaited "Promised Land," albeit 600 years had passed since the original agreement with Yahweh.

Fast forward 1,000 years after arrival in Canaan. The land came to be known as Judaea and the Israelites changed their name to "Judeans" - eventually shortened to "Jews," with the women referred to as "Jewesses" - and from the seed of former slaves arose prophets, judges, kings, and legendary heroes: a blind man with long hair who tore down the pillars of a pagan temple, a boy who slew a Philistine giant with a slingshot, and a wise king who settled a custody dispute by proposing that a baby

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

should be cut in half. But all was not milk and honey in the “Promised Land” - a tiny country trapped in the crossroads of history, easy prey for every passing conqueror on the road to somewhere else - most recently, the powerful legions of the Roman Empire.



And it came to pass, during the reign of Augustus Caesar, that a bright star appeared in the eastern sky to herald the arrival of a holy infant, a Jewish boy named Yeshua, born in a manger in Bethlehem unto a virgin mother whose husband, a carpenter named Joseph, was from the lineage of King David. And, like his virtuous mother, the boy remained celibate and lived at home in the village of Nazareth working as an apprentice carpenter until the age of 33 - at which time he wandered into the wilderness where he met a strange looking man who subsisted on a diet of honey and locusts. The young carpenter was so inspired that he changed his name from Yeshua (*too Jewish*) to Jesus and embarked upon a new career, performing miracles and preaching to the downtrodden masses in the hills and hamlets of Judaea.

And wherever Jesus of Nazareth spoke fishermen, tax collectors, and poor people followed - and he came to be known by many names and appellations - the Christ, the savior, the way, the truth, the light, the Nazarene, prince-of-peace, king of kings (*that one got him in trouble*) lord, father, teacher, rabbi, redeemer, son-of-god, son-of-man, or the long awaited messiah.

“Hosanna,” the women cried, and the men shouted “Hallelujah” when the charismatic rabbi embellished his sermons and allegorical tales with inspiring miracles: he walked on water, cured lepers, resurrected dead people, and turned water into wine (*that was always a crowd pleaser*). And the people were overcome with emotion when Jesus foretold of a world to come where they would dwell in the Kingdom of God (*no longer called Yahweh*) and sit at the footsteps of his marble throne forever and ever until the end of time.

The itinerant rabbi concluded his historic mission in Jerusalem during the Passover holiday where he conducted a private Seder and asked the timeless question, “why is this night different from all other nights?” Then, after sipping a few cups of wine, he confided with twelve close friends and told them he was the anointed one, the long awaited messiah - unfortunately, one of his trusted companions made a side deal with the Romans. We all know the rest of this story. It didn’t have a happy ending.

Several years after the visionary Nazarene died on a cross at Cavalry (*a suburb of Jerusalem*) a Greek Jew, who never met him except in a “vision” on the road to Damascus, changed his name from Saul (*too Jewish*) to Paul and traveled far and wide, to every corner of the Roman Empire, converting pagans to Christianity, an easy sell since he offered eternal life combined with the blessings of God and his only begotten son - without circumcision (smart move). And to sweeten the deal, Paul also eliminated the Jewish prohibition of pork.

“Sounds good,” said several ‘freethinking’ pagans (*descendants of the ancient ‘libertines’ from Ur*), “but is it really necessary for us to obey 613

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

Moses laws? Surely, thou must know, with only ten fingers we cannot count past ten.”

Paul looked to the heavens to ponder this provocative question - and when he finished pondering he gazed upon his ten wiggling fingers: “Friends, pagans, and freethinking libertines – hear my words and hear them well. Unless you prefer spending eternity writhing and screaming in excruciating pain, roasting in the blistering dungeon of perdition, you must cleanse your soul from the sin of Adam - and you can’t do that by chanting 613 man-made laws whilst facing Jerusalem. Yay, verily – ten Commandments are sufficient - but thou must be ‘born again’ - however, fear not! That isn’t very complicated - all that’s necessary is a quick dip in a lake, lagoon, creek, canal, pond, river, brook, bay, bayou, spring or stream. But not the sea. You need fresh water to wash away sin - a fresh start in life.”

“What the hell is perdition?” exclaimed the pagans, idol worshipers, and libertines.

Paul smiled. “I think you’ve answered your own question.”

Then, from among the naysayers rose an old man whose face was pocked and gnarled by the wrinkles of time – whose hand trembled as he raised a bag of drachmas high above his head - and the people listened intently as the old man jingled the coins and told his tale of woe. “Oh great prophet, my profession is that of thievery and skullduggery – an ancient profession that I learned from my father and he, from his father before him. Recently, while in Jerusalem attending a sermon by Peter, your competitor, I stole this large bag of silver coins from a basket that was circulating among his followers – easy money - like taking candy from a baby. Thus, I came here today intending to abscond with your donation basket. However, I was so moved by your epiphany that I changed my mind and decided to give these ill begotten drachmas to you. But, now I have second thoughts - I worry that it might be a sin to rob Peter to pay Paul?”

