Wealth & Piety

Middle Eastern Perspectives for Expat Workers



Karen L. H. Shaw

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Wealth and Piety: Middle Eastern Perspectives for Expat Workers
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The Righteous Rich in the Old Testament

Abraham: Our Rich, Righteous Father

We do not know what Abraham's social status was when he received his original call from God, except that he was a freeman and able to support a wife.[7] However, on the way to the fulfillment of that calling, Abraham made an extended stop in Haran, which proved financially lucrative.[8] Neither famine nor a diplomatically disastrous visit to Egypt was able to erode Abraham's acquisitions.[9] On the contrary, we are told that he became very wealthy in livestock and precious metals.[10] So great had become the wealth of Abraham and his nephew that the area in which they were living could not sustain them both and they were forced to separate. So great had become the wealth of Abraham that when his nephew's person and possessions were carried off as booty by the four kings, Abraham had at his disposal his personal army of 318 trained men who were able with the help of the neighbors to defeat the kings' combined forces and come away with Lot, his people and possessions, the rescued population of Sodom, and substantial booty.[11] Although Abraham chose not to profit by this military venture,[12] he did very well out of another diplomatic

7 Genesis 11:29,30. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Abraham also had a sense of responsibility for his nephew Lot who traveled with them (Gen 11:31).
8 Genesis 12:5.
9 Genesis 12:10–13:1.
10 Genesis 13:2.
11 Genesis 14:11–17, 21–24.
12 Genesis 14:22,23.

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disaster, this time with Abimelech, king of Gerar.[13] Shortly before his death, Abraham's servant was able to boast of his master's wealth to Abraham's Mesopotamian relatives,[14] who were doubtless impressed with the servant's 10-camel caravan,[15] the weighty nose ring and bracelets for Rebecca,[16] and the lavish gifts they were given.[17] There is no doubt that Abraham was rich.

He was also righteous. Although there is much in the Genesis account that can be construed as evidence of his righteousness, at one point only is this righteousness explicitly established in the narrative of his journeying with God, and that is at the point of faith: "Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness."[18] It is noteworthy that this faith, though it clearly had underpinnings in specific beliefs about God, was more than acquiescence to correct ideas about God. The object of his faith was God himself and the occasion of his faith was God's promise.

The moment of decisive faith came when God challenged Abram to trust God with his deepest pain and hope, his longing for a son. The profundity of this issue for Abram is evident in his abrupt dismissal of God's promise of reward: "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"[19] The would-be patriarch valued a son more than all the wealth God could promise, and without the son, the wealth was as much a source of sorrow as of pleasure. When Abraham believed God's promise of a host of descendants, God reiterated his promise of land and made a covenant with Abraham.[20] This combination of faith and covenant laid the foundation for all that follows it in Scripture. The righteousness of Abraham was a righteousness of faith, as Paul forcefully argues in his epistle to the Romans.[21]

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13 Genesis 20, and especially verses 14–16.
14 Genesis 24:34,35.
15 Genesis 24:10.
16 Genesis 24:22.
17 Genesis 24:53.
18 Genesis 15:5,6.
19 Genesis 15:1,2. Although the concept that God Himself is one's reward or portion can be found in the Psalms, the response of Abram makes clear that *he* at least understood the last phrase of 15:1 to be a promise of material possessions which could be bequeathed.
20 Genesis 15:4–21.
21 Chapter 4.

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Nevertheless, James is quick to point out that Abraham's faith was faith that mattered because Abraham acted upon it.[22] This assertion comes in the context of an accusation that someone who does not care for the physical needs of the indigent brother cannot possibly have saving faith.[23] Interestingly, rich Abraham is not held up as an example for someone who fed the poor (Genesis makes no mention of Abraham doing such a thing), but as someone who was willing to make an offering of his greatest treasure, namely his son, because of his faith. James seems to be telling his readers that true faith results in a righteousness that is evident through its willingness to make costly sacrifices. For James' readers, that meant a change of behavior with regard to the poor, whereas for Abraham, it meant binding precious Isaac to the altar.

James connects Abraham's righteousness with the friendship that existed between Abraham and God, and certainly this comes out in the Genesis narrative of Abraham's life.[24] It was on the basis of Abraham's faith that God reckoned Abraham righteous and bound himself to Abraham with a ceremonial oath, an everlasting covenant. Here the relational element of righteousness is at its clearest.

The narrative of Abraham in Genesis, like all biblical narratives, poses difficulties for the Christian ethicist because there is no clear distinction made between what in Abraham's life is to be emulated and what is merely historically descriptive. The Bible portrays nearly all of its great people as flawed and fully human, and Abraham is no exception. And yet he is given this crucial and lengthy role in the narrative because he is indeed a father of many, and children are expected to strive to be like their fathers. Can any more be said of Abraham as a model of the righteous rich beyond his faith which revealed itself in his willingness to sacrifice what he cherished most?

