

ARISE & BUILD

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ABRAHAM'S FAITH ANCHORS BOTH ESCHATOLOGY AND DUTY

BY MARTIN G. SELBREDE



Abraham's vision for the future shaped how he walked. He casts his long shadow across eschatology as well. And it is at the intersection of the first and last books of the Bible that we start to grasp how *faith* is focused upon the Kingdom, the city of God. Dr. R. J. Rushdoony helps us navigate the highway between Abraham and the book of Revelation. Consider his two comments:

As a book for sight, Revelation becomes a frustration; as *a book for faith*, it becomes a joy and a comfort.¹

It is a mark of the church's decline in our time that too little is made of Abraham and his *faith*.²

A reversal of that decline would require renewed respect for, and adoption of, the faith of Abraham, especially as it relates to its object: the city of God. This would put our understanding of Revelation and eschatology on a more proactive basis.

When Abraham came to "the land of promise," he dwelled there in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were "heirs with him of the same promise" (v. 9). All "looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (v. 10). They were promised more than a land for themselves: they expected a new society founded on God's law and word, and it was this they longed for. This new city or social order would be the reverse of the Tower of Babel: its purpose would

be, not the glory of man, but the glory of God.³

The relevance of Abraham's walking by faith and not by sight is reflected in how Christians approach the book of Revelation: for some it opens up new avenues of active service for the Kingdom's enlargement, while others become culturally paralyzed by it.

[But] for too many people, the purpose of any reading of Revelation is to enable them to walk by sight ... But the calling of the Christian is to walk by faith, and the purpose of Revelation is to strengthen us against the enemy, prepare us to do battle, and to walk in the faith that our Lord will triumph, that the great work He has begun, He will accomplish.⁴

But Revelation makes clear that the kingdom is now, and that, not by evading conflict, responsibility, and suffering, but by assuming it, do Christians and the Church gain their inheritance. Both compromise with the world and flight from it assume that Christ is impotent and that His kingdom is in the future and has no power today.⁵

We must adopt the faith of Abraham in its fullness when looking into Scripture. For this purpose, we will turn to Isaiah 51.

ISAIAH 51: A PIVOTAL SCRIPTURE

In Isaiah 51, the righteousness and justice of God winds through the chapter, introducing Abraham and then taking us deep into the future.

Hearken to me, ye that follow after

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righteousness, ye that seek the LORD: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged. Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you: for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him. For the LORD shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody. Hearken unto me, my people; and give ear unto me, O my nation: for a law shall proceed from me, and I will make my judgment to rest for a light of the people. My righteousness is near; my salvation is gone forth, and mine arms shall judge the people; the isles shall wait upon me, and on mine arm shall they trust ... Hearken unto me, ye that know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; fear ye not the reproach of men, neither be ye afraid of their revilings. (Isa 51:1-5, 7).

Starting with those who follow after righteousness, we look from Abraham, then to the transformation of the wilderness into Eden and the desert into God's garden, to a law proceeding from God whereby His judgment provides light, wherein those who know righteousness are "the people in whose heart is my law," viz., those who need not fear men nor their revilings.

Have I gratuitously steered this discussion into the field of ethics, of law, without warrant? Schilder's comments on Isa. 28:9-10 captures that same objection against Isaiah himself:

The ... priests and prophets united themselves in a witty, yet hideous, reproach that Isaiah actually was only a very unfortunate teacher of ethics. For from his mouth nothing else proceeded but cowardly and molesting morality sermons ... Thus [they] bemoaned themselves that Isaiah allowed prophecy to decline into moral lessons: commandment upon commandment, precept upon precept, today this and tomorrow that.⁶

We propose to take Isaiah at his word. Let's dig deeper to see where he takes us.

