

Marvin Wilson. *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*. Eerdmans/Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, 1989. Reviewed by Jim R. Sibley, *Mishkan* 11 (1989): 90-96.

Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith

Marvin Wilson

**Eerdmans/Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, 1989; xxi, 374
pp., softback.**

Reviewed by Jim R. Sibley

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Convention in Israel.

Marvin R. Wilson is a prominent evangelical author who is well-qualified to write on this important topic. *Our Father Abraham* seems to be, in fact, an expansion of the author's previous article, "Hebrew Thought in the Life of the Church" (in *The Living and Active Word of God*, ed. M. Inch and S. J. Schultz. Winona Lake, Indiana: 1983. pp. 123-135). Beginning with the basic premise that "the roots of Christianity run deep into Hebrew soil" (back cover), this book is intended to be "an exposition of what it means for today's Church to be part of Abraham's spiritual family." (p. xvi) Wilson is professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts; he has long been active in Jewish/Christian dialogue; and he has been a prominent spokesman on Jewish/Christian relations. His voice is one which must not be ignored.

Wilson's work is extremely readable and well presented. Its content is informative and relevant, and it is comprehensive in scope. He divides his material, which is written primarily for gentile, evangelical Christians, into five sections.

Part I begins by outlining the Jewish roots of the Church and the "de-Judaisation" which followed. This de-Judaisation is picked up in Part II and traced through the intervening centuries. What began as a Jewish movement, gradually succumbed to de-Judaisation, then to anti-Judaism and, finally, to anti-Semitism. Part III affords an incisive analysis of the impoverishment of the Church which came about as a result of this estrangement. Part IV contains selected studies of specific ways in which the Church is significantly, though unconsciously, influenced by her Hebrew heritage. Finally, Part V points to some practical ways that Christians can recover this heritage and establish productive relationships with today's Jewish community. Wilson wants Christians to reach out with humility and perseverance to Jews "through interfaith dialogue,

educational activities and social action" (p. 324). These three headings actually describe a new agenda which the Church is to adopt vis a vis Israel.

In spite of the fact that this reviewer finds some of Wilson's views to be disturbing, the author shows his familiarity with each of these areas of discussion and consistently stresses the relevance and, indeed, the absolute necessity of recovering our "Jewishness." To this goal and its relevance we can only give hearty affirmation.

Our Father Abraham was written to be used as a textbook (cf. p. xv-xvi). In this regard, it is gratifying to see the full and well-organized table of contents, a pronunciation key for transliterated Hebrew words, footnotes at the bottom of the pages, and the very helpful study and discussion questions at the end of each chapter. The book is also very well-indexed, with indices of biblical texts, rabbinic literature, other early extrabiblical literature, authors, subjects, and indices of Hebrew and Greek words. He also has included a nine page "selective bibliography." While it is necessarily "selective," there are some significant and unfortunate omissions.

These deficiencies fall under two broad headings: 1) books by and about Jews who have recognized and embraced Jesus as Messiah and Redeemer, and 2) books

which deal with the relevant history and historical sources. As to the former, there are many fine books from which to make a selection - the books by David Baron, David Cooper, Daniel Fuchs, Jacob Gartenhaus, Mitch and Zhava Glaser, Phillip Goble, Moishe and Ceil Rosen, and Adolph Saphir, to name but a sampling. Daniel Juster's *Jewish Roots* was included by Wilson, but should be balanced by the very different perspective of Arnold Fructenbaum's work, *Hebrew Christianity*. Since Wilson refers to "this olive tree connection with Israel" (p. 15), it is surprising that John Fischer's book, *The Olive Tree Connection*, was not mentioned. Finally, there have been several books by evangelical authors for the purpose of helping gentile Christians to enter into a Jewish mindset. Notable in this regard is Martha Zimmerman's *Celebrate the Feasts*. At the very least, it would certainly seem that Jewish believers would have something of significance to say about the Jewish roots of the Christian faith.

