

# Olive Branches

by Jesse Bjoraker

*The LORD had said to Abram, Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. (Genesis 12:1-5)*

So begins the greatest story ever told. Four thousand years ago a Mesopotamian shepherd loaded his beasts of burden and left his home in the lush Tigris-Euphrates River valley at the call of a deity of whom he had never heard. Likely Abram was used to long, dusty treks, since his father Terah had moved the family from Ur to Haran, and Abram had made many expeditions before to graze his flocks. But now he was asked to leave, for good, everything he had known for seventy-five years—Sumer, the world's first great civilization, inventor of bronze working, wheeled vehicles, ziggurats, irrigation, the plow, the calendar, the cuneiform script—to follow a being who, for Abram, was yet no more than a voice. Still, he must have marveled at what had happened. In Sumerian society only the trained priests could communicate with the gods, and even then only through an elaborate ritual system, and could receive messages only through signs and omens. This God had spoken to him directly, unsought. Even more incredible, this God didn't haggle or demand or rage, like the Sumerian deities. Instead, in exchange for simple faith and obedience, He promised to make this childless, aging man the father of a great nation, a blessing to the whole earth. So Abram left his family gods behind, and his caravan began the long journey to Canaan, nearly the whole distance from the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean coast.

Who is "the Lord," the God who spoke to Abram? Not a personified natural force, like Poseidon or Amon-Ra. He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, completely other than his creation, and allows no graven image of

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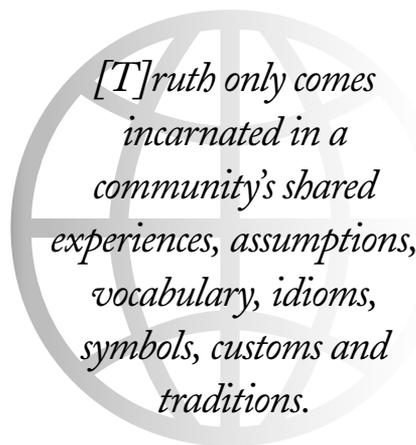
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Himself. Neither can He be reached through philosophical reasoning, like Plato's Good, Aristotle's Unmoved Mover or Hindu Vedanta's Brahman. In fact, the Bible is remarkably free of metaphysical speculation. He is unlike anything either reason or imagination could devise: transcending His creation but immanently involved within it, infinite and lacking no perfection, yet shockingly personal, dynamic, responsive. He upsets our expectations and offends our sophisticated sensibilities. Don Richardson writes in *Eternity in Their Hearts* that most tribal religions have a concept of a distant High God, often the creator of the world, with whom they have lost contact and whom they cannot reach. Abraham's God reaches down to communicate with men. In what German theologian Emil Brunner called "the scandal of particularity," YHVH chose to reveal to a particular people, Abraham and his descendants, at a particular time and a particular location, what eludes the wisest of philosophers and the most profound of mystics.

Why this condescension? Because YHVH is also the Redeeming God. In Genesis 1-11 we see a repeated pattern of creation, fall, and redemption. In the first cycle God creates the world and pronounces it "very good." But Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, disobeying the divine command and violating the created order. God banishes them from Eden, but in the midst of curses He promises that the woman's offspring will one day crush the serpent's head. In the second cycle, men begin to fill the earth but grieve God with their wickedness. He sends a flood to wipe out all mankind, but saves Noah and makes a covenant with him. And in the third cycle, Noah's descendants again spread out over the face of the earth but are scattered and confused for their hubris at the Tower of Babel, setting the stage for the call of Abraham, the inauguration of God's final plan to redeem the whole world.

In Genesis 12 the narration abruptly narrows its scope from the universal to the particular, from the table of

nations to a single Semite. Herein is the Divine strategy. In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* Lesslie Newbigin argues that communication and understanding can only happen "in particular socially embodied traditions of rational discourse." In other words, truth only comes incarnated in a community's shared experiences, assumptions, vocabulary, idioms, symbols, customs and traditions. The universal must be expressed in the concrete particular; to paraphrase Lessing, *only* "the accidental facts of history" can reveal "the universal truths of reason." And from the beginning God's particular



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focus is for the purpose of a universal vision. He chooses to reveal Himself fully to Abraham and his descendants—through concrete supernatural acts in history, not abstract theoretical propositions—in order to bring blessing and salvation to "all peoples on earth." In Genesis 15 God seals His covenant with Abram according to a common ancient Mesopotamian custom, passing between the two halves of animal carcasses. The content of this covenant mirrors the content of the initial call: the promise of the land of Israel, and an offspring as numerous as the stars, a people through whom this universal blessing—restored relationship with God—will come.

