

OUR FATHER ABRAHAM (Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith)

by Marvin R. Wilson. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. and Dayton, OH: Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, 1989. Pp. xxi and 374, paper back \$15.95.

In this morning session Dr. Louis Goldberg and I have the privilege of seeking to stimulate your discussion of a most important book. Indeed, when it first appeared and was carefully read, the impression grew upon many that here was a volume that could not be casually dismissed. Its themes challenged too directly the evangelical preoccupation with "New Testament Christianity" and too critically the very essence of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism. Furthermore, its author serves at Gordon College, a highly regarded evangelical institution in North America. In addition this book has been enthusiastically and uncritically endorsed by a prominent, highly regarded Evangelical, the former president of Regent College. Hence, our task at this gathering is to test whether or not its fundamental thrust is worthy of some sort of public reaction. At the outset of this session I for one would even suggest that the issues it raises and those it fails to raise might warrant our drafting a press release that embodies the LCJE reaction to its contents.

Dr. Goldberg and I have been asked to divide our assignment in the following fashion. I will seek to evaluate what the book actually says, and he will then assist us in taking the full measure of what the book does not say. Our conviction is that both perspectives are equally important. But first some preliminary details.

**AUTHOR:**

Marvin R. Wilson holds the prestigious post of Harold J. Ockenga Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Gordon College. He has coedited several significant books on dialogue between Evangelicals and Jews and has probably immersed himself more broadly in Jewish studies than any other evangelical scholar in our day. As a result, he is impressively

conversant with Jewish life and thought, particularly with those issues--historical and theological--which have arisen in the Jewish encounter with the Christian churches down through the centuries. For years Wilson has been burdened over what he perceives as the impoverishment that has come to the evangelical segment of the church because of its neglect of its Jewish roots. Our Father Abraham is a comprehensive expression of his concern. It is primarily addressed to Gentile (not Jewish) Christians and passionately calls on them to discover their Jewish rootage--"the deep spiritual link every Christian has with the Jewish people" (xvi). Wilson also wants Christians to become aware of "the negative consequences. . . that have resulted from the church being severed from its Jewish roots" (xvii). In his judgment Gentile dominance of the early church resulted in its being caught up in an inexorable sequence: first de-Judaizing itself, then adopting the stance of anti-Judaism, and finally and inevitably, transforming itself into an anti-Semitic movement. In certain ways Christians will find this book helpful. My recommendation, however, would be that they read it alongside Rabbi Yeschiel Eckstein's apologetic for Judaism: What Christians Should Know About Jews and Judaism (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984). The enthusiasms of an outsider should always be tempered by the precise claims of a committed insider! Even so, James R. Sibley, a Baptist missionary in Israel, has rightly said, "Wilson's voice is one which must not be ignored." I agree! Sibley has many other good things to say. I am greatly indebted to his review of this book (Mishkan, Issue No. 11/1989, pp. 90-96) and will share some of his insights in this report.

#### **STYLE:**

This is a carefully crafted book, replete with all the components of a scholarly volume. It is lucid in style, the argumentation is carefully developed, a wide though selected range of sources has been used, and it is equipped with study questions, author and subject indexes, comprehensive lists of biblical and rabbinical references, along with Hebrew and Greek words and a rather helpful bibliography of additional sources. Obviously, Wilson hopes that what he has produced will become a text widely used in evangelical schools, colleges, and seminaries.