Since Wilson's conclusions seem to rely so heavily on historical considerations, his bibliography needs strengthening here as well. As an introduction to the historical sources, he includes Strack's *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, which was written in 1887 and was revised in 1924, but not Bowker's *Targums and Rabbinic Literature* (1969). Neither did he include George W. E. Nickelsburg's *Jewish Literature*

Between the Bible and the Mishna or Faith and Piety in Early Judaism (which Nickelsburg co-authored with Michael E. Stone). He has noted only one volume (#2, by Safrai and Stone) of the five currently available in the *Compendia Rerum Iudicarum ad Novum Testamentum*.

Since Pharisaism formed Jesus' teaching (pp. 40, 92); was bound up in Paul's lineage (p. 43), education and teaching (p. 126); gave rise to Rabbinic Judaism (p. 88); and was influential in the early Church (p. 52), it is surprising that there is not a single monograph on the Pharisees to be found in the bibliography. Also, in dealing with the early history of the Christian faith, Wilson would have been well served by Ray Pritz' *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*. These bibliographic deficiencies, unfortunately, are reflected in the warp and woof of the book itself.

In analyzing the content of *Our Father Abraham*, there are several major issues which confront the reader. This reviewer has identified four which merit a response.

Problem 1: Wilson fails to distinguish sufficiently between biblical Judaism and Rabbinic Judaism. This failure leads inevitably to a confusion of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, to a misunderstanding of Jews who profess faith in Jesus, and to a

deprecation of Jewish evangelism. The observation of Jakob Jocz still holds true:

*Jews have persuaded Christian writers of two things: first, that there is a direct and unbroken line of development between the Old Testament and later rabbinism; and, second, that Pharisaic Judaism was the religion in which Jesus was reared and which prevailed at the time of the New Testament. Seen in that perspective, Christianity is the wayward daughter of the synagogue and ought to be led back to its source. Granted that understanding, there can be no "common ground." ("Difficulties in Jewish-Christian Dialogue" in *The Messiahship of Jesus*, ed., A. W. Kac; p. 89)*

Rabbinic Judaism is not validated by claims that it predates faith in Jesus. Furthermore, although both the New Testament and the Mishna originated in the pluralistic milieu and theological ferment of Judaism in the Second Temple period (e.g., Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, etc.), Rabbinic Judaism actually began to crystallize following the destruction of the Temple, and in large measure was a reaction against Jesus and His followers. Therefore, the Jewish roots of Christian faith are to be sought in biblical, not Rabbinic, Judaism. Of course, Christians, nevertheless, are obligated to demonstrate both respect and love to the adherents of Rabbinism.

Although there are no direct citations indicating literary dependence on Marcus Barth at this point, Wilson apparently has been greatly influenced by his book *The People of God*. Here, Barth argues for a development in Paul's thought which moves from a rather hastily taken position in Galatians 4, through a more mature understanding expressed in Romans 9-11, and culminating in the single people of God, found in Ephesians 2. Neither Barth nor Wilson understand this "People of God" to be composed of only those Jews and gentiles who have trusted in the atoning work of Jesus, but of ethnic Israel into which Christians have been grafted. This position appears to this reviewer to be incompatible with evangelical faith.

Problem 2: Wilson's historical survey is fatally flawed by his inadequate treatment of the *Birkat HaMinim*. If he is to argue successfully that the "Curse of the Heretics" was not specifically formulated for use against the early Jewish believers in Jesus, he must answer the arguments and evidence of books, such as Jakob Jocz' *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ*. For example, Wilson says on p. 68, "It is very significant that *notzrim* (Christians) appears only in the two Genizah versions of the *Birkat HaMinim*..." "But Jocz cites others and offers a full discussion of the issues involved in the literary history of the text (cf. pp. 51-57). In fact, Wilson's chapter (5) on

"Heretics' and the Synagogue" is totally unsatisfactory. It is not based on solid evidence or argumentation, and is thus both prejudiced and tendentious. Even if the final separation of Church and synagogue was lengthy process [e.g., cf. "Jews and Christians in a Roman World," Eric Meyers and L. Michael White, *Biblical Archaeologist* 42 (March - April, 1989): pp. 26-33], this does not mean that the rabbinic authorities were not attempting to bring about a division at an earlier time.

