

Abraham and Sarah

First Steps in Realism

While the story of Adam and Eve is about the flight of humanity from realism into a despair-riddled state of affairs East of Eden, the story of Abraham and Sarah is about the human journey toward realism—a dialogue with the Primal Reality—a journey of the feet in companionship with the Ultimate Profoundness.

The first step Abram and Sarah took was to leave hierarchical civilization for the road. They were raised in a city called “Ur,” a central city in what is now southern Iraq. They left their parents and siblings and traveled west. They lived in tents and they raised sheep. In his dialogues with Ultimacy, Abram, so the story goes, had heard the promise that he would become in this venture the father of descendants as numerous as the grains of sand on the sea shore.

This adventuresome pair left all their previous lives, not knowing where they were going. They ended up somewhere in the Mediterranean coastal area now called Israel or Palestine. The pair was slow in finding the promised fatherhood that would entitle Abram to take the name “Abraham.” Little did they understand that just continuing this dialogue with Ultimacy was preparing them for this fatherhood.

The myths of Abraham feed off of an actual historical journey of a culture of people in the years following 1800 BCE. These myths of Abraham begin to be written up as lasting tradition around 1000 BCE. The Abraham myths embody a “primal religious metaphor” that characterized that region of the planet long before the Abraham myths were composed and remembered. These strange stories of Abraham and Sarah reflect a particular “primal religious metaphor” and assist us to see what a “primal religious metaphor” is.

The “Abrahamic-Dialogue” metaphor was made from temporal content found mostly from the interpersonal approach to approximate truth—that is, this particular primal religious metaphor uses the I-to-I type of relation—a person-to-person type of mythic devise. The Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, spoke of this as the I-Thou relation and applied his careful thinking to both our person to person human life as well as to our human to the Profound Reality relation. The I-Thou myth or poetry is found throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures in which we see, first of all, these human conversations with Yahweh—a personification of Profound Reality.

In one of his stories Abraham is pictured as having an explicit dialogue with Profound Reality in which Abraham is in an outright bargaining with Profound Reality (Yahweh) over how many righteous humans in the horrifically wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah it would take to save these cities from their coming destruction. We see Abraham concerned for the lives of his nephew Lot and his family. Abraham talks with Yahweh about all things in his life.

Following are two other illustrations of I-Thou dialogues stories. First, Abraham and Sarah are now past the age of child bearing, but still have no child though which the promise of descendants can be carried out. Then three angle-like men or men-like angels (messengers from Profound Reality) come by their tent in the heat of the day and announce that Sarah was to bear a child. Sarah laughed and Abraham apparently stared in wonder. Sarah did indeed, according to this story, bear a child. This story exaggerates how Isaac is a miracle child given by Profound Reality, but, if we think about it, this is true of all children. And though all children are the gift of Profound Reality, this child Isaac is being viewed by Abraham as fulfilling the promise made to him by Profound Reality that he is to be the father of descendants as numerous as the grains of sand on the sea shore.

The next Abraham story that I am going to cite has had whole books written about it. Both theologians and philosophers have argued about it until the present day. Like the other stories, this preposterous story is a myth shaped with the ancient I-Thou-relation primal religious metaphor. In this story, Abraham in his ongoing conversations with Profound Reality becomes aware that all the gifts from Profound Reality have to be given back to Profound Reality, including the gift of Isaac that is so central to Abraham's whole life. Abraham sees this awareness of giving back as his own command to be the very knife that gives Isaac back. So he proceeds to make this sacrifice.

This story seems outlandish, but let us notice that it is true that all parents have to give back their children to Profound Reality—if not with the death of their children, then within their children's life time to face the simple fact of their children will grow up and go about their own lives. This entails a type of giving-them-up that challenges all parents. Abraham grasps somehow that not clinging to Isaac is part of his Profound-Reality dialogue. In the completion of this strange story, Profound Reality appears to say to Abraham with the appearance of a goat trapped in the next bush, "OK you have done the command of giving up Isaac, I am providing you the goat in yonder bush for your symbol of this needed sacrifice. Abraham grasps this as Profound Reality doing a re-giving of Isaac to be his hope of continuing the promise of Profound Reality for numerous descendants.

As we look back on this story in the context of an I-Thou dialogue with Profound Reality, we see that this *giving back to the giver the gifts given by the Giver* is really the seed that Abraham is passing along to so many other humans. Abraham's descendants are those who live out *"the spirit seed of giving back all gifts to the Giver."* The Genesis and Exodus stories continue this narrative of such descendants coming to pass through Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and an ongoing mighty chorus of Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious practitioners (women and men) who came to see and still see Abraham as their spirit ancestor. In this century the women are fleshing out the role of Sarah in these old stories that have neglecting her role in this adventurous parenting.

Within these extremely old myths we can see the outlines of a powerful primal religious metaphor that is foundational for all three of these Arabian-origin religious heritages. The Abrahamic primal metaphor is made from the ordinary I-thou dialogue learnings of humanity and applying those wisdoms metaphorically to an I-Thou dialogue with Profound Reality. This heritage has not been easy for twenty-first century people to embrace and to practice religiously. Much of the difficulty has been mistaking the symbol "Thou," when used to reference "Profound Reality" for a dialogue partner, as a literal Personage resident in a literal other-world or a second-level universe. Most of us know, secretly perhaps, that this is spooky talk, even oppressive talk in our culture today. Therefore, for all practical purposes, we may be secretly or openly dismissing all three of these widely practiced religions as superstition.

There is a middle way between the extreme idolizing of a literalist view of Yahweh and a complete rejection of all three of these heritages. If we view this primal "I-Thou" religious metaphor as simply a metaphor that is being constructed by humans from part of our ordinary knowledge to use metaphorically to illuminate the Mysterious Reality we actually confront, then we can find our way again toward reporting how our experience of Profound Reality can be an ongoing dialogue. We can join Abraham and Sarah in their adventure in realism. This very ancient religious metaphor can come alive for us and unite us with millions of great souls who have used this metaphor in a metaphorical way in the ages before us. This attitude of consciousness is indeed happening today among the best theologizing going on in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic communities of contemporary reflection across the planet.