THE MEANING OF RIGHTEOUSNESS (MISHPAT) IN ISAIAH 51

Both *before and after* putting the focus on Abraham (Isa. 51:2), Isaiah focuses on the *mishpat*, the righteous judicial requirements, of God in verses 1, 5, and 6 (where the word appears in both masculine and feminine forms). George Adam Smith says of verse 1,

The loyal Israelites fall back to doubt themselves. They see with dismay how few are ready to achieve the freedom that God has assured, and how small and insignificant a group of individuals the future of the nation depends. But their disappointment is not made by them an excuse to desert the purpose of Jehovah: their fewness makes them the more faithful, and the defection of their countrymen drives them the closer to their God. "Righteousness" here is more probably used in the outward sense ... of vindication and victory: the "coming right" of God's people and God's cause in the world, their justification and triumph in history. They who are addressed will then be they who, in spite of their fewness, believe in this triumph, "follow it," make it their goal and their aim, and "seek Jehovah," knowing that He can bring it to pass.⁷

Here is a people serious about victory! *Righteousness* here doesn't mean the personal character of the faithful, because "what troubles them is not that they are personally unrighteous, but that they are so few and insignificant. And what God promises them in answer is something external, the establishment of Zion."⁸ Smith's exposition of Isaiah 42 explains the meaning of *mishpat*:

"mishpat" is not only the civic righteousness and justice ... On the one hand it is conterminous with national virtue, on the other it is the ordinance and will of God. This, then, is the burden of the Servant's work, to pervade and instruct every nation's life on earth with the righteousness and piety that are ordained of God. "He shall not flag nor break, till he hath set in the earth Law."—till in every nation justice, humanity, and worship are established as the law of God.

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And the marvel of so universal and political an ideal was that it came not to a people in the front ranks of civilization or of empire, but to ... a mere herd of captives, despised and rejected of men.⁹

Isaiah 51:16 gets particular attention by Smith:

The last verse of this reply is notable for the enormous extension which it gives to the purpose of Jehovah in endowing Israel as His prophet,—an extension to no less than the renewal of the universe,—“in order to plant the heavens and found the earth.”¹⁰

This is no surprise, given that Abraham was to be the heir of the world (Romans 4:13). We're not to “look to Abraham” and then forget what we saw (cf. James 1:24). We are to look to Abraham *to do the works of Abraham* (John 8:39) and advance the Kingdom on earth.

The objection that there was no law or *mishpat* among the patriarchs has been ably refuted elsewhere.¹¹

THE VISION OF VICTORY IN THE CITY OF GOD

The early Christians saw the Kingdom's advance clearly, as Westcott observes:

The thought of the Christian *polis*, *politeia* [city of God], which must be regarded on the one side as opposed to all earthly states and institutions, and on the other as absorbing and transforming them, finds frequent expression in early writers: Clem. *Ad Cor.* i. 2, 54; Polyc. 5; Herm. *Sim.* i. 1; *Ep. Ad Diogn.* 5; Clem. *Al. Strom.* iv.174.¹²

This confidence was not restricted to Christian writers:

The faith of Abraham is no less conspicuous in later Jewish teaching than in Christian teaching. He is said (*Mechilta* on Ex. 14:31, ap. Delitzsch l.c.) to have gained this world and the world to come by Faith. In this respect he is spoken of as a father of the Gentiles (Delitzsch, *Brief an d. Römer*, p. 80).¹³

The city which has foundations “is essentially comprehensive. It includes

men as men, and places them in their due connection with Nature. This inherent universality of the Order ... explains the silence of [Hebrews] on the call of the Gentiles.”¹⁴

“The city of the Great King” (Ps. 48:2; comp. Mt. 5:35) ... tended to create a sense of spiritual fellowship offering the hope of an indefinite enlargement (Ps. 87).¹⁵

LESSONS FROM THE ROCK QUARRY

John the Baptist shocked the scribes and Pharisees when he said that “God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.” Klaas Schilder adds,

The Baptizer was proven right. Soon the heathens did come; *they were attributed* to Abraham. They did not have his blood, *but they had his faith* ... One who is born again is exactly as great a wonder as a stone that becomes a man and is incorporated in the manhood of God's election. No, he is an *even greater* wonder. For a stone does not resist life. A sinner does.¹⁶

Consider another possibility why the Baptist referred to making children from Abraham out of stones: he was aware of Isaiah 51:1-2 where Abraham is “the rock from whence ye are hewn.” God hews out children for Abraham: the imagery of rocks and stones may be intentional.

In that light, Jesus marveled at the faith of the centurion, a faith greater than any encountered in Israel, adding,

many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 8:11)

The centurion's faith aligned him with *no less a personage* than the patriarch Abraham. But the supposed keepers of Israel's faith (the seminarians of the age) would be “cast out into outer darkness” (Matt. 8:12). Similarly, “the Church of today also has the name of Abraham and the covenant. But if that is all she believes, she has fallen from Abraham and God.”¹⁷

A CITY THAT HATH FOUNDATIONS: ABRAHAM'S GOAL

The psalm that most extols the transnational nature of Zion opens with praise for its *foundation*: “His *foundation* is in the holy mountains ... Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God” (Ps. 87:1, 3). What’s so glorious about Zion?