## **OBJECTIVE:**

We should heartily endorse the overall objective Wilson had in mind in writing this book. We should also agree to the sequence of themes he has judged to be essential to the development. He wants gentile Evangelicals to recognize that the roots of their faith are deeply embedded in Hebrew soil. Wilson's understanding of the direction of early church history is as follows: The church emerged within Jewry as a distinctly Jewish movement. The early followers of Jesus affirmed their oneness and continuity with what God had been doing down through the ages, from Abraham onward. After all, their only Bible was the Old Testament. With the passage of time, however, large numbers of Gentiles entered the church. At first, they struggled to retain linkage with the earlier revelation, then began increasingly to turn from the Jewish approach to the law. With the coming into being of the New Testament, they naturally affirmed that both testaments reflected the unfolding unity of God's redemptive purpose. Even so, in the face of growing Jewish hostility during those early centuries, these gentile Christians began tragically to drift from their Jewish heritage, and became anti-Judaism. All this inevitably led to hostility and to 2000 years of "Christian" anti-Semitism--the tragic result. Wilson's objective is to awaken Evangelicals to his crafted sequence and humbly return to their Jewish roots. Only thereby, he argues, will it be possible for them to replace their antipathy toward Jews and begin to regard Judaism with love and esteem.

## **STRUCTURE:**

The book is divided into five major sections. Part I reviews the elements of this Hebrew heritage--what it means that gentile Christians are "spiritual Semites," grafted into God's Old Testament people: "The Olive Tree" (Rom 11:17). With much of this we would agree. Part II traces the emergence of the church within Jewry and its tragic movement towards Gentile domination and consequent hostility to all Jews, whether or not they believed in Jesus. Much of this section must be taken to heart, although an outstanding scholar, Richard R. DeRidder,

challenges Wilson's simplistic development of this sequence and argues that it is "hardly born out by more recent research" (Calvin Theological Journal: 1989, pp. 389). Part III becomes even more problematic, particularly Wilson's contention that without early Jewish sources as well as the Old Testament, one cannot gain a correct understanding of the New Testament. Wilson seeks to demonstrate the various ways in which the church impoverished herself and lost wholesome elements in her worldview and life style because she lost an awareness of her Jewish roots. It is passing strange that Wilson relentlessly seeks to point out when and how the church went wrong but fails to lament the tragedy of tragedies expressed in that wistful text: "He came to his own home and his own people received him not" (John 1:11)--when the leaders of the Jewish people went wrong and conspired to destroy their own Messiah. Part IV is Wilson's best section. It is a warmly sympathetic treatment of Jewish marriage and family patterns, the evolution of the Jewish Passover, followed by a description of Christian ambivalence over the complexities precipitated by the existence of the State of Israel. Part V is devoted to "practical" considerations: "how Christians can reach out and build productive relations with today's Jewish community" (xviii). We will return to this final section later. At this point we wish to make some general observations. They follow.

#### **"SELECTED" SOURCES:**

In his review Sibley has particularly commented on the selectivity pattern that Wilson followed in the sources he used to develop the themes inherent in these five sections. In order that our evaluation of Our Father Abraham be comprehensive, I am including in this review what he and I have observed. Wilson's source selectivity significantly bears on the particular thrust of his perspectives. Indeed, at times he virtually becomes an apologist for Rabbinic Judaism for he apparently chose not to refer to the writings of more than a score of Jewish scholars, all who could have made a solid contribution to this book. I have listed some of their names at the end of this review. All of them are Jewish in background and all have confessed their faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. One would think that such scholars would be

particularly qualified to share matters of significance to gentile Evangelicals about the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. Indeed, I would be hard put to find knowledgeable Messianic Jews today who have had no contact with their writings. One can get jaundiced and charge that Wilson has deliberately boycotted them. But this would not be fair. He mentions Daniel Juster and particularly Jakob Jocz, the greatest messianic Jewish theologian of our century. I should add, however, my personal regret that he dismisses too easily Jocz's careful and detailed treatment of the significance of the Birkat Ha-Minim (the early synagogue malediction on heretics, i.e., on Jewish believers in Jesus, pp. 64-70). I cannot but wonder why he prefers the current rabbinic whitewash of this action that slowly but inevitably drove all believing Jews out of the synagogues in the closing decades of the 1st century and on into the 2nd century.

