

A 21st Century (BCE) Truck Driver

He was a "Habiru". Perhaps you recognize the similarity with its derivative: "Hebrew." Habiru—a driver of donkey caravans—a 21st century (BCE) truck driver. He lived in Ur, a Sumerian city of great wealth. His name was Abram, which means "my father be praised." We don't know his father's name; but, given *his* name, I suspect his father had ambitions for him: "Make me proud, Son."

Abram's donkey caravans followed a route we call the "fertile crescent", from his home to Egypt and back. There was a particular area along that route that seemed to call to him. He met a man there named Melchizedek, King of Salem and priest of El Elyon. Salem. Shalem in Hebrew; later called Jeru Shalem (Jerusalem).

Apparently, a relationship developed between Abram and Melchizedek. There's not much data here; so, I'm reading between the lines—such a relationship may have been part of the attraction to that part of the planet.

And the God Melchizedek served, "El Elyon" (in English, "God Most High") seemed to call out to Abram. Over a period of time the call grew stronger, and eventually Abram understood that call and that attraction as described in today's Lectionary reading from the Hebrew Scripture:

<p>Genesis 12:1-4a (NRSV) Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.</p>	<p>³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." ⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.</p>
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Just like that. God said, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house..." So Abram went... His name would be changed to Abraham ("Father of a multitude"). His grandson, Jacob, later would have his name changed to Israel ("He who wrestles with God"); and his twelve sons, Abraham's great grandsons, would be the ancestors of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. And now you know "the rest of the story."

The three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, hold Abraham as the paradigm for those who cast lesser loyalties and priorities aside and "boldly go where no one has gone before," entrusting life and future to God's care.

This migration of Israel's "first family" is a model for any movement from despair to hope, from oldness to newness, from death to life. In today's reading from the epistle, Paul refers to this text:

<p>ROMANS 4:1-5 (NRSV) <i>What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the scripture say? "Abraham</i></p>	<p><i>believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."</i> ⁴<i>Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.</i></p>
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Abraham believed God... And then Abraham acted upon that belief. Faith has

been described as stepping out into the darkness, not knowing where your next step will land. In Judeo/Christianity, Abraham sets the standard for faith.

By contrast, in the Gospel reading for today, Nicodemus personifies an Abraham who's not yet left Ur of the Chaldees, and has little inclination to do so. Nicodemus' grasp of God's design is shallow and barren, which is typical of literalists who inhabit all the world's great religions, including Christianity.

JOHN 3:1-9 (NRSV) *Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."* ³*Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."* ⁴*Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"* ⁵*Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'* ⁸*The wind blows where it will. You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."* ⁹*Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"*

Nicodemus' questions betray a mind closed so tightly that not even a well-honed figure of speech—a pun—gets it. The NRSV renders the key phrase, "born from above." In the original language the word is *ανωθεν*. It can have several meanings: (a) from above, (b) from the beginning, from of old, (c) again, anew. The tricky part is that Jesus and Nicodemus likely spoke Aramaic, and the New Testament is written in Greek; so, this word, *ανωθεν*, is a translation, after the fact.

[Yes; we believe the Scriptures are divinely inspired. I just wish the inspiration had come in a word that would be easier for us to understand. On the other hand, it's evident that Nicodemus had trouble with that word, even in his native tongue!]

Apparently, Nicodemus heard, as did the translators of the KJV, "...born again," because his question was, "How can a full-grown man enter his mother's womb and be born again?" So, Jesus changed the reference to "born of water and spirit." We assume Jesus' change of vocabulary doesn't imply a change in meaning; therefore, *ανωθεν* seems most likely to mean "from above," "from heaven," "from God", which does not contradict "born of water and spirit."

Jesus said, *"The wind blows where it will. You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."* But Nick still doesn't get it. You see how literalism distorts the truth by locking down God's intentions?

Back to our 21st century (BCE) truck driver: the text is not about his personal life. The focus is clearly and simply on the new life to which God calls him.

The source of this new life is the speech of God—a speech that changes his name; indeed, it changes the terms of Abraham's very existence. Before the speech his life was comfortable, without any risky imperative. As far as we know, his existence also was without the awesome, elusive force of promise.

But God speaks a promise to Abraham—a vision of a life not yet reality—an

invitation to live in hope, to trust the promise maker to be a promise keeper. So our father Abraham heard and went, destined for utter, dangerous, wondrous newness!

Wouldn't it be great if God spoke to us that way? With that clarity? I think, if it were that clear, I'd be willing to pick up and pack up and go.

I recall again that scene from Charles Dickens' "Christmas Carol:" Ebenezer Scrooge has just gone to bed, when he is visited by the ghost of his late business partner, Jacob Marley. Scrooge is scared out of his wits, and cries, "You're nothing but a spot of mustard; a bit of undigested ham!"

How do we know if it's God speaking to us, or last night's chili? Well, it's Lent; the season for renewing our spiritual disciplines. They're not called "disciplines" for nothing!

Maybe it was just in my Baptist upbringing, but, at some point in the distant past the spiritual disciplines, especially meditation, were Buddhist, Zen, you know, those Asian pagan religions? The only spiritual disciplines we focused on were prayer, Bible study, worship, witnessing—oh, and tithing.

Early in my time with the Disciples I stumbled upon meditation, and through that discipline have come my most vivid experiences of God's presence. And while those experiences are matters of faith; that is, they're not empirically verifiable, they have strengthened my faith by liberating me from any prerequisite hoops one must jump through in order to experience God's love and grace.

And those experiences liberated me from any obsession with gaining heaven, and replaced that obsession with an awareness of God's constant presence here and now, and a peace in *trusting God* for whatever future is in store.

So, how do we know it's God speaking? It's not called discipline for nothing.

Quaker scholar, Richard Foster, writes that the purpose all the spiritual disciplines is "liberation from the stifling slavery to self-interest and fear. When one's inner spirit is set free from all that holds it down, that can hardly be described as dull drudgery. Singing, dancing, even shouting characterize the Disciplines of the spiritual life."¹

I love Tony Compolo's writings. Here's a quote: "...if you think that being religious, being Christian, being spiritual is getting ready for the next world, you've missed the message of Jesus. Jesus didn't come here to get you ready for the next world, he came into this world to transform you into people through whom he could do his work in this world..." Kind of like *God Calling Abraham*.

¹ *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1978) p. 2.