

## ABRAHAM INC.

### (How a Family Business is Transforming the World!) <sup>1</sup>

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Lois Tverberg laments that, in our Western culture we read the Bible primarily as a collection of unrelated stories about individuals and their personal encounters with God. Wading through a sea of sometimes fascinating, sometimes laborious details, we can easily get bogged down trying to cherry-pick anything that might speak to us in a relevant and personal way ---

Adam & Eve and God.

Noah & God. Abraham & God. Moses & God. David & God. *Etc.*

However, if we grasped how the Hebrew Bible is framed primarily in collective terms of family and communal perspectives, the message of the Scriptures would really come alive. Whilst the Bible must of course, first appeal to us individually --- whosoever will may come! --- let's not stop there. Let's get the big-picture of its world-perspective of family and kingdom.

Tverberg points out that as Westerners we find it hard to relate to communal cultures, with the notable exception of our experience in the corporate and business world. Let me illustrate ...

I remember the day I was employed by the Victorian Ambulance Service. The organisation spent a full week orienting me into the 'family business'. The first thing they did was hand me my uniforms which included summer and winter 'clobber', hats, boots, singlets, socks, indeed everything but my jocks!

Then they took me on a tour of orientation around the Victorian countryside for the next week to meet all my fellow paramedics throughout the region. I became aware I was now part of a large semi-government business that supplied me with their badge and logo and, I felt like I had become the face of one of the most philanthropic and publicly valued companies in Australia. I was part of the Ambulance community, indeed, part of a big family.

Then they sent me off to tertiary ambulance training over the next 3 years and over time, I realised I was an integral part of a 'family business' performing a critical role in society. When at work, my identity was part and parcel of that company. My reputation was theirs, and their image mine.

Maybe we should read our Bibles with this kind of "corporate world" thinking in mind? If we did, we would see the biblical drama as an incorporated story between the CEO of the company --- the LORD God --- and the founding-director, Abraham. This family business was founded with the vision (modern businesses call this their [Mission Statement](#)) of establishing God's grand dream of justice and salvation for all the world.

The sign over the company entrance reads, **Abraham Incorporated!**

The apostle Paul understood this perspective, for he wrote; **For the promise [was] that Abraham should be the heir of world (Romans 4: 13).** Tverberg puts it so well in this graphic piece;

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<sup>1</sup> Once again I freely acknowledge my indebtedness for the inspiration for this article to Lois Tverberg's book, [Reading the Bible With Rabbi Jesus: How a Jewish Perspective Can Transform Your Understanding](#), Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2017, pp 144

God promised Abraham that one day this family business would transform the world! It's hard, though, to imagine how a mom-and-pop venture like this would even survive in a dog-eat-dog business climate with massive conglomerates like Egypt Megacorp, Babylon Multinational, and, later, Rome Unlimited. Hostile Philistine competitors with Advanced Iron Technology also threaten takeover.

As you follow the story, you see how more problems come from within the company. Management is, at times, corrupt. Employees want to replace God's "Holiness and Justice for All" vision with a more saleable product, "Fertile Fields and Phallic Fun," which has been popular for their competitor, Baal Inc. At one point God even insists on a corporate purge.

Finally, God, the deity-owner, promises to send in his own son to take charge as CEO and bring the company back in line with his plans. The board of directors, however, opposes his plan and plots to have his son bumped off instead. How will this scrappy little start-up achieve God's outsized vision? Find out yourself in this spine-tingling corporate thriller! <sup>2</sup>

Reading the Bible within this corporate setting helps us appreciate what the pain was like when the family name was being dragged through the mud in subsequent generations. The implications, ramifications and, extrapolations concerning the machinations within the chosen family boggle the imagination!

If you were a Jew in Jesus' day, you remembered the way God had established the "national family business" in the first place. Didn't the Almighty redeem Israel from Egypt by ten plagues and by dramatically drowning Pharaoh's army in the sea? The dread of God's mighty interventions at the Exodus caused the surrounding nations to tremble. And hadn't the prophets again and again promised such a terrible Day when the LORD their God would visit their enemies again? How long, Oh LORD, will You leave our family in the shambles of shame? When will Israel's glory return and when will Your family rule the roost as You promised?

This is why Jesus was born; David's greater son came to re-establish God's reign over the earth on behalf of the family! He was invested with heaven's full executive authority. Reading the Bible with this family perspective helps us better understand how Jesus' contemporaries got him so wrong.