The rest of the Tanach vividly recounts the story of God's fulfillment of this foundational promise. Abraham's old age, the barrenness of the matriarchs, foreign rulers' interest in Sarah and Rebekah,

rivalry between Ishmael and Isaac and between Esau and Jacob, slavery in Egypt, and Pharaoh's massacre of the Hebrew boys all threaten, but fail, to subvert God's plan. YHVH delivers Israel from Egypt "with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Exodus 5:15), forms them into a nation, gives them the Law, and enters into solemn covenant with them in the Sinai desert, saying, "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell in the midst of you." Joshua and Judges narrate the conquest of Canaan, the entrance into the Promised Land. Samuel and Kings tell of God's deliverance of Israel from her enemies, the establishment of the monarchy, and the building of the temple. Throughout the era of the kings, the prophets urge Israel to turn from her wickedness to covenant faithfulness, depicting idolatry as adultery and prostitution, and YHVH as a jealous husband. God finally judges Israel for her apostasy, but brings back from Persia the faithful remnant of Judah, the ancestors of the today's Jewish people. God continually teaches, shapes, refines, and when necessary judges His people in order to bring them to their destiny.

But while God's dealings are with Israel, we see throughout the Tanach His concern for the *goyim* [Gentiles] as well. He smites Egypt with miraculous plagues and signs in order "that they might know that I am YHVH." Moses rejoices in Exodus 15 that "the nations will hear and tremble," and indeed they do. "Many other people" join the liberated Israelites (Exodus 12:38), and God commands that they be treated with respect and included in Israel (22:21). The covenant carries with it the calling to be "a kingdom of priests [also translated 'royal priests'] and a holy nation," to represent, mediate and model the reign of God to the Gentiles. From their inception as a nation the Israelites are highly visible, evidenced as Moses turns away God's wrath from them by appealing to His reputation among the nations (Numbers 14:15-16).

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Even their geographic location at the crossroads of the Near East testifies to their calling—to be a light to the nations that surrounded them and to the traders and armies that traversed the land.

Gentile God-fearers play important roles among YHVH's people: the Midianite Jethro becomes a judge in Israel, and the Jerichite Rahab and the Moabite Ruth become ancestors of Judah's royal and Messianic line. Even in exile, Daniel and Esther bear witness to their God before kings. The psalmist sings,

May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth. May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you... God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him (67:4-7).

Habakkuk proclaims, "The earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord" (2:14), and in the book of Malachi God declares,

My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun (1:11).

Sometimes YHVH's concern for the Gentiles is strong enough to cause resentment among His chosen people, as when he sends the reluctant prophet Jonah to preach to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria.

I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity,

Jonah fumes.

Now take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live (4:2-3).

YHVH replies, "Have you any right to be angry? ... Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (4:4,11). Here His concern for all peoples is dramatically displayed.

Chronologically speaking, the Tanach ends with Malachi, the last writing prophet. But the story of

God's plan, to bring blessing to all the peoples of the earth through Abraham, continues. For the promise contains another element. Walter Kaiser writes in *Toward an Old Testament Theology* that the collective singular "offspring" in Genesis has "a flexibility of reference," referring both to many descendants of Eve through Shem and Abraham, and to a single male descendant, the "he" of Genesis 3:15. And throughout the Tanach we see prophetic anticipations of the Messiah, YHVH's Anointed One, who will one day deliver Israel. Jacob prophesies that

the scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs, and the obedience of the nations is his (Genesis 49:10).

Balaam says,

I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel (Numbers 24:17).

Isaiah prophesies,

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light... for unto us a child is born, to us a son is given. And the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (9:1-6).

Today's Jews believe that these prophecies have not yet been fulfilled, and the Messiah is still to come. Yeshua's claims to divinity and failure to bring the expected liberation from Roman oppression disqualified him in their eyes.

Christians, however, believe that about four hundred years after Malachi, God's promise to make Abraham a blessing to "all peoples on earth" reached its greatest fulfillment. YHVH's revelation had always been, in a way, incarnational, embodying human thought forms, language, and customs. Yet now, in a move even more scandal-

ous in its particularity, He assumes Jewish flesh: born in Bethlehem to a peasant woman from Nazareth in approximately 5 BC. Yeshua, as his followers believe, was not a Jewish schismatic or the founder of a new religion but the promised Jewish Messiah whose life, death, and resurrection were prefigured in the *Akedah* of Genesis 22, the sacrificial system of Leviticus, the Servant Song of Isaiah 53, and the visions of Daniel. "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets," Yeshua said. "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). Announced by the desert prophet Yochanan, he taught from the Tanach after the pattern of itinerant rabbis, used Jewish images and categories, kept the Law, and observed the Jewish holy days. He saw his ministry as primarily to the House of Israel, telling a Canaanite woman,

I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel... It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs (15:24,26).