I will make mention of Egypt and Babylon as knowers of me. Behold Philistia, and Tyre, with Ethiopia: this man was born there. And of Zion it shall be said, Each and every man is born in her: and the highest himself shall establish her. (Ps. 87:4-5)¹⁸

This is, indeed, the city that hath foundations: the Kingdom of God into which by regeneration all living people will be born, so that the promise to Abraham would be fulfilled that all the families of the earth would be blessed in him.¹⁹

ABRAHAMIC FAITH VERSUS BUILDING THE PROPHETS' TOMBS

Schilder expands on Luke 11:47-48 concerning those who “build the tombs of the prophets.”

Those prophets had left a last will and testament. They said, “Live and act in accordance to this testament and execute it.” But the Pharisees did not read those testaments, or if they did read them, they read them erroneously and explained them in a self-willed manner.²⁰

Schilder indicts those who twist Scripture to avoid building anything which “the old prophets had instructed them to build.”²¹ Whatever labor they exerted was without value.

But if this labor is not a toiling by the light of the Word for *growth and penetration* of God’s eternal work *from* the past *into* our own present time, then we ourselves are like the tombs we build: whitewashed, but on the inside full of dry bones of the dead.²²

THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM: IT LIVES BEYOND TODAY

Dr. Rushdoony commented on an autobiography by Rolf Thomassen, “a

cripple, a spastic. Neither his feet, hands, nor his tongue are under his control ... He entered life with only a helpless body, but his heart and faith have been strong ... His parents could not give their afflicted son a sound body, but they did give him a sound faith, and the results have been great accordingly.”²³ Thomassen’s marvelous achievements are to be credited to his being able to live “beyond today,” adopting the *orientation of Abraham* to his circumstances. The message of Thomassen’s life resonates in light of Abraham’s example: “If the world disappoints us or cripples us, our hope is not ended ... The man to be truly pitied is not Rolf Thomassen but the man who lives only for today. It is he who loses his life and is left desolate and crippled in the end.”²⁴

1. Rushdoony, Rousas John, *Thy Kingdom Come: Studies in Daniel and Revelation* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, [1970]1998), p. 211.
 2. Rushdoony, Rousas John, *Hebrews, James & Jude* (Vallecito, CA: Ross Hoss Books, 2001), p. 113.
 3. *ibid.*, p. 112.
 4. Rushdoony, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 211.
 5. *ibid.*
 6. Schilder, Klaas, *Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh* Vol. 4 (Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada: Inheritance Publications, 2013), p. 731.
 7. George Adam Smith in *The Expositor's Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books House, [1903] 1982), vol. 3, p. 827.
 8. *ibid.*, footnote with asterisk contradicting Dillman’s proposed interpretation.
 9. *ibid.*, p. 805.
 10. *ibid.*
 11. Bruckner, James K., *Implied Law in the Abraham Narrative: A Literary and Theological Analysis / Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 335* (New York, NY: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).
 12. Brooke Foss Westcott, *Commentary on Hebrews* at Hebrews 11:10, Kindle.
 13. *ibid.*
 14. *ibid.*
 15. *ibid.*
 16. Schilder, Klaas, *Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh* Vol 1 (Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada: Inheritance Publications, 2013), p. 55.
 17. Schilder, Vol. 1, p. 55.
 18. The idiom “this man and that man” means “each and every man” and is translated this way at Esther 1:8.
- continued on last page...*

MATURITY IN GOD'S SERVICE

BY MARK R. RUSHDOONY



We are all familiar with stories of people who grew up on a farm or working in a family business. I am a baby boomer, but my generation was raised on stories of life during the Great Depression and World War II. When times were hard, or fathers or sons were absent, younger family members suddenly had a great deal of adult responsibility placed on their shoulders. Hard work was certainly expected, but more than chores was involved. Very young children had to leave their carefree childhood and understand the importance of their labor to the family. They often had to accept responsibility for the care of livestock, use of a tractor, delivering goods to customers, and the like. Often, a substantial amount of work took place before the school day. Some had to quit school altogether to work full time for the family's needs. Children of that era typically obediently did what they were told, but the family's wellbeing necessitated their understanding of the gravity of the situation. Understanding their responsibility was necessary to the development of maturity, and its conscientious performance developed character.