Wilson tries to maintain that persecution of Messianic Jews prior to the First Jewish Revolt was limited to "acts of mob violence rather than official persecution" because "there is not one clear case of the Jewish religious leadership having a judicial execution of a Christian solely for religious purposes" (p. 59). Is persecution to be seen only in carefully delimited terms of executions? Could one imagine a white pastor in the southern United States in the mid-1960's claiming that any racial discrimination on his part had been a purely personal matter and not in his capacity as a pastor because, as a pastor, he had not been convicted in a court of law of the first-degree murder of a single Negro for solely racial reasons?! The evidence from the book of Acts, as cited (but just as quickly and cavalierly disregarded) by Wilson, amply refutes his own contention.

Problem 3: Wilson accepts uncritically Pinchas Lapide's denial that Judaism teaches salvation on the basis of good deeds. It is inconceivable that Wilson says (p. 21), "Judaism does not teach that participation in the *olam ha-ba*, 'the coming world,' is achieved by works, but through the gratuitous mercy of God." Evidence to the contrary could be multiplied, but consider the following:

1. Maimonides said, in a letter to Rabbi Hisdai Halevi, "There is no doubt about the matter, that whoever has perfected himself with good attributes of behavior and with sound principles of belief in the Creator, praised be He, is among those destined to have a share in the world to come." [Quoted in *Issues in the Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, ed., H. Croner and L. Klenicki. New York: Paulist Press, 1979, p. 98]

2. "Man must redeem himself from sin not by faith alone, but by repentance and good works [emphasis in the original]; then God will redeem him from death and Satan ... Each man is responsible for himself, and through his good deeds he must find atonement for his sins ... Numberless times the Talmud returns to the idea that redemption depends on repentance and good works." [Joseph Klausner (trans. by W.F.F. Stinespring), *The Messianic Idea In Israel*. New York: Macmillan, 1955. pp. 530-531]

3. "Virtually every aspect of 'good works' is mentioned as a means of atonement. e.g., 'Now that there are no sacrifices, a man's table acts as an atonement' (Ber. 58a); 'acts of kindness bring atonement' (R. H. 18a); 'Charity brings atonement' (Bava Batra 9a), and 'good works avert the evil decree' (Taan. 16a)." [from *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, ed. Dr. R. J. Zvi Werblowsky and Dr. G. Wigoder. Jerusalem: Masada Press Ltd., 1967, p. 48]

4. "The mitzvot sanctify the Jew's life and imbue it with transcendent meaning and content ... The mitzvot are the vehicles by which Israel is transformed into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation ... Through them we become cleansed and purified ... All blessings, therefore, begin with the words, 'Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe who has sanctified us with your mitzvot and commanded us to...(the specific mitzvah is mentioned)." [Yechezkel Eckstein, *What Christians Should Know About Jews and Judaism*. Waco: Word Books, 1984, p. 59]

These quotes only indicate that Wilson's representation of Rabbinic Judaism cannot be substantiated. To be sure, God's mercy is given its place in Rabbinic Judaism, but that mercy must be based on something, and it is *not* "gratuitous." Wilson fails to address, directly, the basis of God's mercy in Judaism, but the

implication is that it is ethnic in nature. Of course, if it were based either on race (ethnic Judaism), or on works (mitzvot), then His mercy would assuredly be either capricious or cheap; but His holiness would thereby be compromised. If, however, it is based on the guiltless death of an acceptable substitute, God's mercy atones for sin without compromising His purity. This is beautifully pictured in the Temple liturgy. God's "Seat of Mercy" was located in the Holy of Holies, and was sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement.