#### **FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS:**

##### **1. What is Judaism?**

Wilson uses the term "Judaism" rather ambiguously. Apparently, he assumes that his readers will understand this term and that no precise definition is necessary. Hence, at the outset we are told that the Jewish roots of our Christian faith "run deep into the soil of Judaism" and that "Christianity could not exist without Judaism" (p. 19). But it is terribly confusing, if not outright wrong, to make statements like these. Jewish leaders would like Evangelicals to believe that an unbroken line of development exists between the Old Testament faith of the Israelites and present day Judaism. Why Wilson appears to endorse this fiction is unsettling indeed. Actually, even in the time of our Lord there was no uniform understanding of what Judaism was. Indeed, the major conflicts our Lord encountered during his earthly ministry were largely with the leaders of the contending religious parties within Jewry. By no recourse to the New Testament, can it be established that the Christian movement had its specific rootage in any of the organized forms of first century Judaism. Similarities in congregational worship, yes, but the word "roots" has more profound implications. Jewish Rabbis today would have Christians believe that "Christianity is the wayward daughter of the

synagogue." She ought to divest herself of her Hellenistic ideas (e.g., the madness of calling Jesus the Son of God) and return to her Jewish roots. But this position is not supported by careful scholarship. The volume, Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism (Seabury 1982), by the Anglican scholar John Riches, argues that Jesus' controversies were with the Jewish leaders who had "set very firm limits on the prophets and subordinated Israel, not to the living Word of Yahweh, spoken through his prophets, but to the codified Law given once to his servant Moses and now administered by a central authority, the High Priests and the Great Council (1982:62). Riches is supported in this thesis by no less a Jewish scholar than Cyrus H. Gordon. His essay, "Jewish Reactions to Christian Borrowings," details the manner in which the synagogue sought to establish an antithesis with the traditional Jewish thought and worship retained by the emerging "Messianic" congregations (David N. Freedman Festschrift, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983, pp. 685-690). It is tragic that Wilson would have Christians find their Jewish roots in 1st and 2nd century Rabbinism--the period when Rabbinism was nervously but creatively distancing itself from its Old Testament moorings in order that it might counter the vigorous witness of the Jewish believers in the emerging New Testament church.

## 2. Does Judaism advocate "pure grace"?

Wilson wants us to believe that Pinchas Lapide represents normative Judaism when he states, "The Rabbinate has never considered the Torah as a way of salvation to God. . . . [We Jews] regard salvation as God's exclusive prerogative. . . . We are the advocates of 'pure grace'" (p. 21). On this basis Wilson rejects the Apostle Paul's evaluation of the Jews' all too prevalent "works-righteousness" motif in his day (Rom 9:31-32--"Israel who pursued the righteousness which is based on Law did not succeed in fulfilling that Law. Why? Because they did not pursue it through faith, but as if it were based on works." Also Rom 10:2-4). In other words, Wilson knows better than Paul. He states: "By grace through faith" was "the common teaching of first-century Judaism" (p. 21). Wilson goes on to state that any other position (including Paul's?) would be "in reality. . . a caricature or misrepresentation" of the truth (p. 20).

Wilson knows that in order to establish a case for the abiding salvific validity of Rabbinic Judaism that will satisfy Evangelicals he has to make such disarming affirmations. It is significant that he devotes only a bit more than a single page to this crucial issue (p. 20-21). He feels no defense is needed. The impression he thereby conveys is that only an ignoramus would think otherwise. And with what result? This marks Wilson's first contribution to a mood that will increasingly overtake the reader's consciousness as he or she presses on deeper and deeper into his book: *The church has no business evangelizing Jews*.

What shall we say by way of reaction? Actually all sorts of scholarly opinion and Jewish documentation can be marshalled to destroy this attempt to mollify Evangelicals. John Bright speaks for many biblical scholars when he states that what Jesus challenged in his day was the Rabbinic view that Torah "had ceased to be the definition of the requisite response to the gracious acts of God and became the means by which men (and women) might achieve the divine favor and become worthy of the promises" (The Kingdom of God, Abingdon Press, 1953:428). Sibley quotes Maimonides (Issues in the Jewish-Christian Dialogue, ed. H. Croner and L. Klenicki, Paulist Press, 1979:88) and Joseph Klausner (The Messianic Idea in Israel, Macmillan, 1955:530,531) and numerous quotes from The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion (ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and G. Wigoder, Jerusalem Masada Press, 1967:48) and even Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein (What Christians Should Know About Jews and Judaism, Word Books, 1984:59). Incidentally, this Rabbi enthusiastically endorses Wilson's book (see Christianity Today, June 16, 1989).