While the narrative's lack of explicit evaluation limits what we can say with certainty, there is no doubt that Abraham displays a

[22] James 2:17–24.
[23] James 2:14–16.
[24] For instance, Genesis 17:1.

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variety of admirable characteristics associated with righteousness in the Scriptures.[25]

The narrative makes it clear that God had made Abraham rich, in part because of his righteous responses to divine initiative, and that prosperity was included in the blessing God promised to him. If we had only the narrative of Abraham to go by, we might be entitled to think that anyone righteous can expect to prosper. But our next ancient example of the righteous rich would be the first to disabuse us of such a notion.

Job: Permanently Righteous, Temporarily Rich

Abraham and Job had much in common. Like Abraham, Job was a man of the patriarchal period famous for wealth and piety, and highly respected by leading personalities in his region. In both cases, the righteousness of the man was established outside the framework of the Mosaic covenant. Like Abraham, Job was tested, but unlike Abraham's testing, Job's was not entered into voluntarily. Although in very different ways and expressing very different personalities, both Job and Abraham passed the test. Most importantly, both had transforming, personal experiences with God in which they learned something of God's character.

The very first verse of the book of Job establishes his virtue: Job was "blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil." In Job, righteousness equals character demonstrated in deeds. In this play of great antiquity, the narrator entertains no doubts about Job's integrity. God himself is impressed.[26] He is proud of Job, and even the Accuser is reduced to impugning motives for want of a genuine flaw with which to indict the man.[27] No one is more convinced of

[25] Abraham practiced hospitality (Gen 18:1–8), was generous to his relations (Gen 13:8; 24:22,53), rescued his oppressed nephew at great risk to himself (Gen 14), interceded on behalf of others (Gen 18:16–33), gained respect from neighboring groups and maintained good relations (Gen 23:3–6), earned the devotion of his servant (Gen 24:12), shunned entanglement with evil (Gen 14:22,23), would not credit a human being with what God had done (Gen 14:22,23), tithed to Melchizedek, priest of God Most High (Gen 14:20), consistently obeyed God (Gen 12:1–4; 15:9–10; 17:10,11, 23–27; 22:1–11), worshiped God and offered animal sacrifices (Gen12:7; 13:4; 15:10,11), exercised spiritual influence on his household (Gen 17:23,27), and raised Isaac to fear God and shun compromising attachments (Gen 21:4, 8–14; 22:1–18; 24:1–4). In addition, both Stephen and the author to the Hebrews find merit in the fact that Abraham, for all his wealth, was not a landowner, except for the burial ground he purchased when Sarah died (Acts 7:5,16 and Heb 11:9,10,13–16).

[26] Job 1:8; 2:3.

[27] Job 1:9–11; 2:4.

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Job's righteousness than himself, and his protests to his own goodness are loud and long.[28]

The friends of Job, however, remain unconvinced until the very end of the story, when they are forced to rely on the intercessions of righteous Job to atone for their maligning of his virtue.[29] Job's accusing companions insist that he must have done great wickedness while he was still rich, wickedness which resulted in his downfall. They accuse him of having committed the typical sins of the rich: exploitation and callousness toward the poor.[30] Job contradicts this allegation vehemently in his final speech. His self-defense provides us with a vivid portrait of the righteous rich person as understood by Job. Stated in the negative, a rich person of high moral character does NOT:

- allow himself to lust,[31]
- speak falsely or deceive,[32]
- depart from the straight path in lifestyle, attitude, or actions,[33]
- allow himself even to consider adultery,[34]
- deny justice to servants of either gender who have a grievance against him,[35]
- refuse the needs of the poor,[36]
- keep his food to himself (on the contrary, he feeds the poor as family),[37]
- ignore clothing needs of the destitute,[38]
- take advantage of the fatherless, knowing that his influence in the court would enable him to get away with it,39
- consider that his security is in his riches,[40]
- revel in his wealth or his ability to amass it,[41]

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28 For a few of many examples: Job 9:21; 23:7; 27:6; 31:6; 32:1.
29 Job 42:7–10. It seems, however, they needed Job's intercession for maligning God rather than Job.
30 Job 22:6–9. Note similar insinuations by Zophar in Job 20:10 and by Elihu in Job 34:26–29; 36:18–20.
31 Job 31:1.
32 Job 31:5. The reference to honest scales in verse 6 may suggest that Job has in mind deceit in business.
33 Job 31:7. See also Job 23:11,12.
34 Job 31:9.
35 Job 31:13.
36 Job 31:16.
37 Job 31:17,18.
38 Job 31:19,20.
39 Job 31:21.
40 Job 31:24.
41 Job 31:25. John E Hartley, *The Book of Job,* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1988).

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