

The Significans of Abraham for Jews, Christians and Muslims

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Dear participants of our conference,

I was asked to formulate a few thoughts on the significans of Abraham for Jews, Christians and Muslims. I thank you for the invitation and I am happy to do so.

1. Talking about other religions ...

Talking about other religions to their members is not an easy task. There have been too many misunderstandings in history. I am aware of that. Ultimately, you can never completely leave your point of view in your own religion and its context. So allow me to speak to you as a Catholic theologian and biblical scholar, and one, unfortunately, with poor knowledge of English.

2. Controversy about Abraham

Karl-Josef Kuschel has named his important book, in which he presented common and different traditions and images of Abraham in the three religions, tellingly, “Streit um Abraham”ⁱ – “Controversy about Abraham”. He shows in detail how similar, but also how different the Jewish, Christian and Muslim Abraham are.

Therefore, in recent times, criticism of "Abraham" as an interreligious bracket and basis of the dialogue between the three monotheistic religions has been expressed. Attention is drawn not only to the different representations of Abraham, but also to the different status that he occupies in each of the three. Abraham even was brought up in history to *de-legitimize* the other religions.

When we speak about Abraham in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the aim cannot be to level these differences or look for the lowest common denominator. Nor is it about a construction

in which the three religions are made up according to an “Abraham paradigm” that misses the essence of each religion.

Rather, central traditions about Abraham should be made aware, with a view to the question to what extent this common heritage facilitates encounter and dialogue, perhaps even obliges to it. *Differences* in the various images of Abraham do not need to be a disturbance here, but rather bring out Abraham's own profile in each religion more clearly and can thus – at least in part – also be enriching for the other traditions.

3. Abraham in the three monotheistic religions

First I would like to emphasize: Judaism, Christianity and Islam belong to a common and multiply networked tradition, of course in a historical sequence.

- The starting point for our question about Abraham is the Bible of the Jewish people, which contains the original stories about him in the Book of *Bereshit* or *Genesis*.
- As the “Old Testament”, this Jewish Bible forms the first part of the two-fold Christian Bible, completely unchanged and independently. *This* is the Holy Scripture of Jesus and the first Christians, to which the New Testament often refers as its authoritative basis (1 Cor 15:3-5; Lk 24:13-35, etc.). That means: The Holy Scripture of Christianity include also the Abraham narratives of Genesis, and not just their inclusion and interpretation in the New Testament, as it is often perceived.
- The Koran refers in many places – in its own way and selection – to the Jewish and Christian Bibles, to which is ascribed in it a revelatory character (cf. the “Leaves of Abraham” and the “Leaves of Moses”, e.g. Sura 53; 87:14-19 ; cf. also Sura 2:136; 5:44-49; 42:13) and presuppose Jewish and Christian traditions.

Besides this strong connection of the Holy Scriptures, there is a certain distancing from the older scriptures in the more recent religions. However, this can hardly call into question a dialogue within the framework of this broad stream of tradition.

And the *process* of tradition continues lively after the canonical conclusion of the Holy Scriptures in the history of the religious communities. I would like to say: As people's lives have changed in history, their formulations of faith develop and change too. And this also

applies to the figure of Abraham. In the course of history, as just said, there are different images and weightings of Abraham *within* each of the three religions as well as *between them*. But when Judaism and Christianity speak of Abraham and Islam of Ibrahim, all three refer to the same important religious figure. It is the memory of a *common beginning*.

For the biblical tradition he stands at the threshold between the world of the nations of all humanity (Gen 1-11) and the history of the people of Israel (Gen 12ff.). So for Judaism he is “our father Abraham”, from whom Israel descends. And this also applies to the Jew Jesus, who is referred to already in the first sentence of the New Testament as “son of David” and “son of Abraham” (Mt 1:1). In the Koran and in the Islamic tradition the Arabs are traced back to Ibrahim via Ishmael and Ibrahim is of particular importance, since the Muslim faith is regarded as the “religion of Ibrahim” (*millat Ibrahim*) (e.g. Sura 2:130, 135; 3:95; 4:125; 16:120-123, etc.).

So there can be little doubt that Abraham has a *non-interchangeable* importance in the three monotheistic religions.

Let me look briefly on three aspects of Abraham or Ibrahim.

Abraham – Blessing for the Nations (Gen 12)

First: When God makes the covenant with Abraham in the book of Genesis, the line of promise is said to go through *Isaac*, his son with Sarah (Gen 17:19, 21; 21:12). This restriction responds to an important statement right at the beginning of the Abrahamic narratives, that *the peoples of the earth* should receive blessing through Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). A little later it is said that God wants to make him the father of *many peoples* (Gen 17:4f.). So, different lines are going out from Abraham.