But I have even more compelling evidence that Wilson is wrong. In recent years I have been in correspondence with Rabbi Dennis Prager, a radio-TV commentator in Southern California. He edits a quarterly paper, Ultimate Issues. He recently raised the question: "Is God Loveable?" and sought to draft a comprehensive Jewish answer (Vol. 9; No. 4, pp. 15,16). What does his answer reveal? He says nothing that even begins to approximate any sense of gratitude or love for God because of His grace and His salvation. If Judaism teaches the "pure grace" of God, why this silence? All Prager can do is self-righteously and pridefully state that

he wonders "whether God ought to have his own Day of Atonement on which to ask human beings to forgive Him" (p. 16). What I wrote to Prager applies equally to Wilson.

Your silence about the enormity of human sin, and the total estrangement from God it has caused, reflects almost complete departure from a fundamental theme in the biblical witness (e.g., Isa. 59:2). In addition, your silence about what God has done to put away sin through the Messiah offering himself to be "stricken for the transgression" of Israel ("my people"--Isa. 53:4-9, especially 8) is also tragic. Frankly, I never saw so clearly the great difference between Judaism and what any Jew who believes in Jesus constantly affirms: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners the Messiah died for us" (Rom. 5:8). . . . Why doesn't Judaism stress the fallenness of the human race and the desperate wickedness of the human heart (Jer 17:9)? Why does it stand back and ask God to put His act together? Why does it generate such self-righteousness?

It is not difficult for us to answer these questions. We know that Judaism proclaims that Jews are quite able, because they are Jews, to make themselves fit for God's presence, His friendship, and His eternal salvation. Obviously, all talk of beseeching them on behalf of Jesus the Messiah, to be reconciled to God is utterly unnecessary, if not downright offensive to them (2 Cor 5:20).

### 3. What is the Church?

Wilson admits that the issue of Jesus Christ separates synagogue from church (p. 54). Actually, this is the only issue on which all segments of Judaism are in passionate agreement: Jesus is neither the Messiah of Israel nor the Son of God. But when Wilson makes the amazing claim that "in the New Testament Paul stresses that the coexistence of both faiths is in keeping with God's mysterious plan" (p. 328), what is he saying? Nothing less than that Rabbinic Judaism is for Jews and Biblical Christianity for Gentiles. But did not Jesus tell the Jewish people otherwise? One recalls how he said, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed My voice. So there shall be one flock, One Shepherd" (John 10:16). As a result, was it not one of His great redemptive achievements to bring Jews and non-Jews together into a new unity? "He is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility . . . that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two . . . and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bring the hostility to an end (Eph 2:13-16).



In contrast, Wilson calls for mutual acceptance and peaceful coexistence between church and synagogue and makes no mention of the Apostle Paul's prayer that the Jewish people "be saved" (Rom 10:1). No wonder that Rabbi A. James Rudin and Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein are so enthusiastic in their public endorsement of Wilson's book. We know of their avowed hostility toward all attempts by Christians to evangelize the Jewish people.

#### 4. Why so much special pleading?

There are many factual matters that Wilson has had to deal with in this extensive study. It was inevitable that as we sought carefully to trace the movement of Wilson's argument, our prior familiarity with his themes would enable us to interact responsibly with his concerns. But what was unexpected was the fact that again and again we found ourselves wondering why he was so uniformly supportive of the perspectives of liberal scholars and Jewish Rabbis. We have already referred to his superficial disregard for the full implications of the brutal Birkat Ha-Minim that was used so unjustly and ruthlessly to drive Messianic Jews out of the synagogue. And we would ask why he relegates the persecution of Messianic Jews to "acts of mob violence rather than official persecution" (p. 59) when references in the Acts and Epistles speak otherwise.