MATURITY IN THE CHRISTIAN

Maturity in the Christian life also demands both an understanding of personal responsibility and faithfulness in its performance. Several of the parables of Jesus were about the faithful performance of assigned responsibility in the absence of the master. The parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30) shows that more than a minimal obedience is expected that a faithful servant proactively engages his efforts into advancing his lord's interests.

Yet sinful man often avoids responsibility and work. Affluence is often cited as the cause, but it is no more than

an enabling circumstance; the need to survive forces many to labor even if their character is inclined to indolence. Affluence merely removes that incentive to enterprise.

Affluence has allowed modern man to place an importance on adolescence never known in history. It is seen as a period of youthful pleasure without responsibilities, one which has been extended into the college years and beyond. It is not hard to find individuals who never outgrow childish priorities, who avoid maturity and responsibility. Many see work only as a necessary means of funding their recreation, and their accumulation of toys (not to mention debt) witnesses to this.

The avoidance of maturity is also evident in the church. Young people's church groups and Christian colleges often sing the same children's choruses taught in primary school classes. Modern worship is now in terms of what the churchgoer finds entertaining. It is increasingly a show. Sermons tend to be shallow because the faith is seen as shallow, with limited application. There is an avoidance of marriage; the minivan is, as the station wagon before it, a hated symbol of the responsibilities of family life that are eschewed.

BABIES CAN ONLY DIGEST MILK

Paul confronted immaturity in the Corinthian church by calling them "babes in Christ" who couldn't digest meatier teaching so had to be served "milk" instead (I Cor. 3:1-15). Their problem was more than being new to their faith. They saw individuals and factions as important, thereby placing personal feelings above the faith. They were immature because they were not growing; they failed to see the larger picture of the Kingdom of God meeting their culture, so Paul immediately began

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explaining about the importance of Kingdom work: “For we are *laborers* together with God ... let every man take heed *how he buildeth* thereupon” (vv. 9-10). “Every man’s *work* shall be made manifest,” Paul added (v. 13). It is the Christian’s calling to be part of God’s family and to be “laborers” in the building of His Kingdom. Their petty squabbles showed the Corinthians did not understand their larger responsibilities in the Kingdom so they had not engaged themselves in God’s service.

The writer of Hebrews reprimanded believing Jews who were apparently not yet willing to break out of the perspective that plagued their unbelieving countrymen (Heb. 5:11-14). Again, they are acting immaturely, as “babes” (v. 13) who were “dull of hearing” (v. 11). The “strong meat” of teaching had to wait until they were able, as mature believers, “to discern both good and evil” (v. 14).

Immaturity is, for believers, more than a “failure to launch.” It is a moral failure, a character issue, one that can only be overcome by a willingness to see and accept one’s responsibility to faithfully work in his heavenly Father’s business.

The problematic Arminian emphasis on free will extends beyond the theology of redemption, because it is accompanied by continuing calls to make more decisions: “getting right with God,” rededicating one’s life, etc. It begins with the primacy of man’s will in salvation and continues with that focus, one that tends to center the faith on man rather than God. Regeneration that is enabled by the “effectual” calling of the Holy Spirit means, rather, that same power now commands our sanctification, our growth in grace. Maturity and growth, therefore, are our expectation of ourselves and those who claim to be regenerated by the blood of Jesus. Salvation is then not the goal of Christian work but its starting line. When we put a charger on a dead car battery, it is with the expectation of powering that car to go someplace. Where

are we going in the service of our Lord? When the brother of Jesus said, “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:20), he was offering an oxymoron, saying that such thinking was “vain,” empty and non-sensical.

Maturity means we are developing as a “new creature” in Christ (II Cor. 5:17) in knowledge, faith, and obedience. Pietistic religion loves to emphasize faith in the Christian walk, because it is, like its ethics, a subjective standard. Jesus had a more objective standard in view when He said, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). The Old Testament prophets used disobedience as the evidence of the Jew’s unfaithfulness. My father’s thesis in *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (1973) was that the law of God was our means of sanctification, our measure of our faithfulness and growth in grace. It is a sad commentary on the modern church when we so commonly see its preachers and parishioners piously denouncing the law of God as unspiritual (or worse).