Without hesitation, Paul reached forth and grabbed the bag of coins from the hand of the wrinkled old man. “Good sir - It is no wonder that your face looks like a prune. Nay – like a crumpled piece of parchment - you worry too much.”

And it came to pass that the Christians hated the Jews even though the icon of the new religion was a messianic rabbi who preached to other Jews about the benefits of being a good Jew, a sacred martyr who was often called “King of the Jews.” (*go figure*).

Meanwhile, as Paul and his growing legion of converts clashed with local Jews, Christianity hit a bump in the road in Rome where a deadly fire was destroying the city. The mad emperor Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus blamed the Christians and played his fiddle while the city burned to the ground. Paul was beheaded and many of his followers were fed to the lions.



Five centuries after Paul, in the remote village of Mecca, the shifting sands of the Arabian desert opened a portal for a new “messenger-of-god,” Aba al-Qasim Muhammad ibn Abdullah, known to history as

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

Muhammad - a middle-age man with 15 wives (*never more than nine at the same time*).

As told in the Qur'an: the enlightenment of the Prophet Muhammad began on the "Night of Power" when he entered a cave in order to meditate and contemplate the direction of his life and the world around him - whence he was told by an angel (*the same angel who told the Virgin Mary she was with child*) that he was descended from Abraham, the legendary "Patriarch" - through Hagar, his elder concubine. Upon learning of his divine ancestry the "son-of-the-desert" adopted the Jewish ritual of circumcision and the ban on pork. He also changed God's name to Allah and united hordes of tribesmen and nomadic herders, loosely referred to as Muslims, into a new religion called Islam.

As an added bonus, Muhammad made a few improvements to the Christian vision of heaven - does anyone really want to sit at the base of a marble throne with millions of dead people waiting for the apocalypse? Muslim heaven would be a lush garden with rivers and streams and unlimited water, no talking snakes, and those who were most righteous during their lifetime would be granted eternal companionship of a beautiful young virgin.

And from the seed of camel drivers and basket weavers arose conquering armies, philosophers, and astronomers who knew the earth orbited the sun (*eight centuries before Galileo was excommunicated for coming to the same conclusion*) - and bearded mathematicians who would develop algebra, Arabic numbers, and a nondescript little circle to serve as the symbolic representation of zero. However, Christian mathematicians, who still used Roman numerals and thought it was blasphemy to use long division, scoffed at the little circle. "What's the big deal about zero? It's nothing!" Whereupon the Muslims responded to the scoffing: "OK - if you're so smart let's see you solve simultaneous equations using Roman numerals." But the Christian mathematicians were annoyed with this heresy and ended the intellectual dispute. "If God, in his infinite wisdom, wanted those equations to be solved he would provide the solution. But, what's an equation?"

Side-note: In addition to religious and military prowess, Muhammad achieved fame for the wisdom of his avant-garde philosophy, especially a profound comment about a mountain. According to Muslim folklore the "great prophet" tried to convince a mountain to come to him but the mountain wouldn't move, so he said, "what the heck - if the mountain doesn't go to Muhammad then Muhammad will go to the mountain."

And it came to pass that the followers of Islam despised the pork-eating Christians and the Christians detested the circumcised Muslims - even though both religions worshiped the God of Abraham. And of course, everyone was suspicious of the Jews, known as the "people of the book."

After a few crusades and holy wars between Christianity and Islam theological schisms split the burgeoning Christian religion into three divergent factions: (1) Roman Catholics, who praised the Son of God by tapping a finger up, down, and across their chest from left to right, (2) Greek Orthodox, who sought rapture by crossing themselves in reverse,

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

from right to left, and (3) Protestants, who lambasted crossing in either direction as blasphemy.



Today, as we navigate the winding road of the twenty-first century — organized religion is locked in a power struggle with “secular humanism” - while mankind, bored with the vacuum of loneliness, has turned to social media to find inner peace, the meaning of life, and remedies for erectile dysfunction. The Promised Land, now known as the State of Israel, is inhabited by Israelis and Palestinians who can’t get along even though they both read from right to left, practice circumcision, and prohibit pork. Alas, the Land of Canaan, which Yahweh promised to the “Chosen People,” has become the spiritual epicenter (*eye of the storm*) for three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In retrospect, as I conclude this brief chronicle of the God of Abraham, I am consumed by one compelling conundrum - how was mankind able to love, laugh, dance in the rain, and cope with the anxieties of existence during the first 95 percent of its history, before the revelations of five larger-than-life prophets (Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Paul, and Muhammad) - before the “Covenant of Abraham?”

Unfortunately, theologians and ecclesiastic scholars have ignored this soul searching question – choosing instead to debate how many angels could dance on the head of a pin - but poets, whose poems do not rhyme, and artists, who see the world as a collage of abstract refractions, and “freethinking libertines,” who quote from Karl Marx and Groucho Marx – tell us that the answer is written in the stars – known only on the other side. If that’s the case, I’ll wait my turn. In the meantime, I’ll heed the warning of Lot’s wife and never look back.

“Those are my principles, and if you don’t like them ...well, I have others.”
(Groucho Marx)