#### 5. Are Judaism and Christianity divorced?

Wilson makes a series of statements on page 328 that are altogether incredible. He begins by affirming that "Jesus and the faith that developed around his teachings" became "major obstacles in the split between Judaism and Christianity." We agree. Then he adds: "The divorce is not permanent." What does he mean? His answer is the astounding claim that represents complete fabrication: "In the New Testament Paul stresses that the coexistence of both faiths is in keeping with God's mysterious plan." Actually, what Paul stressed was the continuity of both Jews and Gentiles, which is a far different matter. Paul never saw in Rabbinic Judaism the revealed will of God. Finally, Wilson's staggering conclusion that

"eventually, there will be a breakthrough, and the 'ultimate transcendence of the divorce.'" By this Wilson means that in the End, both Jews and Christians will see things as they really are-- in short, that the differences between these two religious communities were always minimal and that nothing really divided them. How do we react? All we can advise is that Wilson step into the world of the Bible and ponder what God has actually revealed concerning the End. And what will he find? Quite a different picture. Nothing less than the full disclosure in power and glory of Jesus the Messiah of Israel and the Eternal Son of God. He alone will be preeminent and at His Name "every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue (Jew and Gentile) shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10,11).

Admittedly Jews and gentile believers in Jesus and Jews who do not believe in him have much in common. Both have Abraham as their father; indeed, all believers in Jesus are spiritual Semites. The Hebrew Bible with its great treasures is their common possession. Christians share the sentiments of Jews in revelling in the record of the divine disclosure and religious experience of the people of God from Genesis to Malachi. Both have the same moral and ethical rootage via the giving of the Law at Sinai. Both look for the coming of the Kingdom of God when righteousness and justice shall characterize the nations. And both look for the glorious manifestation of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Last Day. He shall then be exalted as God over all the earth, the nations, and the universe.

But Rabbinic Judaism and the Christian Church differ on two major points: the attitude toward Jesus of Nazareth and the attitude to what constitutes acceptable worship according to the Old Testament revelation. And in the end Jesus alone will be exalted.

I want to be fair in this review. In Part IV of Our Father Abraham Wilson identifies those areas in the Hebrew heritage that have had a significant though unappreciated role in forming the personal and societal values of Christians. We are indebted to Professor Wilson for sharing these insights with us. He has rendered the Church in our day a noteworthy service by encouraging Christians to rethink their relationship to this neglected Jewish heritage. Those

who master this portion of his book will deliberately push themselves into the forefront of all efforts to resist every form of anti-Semitism in our day.

But the closing section, Part V, devoted to "practical" considerations brought me to a full stop. Its object is to provide insight into "how Christians can reach out and build productive relations with today's Jewish community" (xviii). When I began this section I was filled with anticipation. Now I would learn my responsibility toward Jews and Judaism. Professor Wilson wants Christians to establish "personal contact with the Jewish community" and "become personally involved in the contemporary Christian-Jewish encounter" (p. 320). I agree fully with him. We should reach out thoughtfully, humbly, and caringly to Jews. But, when he stated that this reaching out is to be expressed by "interfaith dialogue, educational activities and social action" (p. 324), I became curious as to what he meant. His explanation left much to be desired. For instance, by dialogue Wilson wants us to understand that its object is "not to convert one's partner from one faith and tradition to another" (p. 325). Wilson is very explicit at this point. He laments, "Too frequently in the past dialogues have exposed hidden Christian agendas and tactics" (p. 325). I personally am offended at this. In this whole section ("Face-to-face in Dialogue") Wilson is very critical of Christians who evangelize Jews. This is what makes Our Father Abraham so destructive. I heartily endorse Sibley's reaction: "Evangelism is not a hidden agenda, and never has been . . . . For an evangelical to depart from this basic understanding of the Gospel (i.e. "to the Jew first" Rom 1:16) and our commission to proclaim it to a lost world is to deny Evangelicals their *raison d'etre*" (p. 95). True, no one wants to endorse all the ways in which Gentiles have sought to evangelize Jews down through the centuries, but I have yet to meet any Jews who came to faith in our Lord Jesus who have criticized the obedience and out-going love of those Christians who shared the gospel with them. Sibley goes so far as to suggest that Wilson's promotion of dialogue and his opposition to Jewish evangelism are in lock-step with the leaders in Jewry today. He quotes Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein's counsel that "evangelicals regard dialogue as the proper forum in which to "preach