Yet in continuity with the God of the Tanach, his concern was also for the Gentiles. When the woman persisted, he replied, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted" (15:28). Before his ascension he instructed his twelve chosen disciples, echoing the call of Abraham,

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (28:18-20).

God's strategy since Abraham was to use a particular people, the Jews, to bring a universal blessing to all the peoples of the earth.

The *Brit Chadasha*, or New Testament, tells the story of the phenomenal expansion of this blessing. Over two thousand years God had fully revealed Himself within Jewish culture. Now, in Acts 2, tongues of fire descend on Yeshua's disciples, enabling them to speak other languages—a symbolic reversal of the confusion at Babel. Christianity, the name given to this movement by the Greeks in Antioch, was at

its inception a purely Jewish one, and the New Testament's authors are Jewish [*Ed. note: Some scholars believe Luke was a Jew*]. But as God's revelation was translated in Greco-Roman culture, the Gentiles, who in the Tanach joined Israel one by one, now began to come in droves. The "God-fearers," Gentiles who sat in the back rows of synagogues because they desired to worship YHVH but were unwilling to undergo circumci-

along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 2:20).

Therefore, since we as Jews and Christians worship the same God, and share—either as natural or adopted children of Abraham, natural or naturalized citizens of the kingdom of God—the blessing of being His people, we also share the same calling: to be witnesses of His glory and power working through us, to make His name known throughout the earth.

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sion, embraced this message. Yeshua had provided the nations a way to worship the God of Israel acceptably within their own cultures.

Jews and Christians, then, differ in their acceptance of Yeshua's messianic claims. But Gentiles still owe a great debt to Israel. For through Yeshua, this great seed of Abraham, Israel has brought many millions of Gentiles from hundreds of nations to read a Jewish book and worship YHVH, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And though Israel's destiny fulfillment cannot be reduced only to giving the Messiah to the world, countless grateful Christians credit the Jewish people with having wonderfully fulfilled their destiny, as promised to Father Abraham, by bringing the knowledge of the true and living God to them through Yeshua, the faithful son of Israel, the Jew from Nazareth.

And while Gentile Christians do not consider themselves Jewish either in blood or in culture, they have said to the Jews, like the Moabite Ruth to her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi, "Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). The Jewish apostle Shaul [Paul] of Tarsus writes,

The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham, 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed

Borrowing an image from Jeremiah (11:6), Shaul compares the Jewish people to an ancient olive tree, springing from the seed of Abraham, with its roots in the soil of Israel, cultivated and pruned over centuries by a Divine Gardener to bear fruit for the nourishment of all the peoples of the world. The Gentiles, like wild olive branches grafted into the tree, "now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root" by embracing Yeshua as their Messiah (Romans 11:17). Let us therefore burn brightly, like the olive oil in the Temple *menoroth*, as we remember our calling as "a light to the Gentiles [*goyim*, nations]" (Isaiah 49:6, Acts 13:47). And let us extend the olive branch of peace to one another as we worship the God of Abraham. **IJFM**

### Note

My main sources are as follows. The information about Sumer is from William McNeill's *A World History*, and the geography of the ancient Near East from James Pritchard's *The HarperCollins Concise Atlas of the Bible*. The pattern of creation-fall-redemption, the interpretation of Genesis 12, and the idea of the promise-plan of God as the central theme of the Tanach are taken from Walter Kaiser's brilliant *Toward an Old Testament Theology*. The theology of the inclusion of the Gentiles and the New Testament as cultural contextualization come from Lesslie Newbigin's *The Gospel in a Pluralist*

*Society*, Don Richardson's *Eternity in Their Hearts*, and many unpublished lectures by Ralph Winter. Marvin Wilson's *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* directed me to the olive tree image. Paul Johnson's *A History of the Jews* gave me a historical, non-theological perspective on the Tanach and the Jewish people. And for the inspiration to write, research direction, editing, and the general tenor or tone of the essay, I thank my father William BJORAKER, who has worked harder to bring reconciliation between Jews and Christians than anyone else I know.