In our sanctification, the Kingdom must develop in our minds as well as our hearts. Just as many a father has carefully explained to his child the importance of his work to the family’s wellbeing, we must first know what God expects of us. Then, like a child, we assume the responsibility of the duties assigned us. God starts us with a few talents, but we must develop so our productivity increases, and we can teach another generation after us the responsibilities that come with our Father’s business.

The Christians at Corinth did not understand the work at hand. They could see no further than the personalities and factions in the church, as though the faith was a contest with rival teams. Their lack of understanding the Kingdom work and their own duties evidenced immaturity; they were acting like children in the faith. Paul was willing to teach them, but only at the most rudimentary level, because he wanted them to see their inability and its cause.

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THE REMNANT REMAINS FAITHFUL

The idea of the remnant is a recurring one in Scripture. God repeatedly told His people that His purposes would come to pass with or without them. A generation died in the wilderness. The ten northern tribes largely disappeared from history, then God warned the people of Judah that so many would die that there would be no one to bury the dead: the birds of the field would eat their flesh. Later, He destroyed the monarchy, Jerusalem, and the temple while sending the people into a foreign country.

Yet, a small remnant did return, and God's promises went forward. When their apostate descendants rejected the Messiah they claimed to be expecting, a believing remnant took the gospel to the Gentiles with the message of the Kingdom. God's purposes will go forward, and His Kingdom will grow to fill the earth, because His Spirit's work is effectual. Our work in the Kingdom is a privilege. The work is that of the Spirit; we are called to faithfulness, which can only be measured by self-conscious obedience to God. Like a child who learns the performance of his duties from his patient father, we must heed God's Word and be His remnant in our lifetime.

One of the most beautiful and effective teachings of the Reformation was "the priesthood of all believers." It contrasted with the perspective that to really serve God one had to be a monk, nun, or priest. This idea has returned in Protestantism. When I was young, "full-time Christian service" was urged on those who were truly interested in serving God, ignoring the importance and even depreciating the validity of other callings. In the idea of the priesthood of all believers, the Reformers said a man's calling, however humble, was his means of serving God.

That teaching caused an economic revolution that resulted in an explosion of economic development in Europe. Men took pride in their calling and work. In Europe and America, it resulted in

the "Protestant work ethic," famous for quality and business deals bound by a handshake, because men felt their service to God was measured by the integrity displayed in their work.

Sometimes our work is not directly involved in Kingdom advancement. Sometimes it is hard for us to see what good our labors are for God. Even then, God has provided a mechanism whereby all our labors serve His Kingdom—the tithe, which is the necessary funding mechanism of Kingdom work.

I have often wondered if the parents of Martin Luther or John Calvin doubted the value of any contribution they could make in God's service. We are the workers of the Kingdom, not its planners or directors. Like the farm boy learning his responsibilities, we apply our shoulders to the wheel and follow our Father's instructions because we know that our "labor is not in vain in the Lord." That is the maturity He expects of His Children. 🏡

M. Selbrede, Abaham's Faith, cont...

19. "Cultural pessimists" argue that passages like Hebrews 13:14 ("here we have no lasting city") absolve them of cultural responsibility. But "we must explain Heb. 13:14 in light of the prediction of Christ about the destruction of Jerusalem ... We cannot permit ourselves to base our pessimism about culture on this text. How dangerous it is to adopt this manner of speaking." Cf. Van Der Waal, C., *The World Our Home: Christians Between Creation and Recreation* (Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada: Inheritance Publications, 2013), p. 35. This book examines Biblical texts used to "refute" cultural involvement: texts about deserts, pilgrims, strangers, aliens, etc., and is highly recommended. This title is available at the publisher's website <https://inhpubli.vercel.app/products/14574>

20. Schilder, Klaas, *Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh* Vol. 4 (Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada: Inheritance Publications, 2013), pp. 652-653.

21. *ibid.*, p. 653.

22. *ibid.*

23. Rushdoony, Rousas John, *Good Morning, Friends* Vol. 2 (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2018), p. 164-166.

24. *ibid.*, p. 167.



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P.O. Box 158 • Vallecito, CA 95251-9989

Phone: (209) 736-4365

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