



## The Galatian Test: Is Islam an Abrahamic Religion?

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### Abstract

While Judaism, Christianity and Islam are now commonly classed together as 'Abrahamic religions' it seems clear from what Paul the Apostle writes that, from the Christian point of view, Islam should not be regarded as 'Abrahamic'

### Keywords

Abrahamic religions, St Paul, Islam, Christianity, Kaaba

The term 'Abrahamic religions' is commonly applied to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Each claims a connection with Abraham. With the Jews it is their claim to physical descent from him, which in their faith makes them the recipients of the promises God made to him. The Muslims accept him as a prophet and believe he helped found the Kaaba in Mecca as a place of pilgrimage. For Christians God's promises were made to Abraham and were realised in the person of Christ, not for a single nation however but for all mankind.

An additional, and equally significant, reason is that 'Abrahamic' is taken to mean monotheistic, which is what all three religions are. For example Muhammad held Abraham up as an example of a monotheist. Being from Mecca, where the Kaaba had been a major place of polytheistic pilgrimage for centuries, Muhammad himself had begun his religious life as a polytheist, staying that way into adult life. That was how he was brought up; it was his religious and cultural inheritance. However his 25 years of trading as a merchant along the whole coastline from Aden up to Syria had brought him into constant contact with Jews and Christians which unsettled him. Not just him. There was a number of fellow Arabs at that time who were beginning to regard their inherited polytheism as backward. Judaism presented Muhammad with a much simpler form of monotheism than Christianity. Muhammad drew very heavily on Judaism; and he maintained a decidedly ambiguous attitude towards Christianity in this regard. He rejected Christ as the Son of God and he regarded the notion of the

Trinity as polytheistic. That Muhammad was no theologian emerges on every page of the Koran. He was a preacher and a leader, political and military as well as religious. However, modern scholarship is of the opinion that Abraham was a polytheist. That poses no problems for Christians but it does for Muslims by reason of their understanding of the meaning and location of revelation. The Islamic notion of revelation differs in essence from that of Christianity.

When Heythrop College founded a degree course in 'Abrahamic religions' the advertisement made two statements. (see *The Tablet* 12 May 2007). Under the title 'One Source, Three Faiths' it asserted that Abraham was 'the common source of the three traditions', which might imply that divine revelation is to be found in Islam as it is in Judaism and Christianity. From a Christian viewpoint can that be correct? For Christians direct or supernatural revelation came only to the Jewish people and found its fulfilment in Christ in his person and his gospel. The second assertion was that 'we should make a positive assessment of Islam to match what we have to say about Judaism'. However, the Christian belief is that the spiritual history of the Jewish people is unique. God chose the Jews, no other nation, to be the instrument of salvation for all mankind, achieved in Christ in the fullness of time.

What, then, does it mean to be Abrahamic? Its meaning cannot be taken for granted; and both Judaism and Islam will each have its answer to the question. The notion provides grounds for serious and fruitful debate, both agreement and disagreement. In any adult society, national and international, debate between religions, where agreement and disagreement are expressed with reasons being provided and in a polite and respectful manner, should be as commonplace and acceptable as it is in the conduct of politics or culture.

The Christian meaning is provided definitively by St Paul. Events in Galatia after he had preached there made him apply himself to the issue. Christians of Jewish origin had arrived in Galatia after him preaching 'another gospel than that which we preached to you' (Gal.1.7-8). According to these preachers, while faith in Christ had a role, justification was not complete without observing the works of the law, specifically the commandment of circumcision and the feasts of the Jewish calendar. This, stated Paul, undermined the unique role of Christ in the salvation story; and, responding to the preachers' invocation of Abraham, he set out the Christian meaning of Abraham in the saving plan of God.

'Christ brought us freedom from the curse of the law... The purpose of it all was that the blessing of Abraham should in Jesus Christ be extended to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith' (3.13f). The blessing of Abraham, he states, is Christ Jesus. Nothing else. 'Now the promises were pronounced to

Abraham and to his issue. It does not say 'issues' in the plural but in the singular: and the issue intended is Christ' (3.16). The one and only issue of Abraham is Christ. Christ and only Christ is what Abraham was all about. 'Faith in Christ is the ground on which the promised blessing is given, and given to those who have such faith' (v.22). 'Baptized into union with him, you have all put on Christ as a garment' (v26).

This then is the Galatian test of what it means to be Abrahamic. Does whatever is preached declare that faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour constitutes justification (2.15) and not anything else? If it does not, it is not Abrahamic because 'It is the men of faith who are Abraham's sons' (3.7). Faith in what? 'Faith in Christ Jesus' Paul tells us (2.15). Justification is 'only through faith in Christ Jesus' (ditto). Taking this forward to the matter before us, Abraham is not therefore one source of three faiths. Christ was his 'singular issue' (3.16), Christ and only Christ. What counted with Abraham in God's saving plan was 'his faith in God' (3.5), for which he was blessed (3.13). In the fullness of time that blessing was Christ Jesus, nothing else. Abraham in God's saving plan is not a 'source' of anything else. Such an assertion is not 'the gospel of Christ' but 'another gospel' (1.6f).

Making references to Abraham in a religious document like the Koran and citing him as an example of a prophet and believer in the oneness of God is not Abrahamic therefore in the Christian understanding of 'Abrahamic'. Judaism led to Christ, therefore it was Abrahamic. Islam does not. Therefore, contrary to the Heythrop College course advertisement, Islam cannot be said to be Abrahamic in its Christian meaning, cannot be said 'to match what we have to say about Judaism'. The assertion that Islam does match what we have to say about Judaism is not compatible with God's saving plan. Of course Islam has a profound religious significance but no more and no less than any other non-Judaic/Christian religion. Likewise, Muhammad has no more significance, and no less, than the founder of any other non-Judaic/Christian religion. What does not lead to Christ is not Abrahamic. Indeed not only does Muhammad not lead his readers to Christ but he expressly would also lead them away from him. 'The only true faith in God's sight is Islam' he declares (Koran 3.19). Muslims must never be denied the right to express that belief. But it is not Abrahamic in its Christian meaning and 'It is not the gospel which we (Paul) preached' (Gal.1.9).

As the reader will be well aware, Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians with passion. In parts his language is intemperate. He was angry at what was being preached to them, he was driven by an overwhelming concern that his Galatian Christians might be turned from the true 'good news' of what Jesus Christ was to a false gospel. That was in the year 54 or 55 when he was staying in Ephesus towards

the conclusion of his second missionary journey. Just two years or so later when he was in Cenchrea, the port of Corinth, he wrote his letter to the Romans 'longer than any other NT letter, more reflective in its outlook . . . more calmly reasoned that Galatians in treating the key question of justification and the Law' in Raymond E. Brown's words (1997). However, though the tone is different from that of Galatians, the message is precisely the same. In 9.6-9 Paul sets out what it means to be one of Abraham's children'. He states: 'Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children . . . It is not the natural children who are God's children but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.' It is an uncompromising statement.

Like Paul, we must 'speak the truth in Christ' (Rom.9.1). Ephesians 5.14 advises us how Christians should conduct dialogue and debate, namely: 'Speak the truth in love, so that we may grow unto Christ in all things'. Christ is the promise made to Abraham. Because that is the truth, it devalues no one and nothing. However, it gives us who believe no grounds for boasting, 'Boasting is excluded' (ibid.3.27) because we have earned nothing. Jesus Christ is the pure gift of the Father. The Spirit has been poured out, not earned.

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