## SELECTIVE HEARING

Remember, how after his resurrection as he walked along the Road to Emmaus, Jesus posed a searching question to two dejected followers of his;

**Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory (Luke 24:26)?** The question was designed to shatter their selective deafness. It cut to the quick of their psyche: How could one man from their national family suffer and die as a criminal-reject and *still* be their glorious Saviour-King? Ah, all along the answer lay in their own holy Scriptures;

**Behold, My servant shall understand and shall be high and lifted up; he shall be exceedingly exalted. Many shall be astonished at you --- [for] your appearance was so marred beyond human semblance, and your form beyond that of the children of mankind. Thus shall many nations wonder at him ... (Isaiah 52: 13-15).**

This suffering, yet highly exalted servant-figure, was mysteriously hiding there in plain light all along! Sometimes he seems to appear as a symbol for the entire nation of Israel. Other times he appears as

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p145.

one man acting on behalf of the national family, regathering God's wandering sheep, redeeming them through his sacrificial work.

### BUT HOW CAN ONE MAN ATONE FOR THE SINS OF THE MANY?

One of the oft-heard objections Jews have to the Gospel message that **Christ died for our sins** is to ask, "But how can God forgive the sins of Israel and the nations through the death of one man, even if he be a righteous man?" As the apostle Paul put it, the message of a crucified man was **to the Jews a stumbling block (lit. a scandal or offence), and to the nations foolishness (lit. nonsense) (1 Cor. 1:23)**.

To modern Christian ears the message that God forgives sinners because of the righteousness of one man's substitutionary death has lost a lot of its original and staggering impact. We can easily take it for granted that God's mercy is extended to the vilest offenders on the basis of "the substitutionary atonement" of Christ.

However, to Jewish ears the message that God gives mercy to the undeserving because of the sacrificial death of Messiah can sound rather outrageous. Yet their own Scriptures foreshadow this important principle: Mercy may be granted to the many for the sake of another who is righteous.

### GOD REMEMBERS ABRAHAM

For example, think about a classic OT example in **Genesis 19**. Do you remember how Lot was delivered from the destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah? Lot had pitched his tent on the outskirts of Sodom even though he knew of their wickedness. Then, it wasn't long before Lot was taking an active part in that society, even to the point of **sitting in the gate of Sodom (Gen. 19:1)**--- code for being a respected elder handing down judicial decisions --- and allowing his own daughters to intermarry with the Sodomites.

True, Lot was still grieved in his heart over the sin of that society (**1 Peter 2: 8**), and he never became corrupt as they. But for all that, God did not save Lot because of his own righteousness. Rather, Scripture tells us; **God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the destruction (Gen. 19:29)**. Which is to say, God rescued Lot from the catastrophe for Abraham's sake. Lot was saved in response to Abraham's faithfulness.

This reveals how God would show special favour, even mercy, towards Israel because of the merits of their patriarchs. Which is to say, God's blessings came upon Israel because of His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, even promising Moses that on that basis He would pardon to the thousandth generation those who love Him (**Ex. 34: 6-7**).

In fact, Moses appealed to God to forgive the rebellious Israelites by reminding Him of his promise to his ancestors (**Ex. 32: 13**). And in **Micah 7** God's mercy is also linked to his covenant-pledge to the patriarchs,

**Who is a God like You, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of His inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea. You will be faithful to Jacob, and show love to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our ancestors in days long ago (vs. 18-20).**

The NT alludes to the same idea when Paul states that, as far as the election goes, Israel is loved on account of the patriarchs (**see Romans 11: 28-29**). And to this very day on their New Year celebration (called *Rosh Hashanah*) and also on the Day of Atonement (called *Yom Kippur*) when Jews pray for forgiveness, they focus on the story of Abraham's obedience of binding Isaac for sacrifice.

Some traditional prayers ask God's forgiveness for the sake of father Abraham who had such great devotion to God, even being willing to sacrifice the son of promise. All of this demonstrates that the Hebrew Bible endorses the belief that a sinner can seek God's mercy and forgiveness because of the merits of another.

Yes, it's a very Jewish reading of the Scriptures to know that God accepts and forgives sinners because of the righteous merits of Another. They call this principle, "the merit of the fathers".<sup>3</sup>

### SUBSTITUTIONARY SUFFERING?

And don't forget how the prophet Isaiah predicted that a Suffering Servant would **bear the sin of many, and make intercession for the transgressors (Is. 53: 12)**. Jesus' offering himself upon the cross for the sins of the world did not happen in a theological vacuum.