the gospel to Jews ' . . . without the intention of converting them" (1984:321). Let me share Sibley's conclusion:

One can hardly imagine a more calloused attitude toward the spiritual condition of unbelieving Israel . . . Wilson's understanding of Jewish evangelism is a discredit to any evangelical book and a dangerous precedent in the subversion of a healthy evangelical faith (p. 96).

POSTSCRIPT:

Obviously, this review is incomplete. More important by far is the paper that Dr. Goldberg will now present. His is the more important task, for he will share with us the significance of this book in terms of the things that Wilson has not seen fit to include. He will now introduce us to the one indispensable element in our Jewish roots. I am sure that his heart is as heavy as mine over having to participate in the presentation. After all, Professor Wilson loves the Jewish people, and both of us love him for this, although we painfully recognize that we are not on his side.

One final thought: on the back cover of this book is an enthusiastic endorsement by Dr. Carl E. Armerding of Regent College. Among other things Dr. Armerding wrote, "Marvin Wilson has thrown down a theological gauntlet, challenging Christians of all kinds to reform a two-thousand-year-old history of misunderstanding Jews and misinterpreting our own sources. Our Father Abraham does not pretend to be the last word in dialogue, but is a powerful first salvo!"

How do you react to this strident challenge? What battle does Dr. Armerding see joined? Just what is happening among Evangelicals in our day? Wilson comes from Gordon College and Armerding from Regent College. Significantly, David Wells comes from Gordon and James I. Packer from Regent, and both of these latter two men made significant contributions to the drafting of The Willowbank Declaration on the Christian Gospel and the Jewish People, a declaration the essence of which was incorporated in the Manila Manifesto drafted at Lausanne II (July 1989). When I read Dr. Armerding's almost intemperate endorsement of Our Father Abraham, I almost immediately wrote him to ask for details: What war was he

referring to? Are there to be other salvos? On whose side was he? Can it be that some Evangelicals with their professed allegiance to Scripture are no longer agreed that the gospel is "for the Jew first" (Rom 1:16)? I will not share with you the correspondence that eventuated, but I firmly believe that if Evangelicals do not close ranks on the issue of evangelizing the Jewish people, the evangelical segment of the Church is in deep trouble.

Arthur F. Glasser

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#### APPENDIX A

"Why were we not consulted?"

David Baron  
T. H. Bendor-Samuel  
Solomon Birnbaum  
Donald G. Bloesch  
David L. Cooper  
Ludwig R. DeWitz  
Alfred Edersheim  
Henry Einsbruch  
Henry L. Ellison  
George P. Fisher  
John Fisher  
George W. Forall  
David N. Freedman  
Arnold Fruchtenbaum  
Daniel Fuchs  
Bernard B. Gair  
Jacob Gartenhaus  
Emmanuel M. Gitlin  
Louis Goldberg  
Mitch Glaser

Phillip Goble  
Emmanuel S. Greenbaum  
Karl J. Hirsch  
Arthur W. Kac  
Aaron J. Kligerman  
Joseph I. Landsman  
Heinz D. Leuner  
Stephen B. Levinson  
Nahum Levison  
Isaac Lichenstein  
Elias Newman  
Max I. Reich  
Molshe Rosen  
Harcourt Samuel  
Adolph Saphir  
Nathan J. Stone  
Max Wertheimer  
John Wilkinson  
Morris Zeldman  
Marsha Zimmerman