

## Item #82 (Abraham and Jesus)

One of the more intriguing passages in the Gospel of John is John 8,31-59. (What follows is written using my previous presentation of John as a basis. See Items #1 and #73 above.) In the passage singled out for discussion in this Item, John remains true to the purpose of his calling as the beloved disciple to present Jesus as divine (see John 20,30-31). But he does this in the context of his calling as an Apostle, to witness to the humanity of Jesus (see Matthew 10,2). The passage under discussion begins after the previous passage saying that “As He said these things, many believed in Him” (John 8,30). I would prefer to translate what follows in John 8,31 as follows: “Jesus then was saying to the Judeans who had believed in Him, ‘If you remain in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’. The persons to whom Jesus was speaking no longer believe in Jesus, for they are trying to kill Him (see John 8,37.40). (On the perfect tense used with a pluperfect meaning see my article in *Biblica* 61 [1980] 110-115).

The confrontation between Jesus and these former disciples of His then turns to true sonship. After alluding to His divinity by referring to God as His Father, Jesus contrasts this sonship with that of His adversaries (John 8,38). Jesus denies that His adversaries are true “children” of Abraham, for if they were they would be doing what Abraham did (that is, have faith in God as Abraham did). By their rejection of Himself, Jesus says that the adversaries to whom He is speaking show that God is not their Father, in contrast to what Abraham did (John 8,42). Jesus then proceeds to name the real father of these adversaries: the devil (John 8,44). Jesus continues by saying that the devil is a murderer (by implication, just as are His adversaries), and a liar with no truth in him, just as His adversaries, who do not believe Jesus when He tells them the truth (John 8,44-45). Jesus continues by stating that if His adversaries were in a right relation with God they would believe His words (John 8,47).

Jesus then introduces the subject of death by stating that if one keeps the word He speaks (in contrast to His adversaries who have not), they would not “see death”, that is, they would have the gift of eternal life (John 8,51). His adversaries ask if Jesus is greater than Abraham, who obviously died (John 8,53). Jesus answers by stating that God glorifies Him (John 8,54). Here He is alluding to His crucifixion which, in John’s Gospel is primarily about God’s glorifying Jesus by revealing His divinity, and only secondarily about His death.

Then Jesus solemnly states: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he might see My day; he both saw it and rejoiced” (John 8,56). Jesus is alluding here to the testing of Abraham as set forth in Genesis 22,1-18. He agrees that Abraham is the father of His adversaries, but in a physical sense (“your father Abraham”). Jesus is alluding to the fact that there was a ram offered in sacrifice in the “testing” of Abraham, not a human (Genesis 22,13). Isaac, the blood descendant of Abraham, was not offered in sacrifice as was necessary for the forgiveness of Adam’s Sin. But this tradition of a lack of sufficient sacrifice continued on down to the time of Jesus, and Abraham’s “seed”, Jesus, by His death on the cross, made up the lack, as Paul notes in Galatians 3,15-18. Thus Jesus as human.

The interaction between Jesus and His adversaries concludes: “The Judeans then said to Him, “ You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?” Jesus then said to them, “Indeed I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I am” (John 8,57-58). The phrase “I am” is a citation from Exodus 3,14 where God uses this expression in giving to Moses the name he should use in telling the people Who sent him to lead them. Jesus thus makes Himself one with His Father (see John 10,30). Thus Jesus as divine.

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On Saturday, July 3, 1976 I had the occasion to visit Tell-al-Baid, uninhabited ruins in an isolated and desolate area of southern Iraq, ruins that four millennia ago were Ur of the Chaldees, where the Abraham of the Bible probably grew up. It was probably at Haran, well to the north of Ur, where God called Abraham and made him the father of the chosen people (see Genesis 12,1-3; 15,1-6). Just as Jesus chose uneducated men to be His Apostles, and not some educated scribes who, if chosen to be witnesses of His resurrection, would be open to the charge of inventing it all, so God chose in Abraham an ordinary native of an ordinary place to avoid the charge of inventing it all. As I mull over my brief exposure to what must have been a pleasant place because of the then proximity of the Euphrates River but is now a bone-dry oven inches deep in dust and pottery shards, I think how pleasant it will be in the world to come to get to know the Abraham I have studied and prayed over, Abraham my “father in faith” (the First Eucharistic Prayer of the Latin Rite Mass). **(James Swetnam, S.J., November 8, 2021)**

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