One people besides Israel, for whom the descent from Abraham is explicitly stated in the traditions of Genesis, are the descendants of his son Ishmael, his son with Hagar. *And God promises his blessing also for him!* (Gen 17:20) To Ishmael are traced back the Arabs on the Arabian peninsula. According to the Koran, Ibrahim and his son Ishmael purified the Ka'ba, the central shrine of Islam and the essential rites of pilgrimage are connected with them (Sura 2:125-134; 22:26-29 etc.).

In a *spiritual sense* also Christians, coming out of the peoples, are looked upon as children of Abraham. So appeals Apostle Paul In the important question for early Christianity, whether those who want to join Christ from among the peoples, must first become Jews, to God's blessing for the peoples through Abraham (Gal 3).

So, there are family-ties, spiritual or genealogical, between the Abrahamic religions that go beyond one people, Israel, and one religion. And even if this openness of God's promises for the peoples through Abraham is partly obscured later on, this remains an important common heritage that reminds us of God's *universal will for salvation*, which embraces us all – but also other people and religions.

The Faith of Abraham / Passing the Trials (Gen 22)

Second: What the *faith* of Abraham means, namely *absolute trust* in God, shows one of the most impressive, but also most difficult stories about Abraham: the "Binding of Isaac" (*'Aqedat Yish'haq* in the Jewish tradition). Isaac is the long-awaited bearer of promise that God gave to Abraham and his wife Sarah. With the sacrifice of the beloved Son, the whole promise is at stake, Abraham's long journey with God over ups and downs would become – at least on the surface – pointless. Will Abraham keep in this situation the promised Son for himself or does he completely trust in God, who led him to this point and whose faithfulness he has experienced again and again? We all know how the story ends: There is no sacrifice of Isaac, God – or his messenger – hold Abraham back from it (Gen 22:12). He completely passed *the trial of his faith* by God. This is, how the story is interpreted already in its first verse (Gen 22:1). In the Jewish tradition it is the most harsh and last of ten trials of the faith of Abraham, that he passed (cf. 1 Makk 2:52; Sir 44:20; Jub 17:17f.; mAvot 5:3; Pirke deRabbi Eliezer 26).

How immense this story is, shows the multitude of text it provoked during history. A whole series of interpretations and embeddings of this narrative in Judaism, Christianity and Islam show how impressive and at the same time offensive it was at all times. The biblical tradition already suggests that this story is anything but smooth and simple, that Abraham does not just go off to sacrifice his beloved son without hesitation: The narrative vividly illustrates Abraham's deep love for Isaac. The Jewish tradition of interpretation sees the Akedah as a perfect act of obedience and trust by Abraham, but also tries in different ways to make the incomprehensible more understandable or more bearable. And in the story how it is given in

the Koran (Sura 37:99-113) the son is *included* in Abraham's decision, when he asks him about his attitude towards it (Sura 37:102-103). The father does not decide alone the fate of the child, but together they bear this burden.

In all three religious traditions, it is the deep faith of Abraham and his trust in God, that is presented as an example for Jews, Christians and Muslims, greater than you could simply grasp it.

Hospitality and peace (Gen 18; 23)

Third: One last brief look at the hospitality and peacefulness of Abraham. The beautiful story of his encounter with the three messengers of God in Mamre, which is connected with the promise of Isaac's birth, shows Abraham as a *generous host* (Gen 18; Sura 11:69-76; 15:49-56; 51:24-37 etc.). And in general the stories about him in Genesis are characterized by peacefulness. God's promise of the land to Abraham does not lead to enmity with its inhabitants. After the death of his wife Sara, he peacefully buys the grave from the landowners, in which he and the other members of his family will be buried in Hebron. When Abraham died, his two eldest sons buried him *together*: Isaac and Ishmael (Gen 23). The place is called by the Palestinians in the Holy Land: Khalil – the place of the friend. This is the special honorary title given to Abraham by *all three traditions*, the Jewish, the Christian and the Muslim: Abraham is the "friend of God" (Isa 41:8; 2 Chr 20:7; Dan 3:35; James 2:23 ; Sura 4:125), no other person is so named in the Holy Scriptures of the three religions.

4. Conclusion

We looked – even if only briefly – on different but strongly overlapping receptions of the same basic figure Abraham/Ibrahim in the rich traditions of the three religions. Throughout history, Abraham took various forms and traits, differences that have been formulated over centuries of tradition. This process has not ended yet. We are part of this tradition and it is up to us to add a chapter on Abraham of our own.

His deep trust in God is an example for us all, Jews, Christians or Muslims. Through Abraham the boundaries of peoples are crossed and religions are connected to one another as members of a family. We can take an example of the hospitality and peacefulness of Abraham. The

common memory of the beginning with Abraham unites us in mutual respect, esteem and responsibility for one another. All this, I think, could be elements of an Abrahamic Spirituality about which Karl-Josef Kuschel spoke at the beginning of our conference.

Thank you very much.

ⁱ Kuschel, Karl-Josef (1994): Streit um Abraham. Düsseldorf.