This is what we find in Judaism of the New Testament period. John the Baptist said, "And think not to say within yourselves, 'We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham'" (Mt. 3:9, cf. also, Lk. 3:8). Jesus repeatedly castigated the religious leadership of His day for failing to see that works of the Law were inadequate as a means of gaining God's favour. In fact, as Paul points out, not even Abraham was justified by works (Rom. 4:1-2), but by his faith (Rom. 4:3-5). Indeed, Jesus made it abundantly clear to Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, that nothing but faith in the crucified Son of God could atone for the sin of man. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes may in Him have eternal

life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." It is really unfortunate that the Person and work of Messiah Jesus receives little, if any, attention in Wilson's book. In any discussion of Jewish roots, due attention should be given to "the Root and the Offspring of David" (Rev. 22:16). As such, He embodies both the Jewishness we need to recover, and the basis of Jewish/Christian relationship and dialogue.

Problem 4: Wilson is accusatory and critical of Christians who approach Jewish/Christian dialogue with "hidden ... agendas" (p. 325) - by this, the author refers to the evangelization of the Jewish people. Evangelism, however, is not a hidden agenda, and never has been. Paul said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of the Messiah; for it is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). This verse is commonly regarded as the heart of the New Testament. For an evangelical to depart from this basic understanding of the gospel and our commission to proclaim it to a lost world, is to deny evangelicals' *raison d'être*.

Wilson states that, "The object of dialogue is not to convert one's partner from one faith and tradition to another. Conversion is the work of God, not of human beings" (p. 325). This theme is

becoming a familiar one in books of this nature. For example, a Lutheran publication says:

In their encounter with Jews, Christians can learn that mission does not mean the conversion of another through one's own efforts. Christian witness can prove itself to be genuine only through God's Spirit just as surely as God himself is the Lord of the community that confesses God as the one who gathers the people of God from all peoples. [Judaism: An Introduction for Christians, ed. J. Limburg. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987, p. 211]

Granting that conversion is the work of God does not absolve the believer of his responsibility to proclaim the gospel. Wilson argues that since "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26), and "only God can remove [this final barrier]" (p. 328), Christians should not make it their business to seek the salvation of the Jewish people. This same argument was overthrown by William Carey and others when it was advanced by the hyper-Calvinists of the late 1700's. They were arguing that God would save the elect without man's effort; Wilson would substitute "Jew" for "elect."

One can hardly imagine a more calloused attitude toward the spiritual condition of unbelieving Israel. In light of the recent statements on Jewish evangelism contained in the "Manila

Manifesto" (cf. Editorial and p. 85) and in the "Willowbank Declaration" (cf. pp. 71-84), it is fair to ask if the position espoused by Wilson reflects a truly evangelical perspective.

Our Father Abraham may unwittingly be playing a part of a larger strategy: Yechiel Eckstein has made it quite clear that the perceived threat of evangelical witness is to be neutralized by trying to persuade evangelicals to adopt some form of a dual covenant theology (usually based on ethnic Judaism). "Should this prove to be theologically too difficult, [Jews] will request that evangelicals regard dialogue as the proper forum in which to 'preach the gospel' to Jews ... without the intention of converting them ..." [op. cit., Eckstein, p. 321]. This book contains many good features, and its goal of exposing and reviving the Jewish roots of our faith is both praiseworthy and greatly needed. Nevertheless, the author's undermining of Jewish evangelism is a discredit to any evangelical book and a dangerous precedent in the subversion of a healthy evangelical faith.

This reviewer can only hope that both Wilson and those who are involved with the Center for Judaic-Christian Studies will recommit themselves to the proclamation of the good news to those whom they profess to love and who are in such desperate need of the atonement their Messiah died to provide.