The Greek theologians, post-apostolic days, sought to answer the question using their own Hellenistic categories of the "substitutionary atonement". For example, they came up with the idea that through Christ's death, God paid the Devil himself the full ransom price for the release of men's souls! We don't need that kind of philosophising thanks!

However, the Hebrew mind worked from a different category and mind-set. Their theology was grounded in what God did in their family history.

Take, for instance, the suffering Joseph. In one day God brought him up from the dungeon and highly exalted him for the sake of his own family and indeed, for many nations. What men had intended for evil, God worked for good (**Genesis 50: 20**). So yes, of course the Hebrew Scriptures illustrate from living family history that, God can allow human wickedness and the unjust suffering of one individual to serve His own wider purposes for the many.

The "doctrine of merit" is not an infrequent theme in the Bible and constitutes many such incidents in which the righteousness of chosen individuals may sustain other individuals or even an entire group through its protective power.<sup>4</sup>

Remember, in Middle Eastern communal thinking, the big picture is not centred on the individual, but the honour and good of the "family". This is how the tragic servant song of **Isaiah 53** is able to conclude on a victorious note,

**Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper his hand.**

**Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.**

**Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many; and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors (vs. 1-12).**

The words I have underlined seem rather anticlimactic, don't you think? As **Tverberg** remarks;

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<sup>3</sup> Called *zechut avot*.

<sup>4</sup> Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, NY, Schocken Books, 1966, 150-151

To our ears this sounds like tepid, half hearted applause. Along with many others, the Servant will be given a prize, maybe a firm handshake and a pat on the back for all the anguish he endured. Does that seem reasonable? <sup>5</sup>

The impact of these verses is driven home far better by reading the underlined words from the **Jewish Publication Society Tanakh 1985** translation: Assuredly, I will give him the many as his portion, He shall receive the multitude as his spoil.

Here, God as the Speaker promises to give His Servant not just a portion with the many, but rather promises him *the multitude itself as his spoil.* <sup>6</sup> God's Righteous Servant will be handed **the people themselves as his spoil. He's being awarded people because he suffered on their behalf!**

As Christians this ought to grab our attention big time. The Suffering Servant is not going to get any old reward. He's going to inherit a multitude as his spoil! Jesus gets the whole family of God! No wonder he came proclaiming, **"The kingdom of heaven is at hand, repent and believe the good news!"** The Good news is that God is going to give to His Messiah a countless number of redeemed people.

**It's** the answer to the prophetic **Psalm 2; 7-8**, The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.'

**It's** Daniel's prophetic vision which Jesus so loved, To him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Dan. 7:14).

**It's** Gabriel's announcement to Mary's child, 'And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the LORD God will give him the throne of his father David; and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and his kingdom will have no end' (Luke 1: 31-33).

**It's** the way Jesus read **Isaiah 53: 12** at the Last Supper: Holding up the cup and the bread he announced, 'You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom ... (Luke 22: 28-29).

**It's** the way Jesus testified before the High Priest and Jewish Sanhedrin, 'You shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of [the] Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven' (Mark 14: 62). Code for governing as Saviour-King over God's family empire!

**It's** the way Jesus endured the cross, **disregarding its shame**, knowing he would **take his seat at the right hand of the throne of God** to inherit the spoils of God's "family business" (Hebrews 12: 2).

**It's** the way the Bible story ends, with all of Abraham Incorporated, singing their new song: **You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God and they will reign on earth (Rev. 5: 9-10).**

**It's** how God's covenant with **Abram** is realised, for that patriarch who was a wanderer and dweller in tents, became **Abraham, father of nations!**

**It's** how **Sarai** who was a barren old matron, became **Sarah, mother of princes!**

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p 243

<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew verb *halaq* means to "grant an inheritance", to "divide" or "apportion" a thing of value, like a conquered territory.

**It's** how the “mom-and-pop adventure” not only survives against all the odds and dark powers and hidden forces of the evil world empires, but thrives through their Champion-Servant, for at the last the heavenly hosts and the whole redeemed family shouts with a deafening roar, saying; **The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our LORD, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever ... Now salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come ... (Revelation 11: 15; 12: 10).**

**It's** *the Bible story of how a little “family business” takes over the whole world!*

Wouldn't you love to be part of a 'family empire' where the King and the greatest of his people are all selfless servants of one another? It surely makes our individualism in the West look rather pale and pathetic, does it not?

When you and I repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and are baptized into union with him, Christ doesn't just “come into our heart”. It's far grander than that. We enter into a family that will rule forever. We inherit His glorious kingdom that will never end.

Aren't you glad your heavenly Father has been jealous all along for His “family business”?