

Abraham's Strong-Willed Children

What differentiates Judaism, Christianity and Islam?

Abraham's life was shaped by his faith in God. He trusted God and followed wherever God led him until he arrived in the land God promised him, which later came to be known as Israel. Genesis 15:6 says "Abraham believed in the Lord and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness."

Abraham had two sons who received special blessings from God that led to two great religions, Judaism and Islam. I'll address his sons' stories in the next chapter. Here I want to say that Christians also revere Abraham as "father," based on their willingness to trust God as Abraham did. Two New Testament verses substantiate this view: **"Those who have faith [in Christ] are children of Abraham"** (Galatians 3:8, NLT). And: **"For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.... And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise"** (Galatians 3:26-29, ESV). The promise referred to here was that all the nations of the earth would be blessed because of Abraham's faithfulness. (See Genesis 12:3, 22:18).

All three of these religions consider Abraham their ancestral "father," so why have they been quarreling and fighting each other for centuries? How are they alike and how do they differ?

The "Book" versus the "Living Word" of God

Judaism is founded on the teachings of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, which were revealed to the Jewish people through the prophet, Moses. Moses' spoke directly with God at Mt. Sinai and recorded what God told him to write down.¹ (Exodus 34:27)

In Islam, the Quran is considered the word of Allah given to Muhammad over 23 years (610-632 CE) by the Archangel Gabriel. "Quran" means to be read or recited, and conveys that Muhammad directly recited what he heard from the angel without interpreting it. The recitations were initially passed on by word of mouth and through informally hand written snippets. The canonized text found today was compiled according to most scholars in 650 CE, twenty years after Muhammad's death. Muslims hold that the text reveals Allah's will even though it is open to some degree of alternative interpretation.² The earliest text set forth in chronological order was later reset placing the longest passages first. This tended to lend more weight on certain passages that were written later but were longer in length, particularly when they contradicted earlier passages.

In sharp contrast to both Judaism and Islam, the opening verses of the Gospel of John declares that **Jesus, Himself, is the "Living Word" of God.** (John 1:1-5, Hebrews 4:12.) He came as a visible

¹ Jewish scholars discuss in detail exactly when Moses wrote the Torah, with a general consensus most or all of it was revealed at Sinai but Moses took forty years to record everything that was revealed. See [when-did-moses-receive-the-torah](#).

² See [Textual Variants of the Qur'an](#). Also, the original Arabic written text (like early Hebrew) had no auxiliary signs and lacked vowels, which opened it to alternative interpretations. See [The Different Arabic Versions of the Qur'an](#).

“expression” [*Logos*] of God in human form. That is, He embodied God’s expressive power in His whole being.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah foretold details about Jesus’ birth 700 years before He was born. Isaiah called the one to be born “Emanuel” (Isaiah 7:14), which means “God with us.” Matthew 1:23 applies these words directly to Jesus, which Christians understand to mean Jesus came as “God with us” in human form. However, Orthodox Jews interpret Isaiah’s words as a prophesy God would be faithful to Abraham’s descendants, as demonstrated when God led them out of captivity in Egypt during the Exodus.

Book-Centered vs. Christ-Centered Faith

Islam and Judaism are primarily book-centered religions, in contrast to Christianity, which is fundamentally Christ-centered. Muslims say the Quran is the unmediated word of God, which is similar to how Jews view the Torah, except Judaism holds that the Torah reveals personal aspects of God as well as God’s transcendent nature.³ Scholars acknowledge that the Quran speaks only of God’s absolute nature and will.

Muslims strive to live in submission to the Quran just as Jews study intensively to live as the Torah teaches. The Islamic view helps explain why Muslims take mocking or insulting the Quran so personally. To them it’s blasphemy against the closest thing Muslims have to knowing God directly. Their “saints” are authoritative masters of Islamic writings who defend the faith and advance the Quranic goal of transforming the whole world into a theocratic community. The Islamic ideal is for the entire world to live in submission to the laws of Sharia. (More on this in the next brief.)

In the Jewish view, *Yahweh* self-revealed as a personally relatable God who covenanted with Abraham to be with his descendants through all their ups and downs. This explains why Orthodox Jews were able to thrive even after Israel’s exile from Israel. Study of Torah remained their safe place no matter where they were forced to live. Their greatest “saints” are their most revered scholarly masters and prophetic interpreters of Torah. Jews are called to be a light to the world, but there is no spiritual mandate to conquer the wider world or impose Jewish ways of life on others, only to establish a safe home for Jews in Israel that is also open to non-Jews. Orthodox Judaism welcomes non-Jews but doesn’t require them to follow the Torah’s religious laws.

Because Christ is the Living Word of God, the goal of Christians is broadly speaking to become “one with Christ” spiritually. A favorite Christian passage reads “**It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me**” (Galatians 2:20). Christian saints are ordinary people whose lives demonstrate communion with Christ and the power of God’s love, truth and Spirit to transform their lives and the world around them. Jesus said His Kingdom is not of this world yet permeates

³ *Elohim* is a common noun and the name given in Torah to God as Creator. It reveals God’s transcendent nature, majesty and absolute power. *Yahweh*, is a proper noun and the name given by God to Moses (Exodus 3:13-15), with instructions that this was the name by which God was to be known by the Jews. It reflects God’s presence and engagement with the world, akin to knowing God “personally.”

the world. It is based on freedom to choose, which explains why democratic rule of law, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech are so highly valued in Christian societies.⁴

Worship of One God

The metronome of faith in Judaism is a prayer called the She'ma (pronounced, "sh'ma") recited twice daily. It's also recited as the climatic final prayer of their most holy day of the year, *Yom Kippur*, and understood traditionally as the last prayer to be spoken before someone dies. The She'ma directly quotes Deuteronomy 6:4: **"The Lord, the Lord our God is One."**

Muslims, too, hold firmly to Allah as one and indivisible, possessing solitary unity. Thirty-one verses in the Quran reiterate this, such as *Surah* [chapter] 2:163: **"And your Allah is One Allah: There is no Allah but He."**

Both these religions consider the Christian Trinity to be blasphemy. *Surah* (chapter : verse) 5:73 in the Quran makes this explicit:

They have certainly disbelieved who say, " Allah is the third of three." ...There is no Allah except one Allah. If they do not desist from what they are saying, [a painful punishment] will surely afflict the disbelievers.

These intimidating words immediately establish a huge point of contention between Islam and Christianity. They also underscore a problem between Christianity and Judaism that became apparent to me once while traveling with an Orthodox Jewish guide in Israel. He totally surprised me by saying that if he were forced at gunpoint to choose between becoming a Muslim or a Christian, he would choose to become a Muslim. When I asked why, he said: "Because Muslims believe like Jews that there's only one God, but Christians worship three gods."

In fact, both Islam and Judaism distort the meaning of the Trinity taught by Jesus. He clearly said He did not come to cancel the Law of Moses but to bring it to fulfillment. He never "canceled" Deuteronomy 6:4. Rather, He demonstrated what it looks like to completely follow and obey the "Living God."

The most famous verse in the New Testament, John 3:16, explains why God manifested as a "Son" — **"For God so loved the world that God gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life"** (John 3:16). In other words, God expressed Himself creatively in human form out of love in order to save humanity from living separated from God. This is epitomized in Jesus's Hebrew name *Yeshua*, which literally means "God Saves." Even death cannot separate Christ's followers from the love of God.

The Hebrew word for "one" is *echad*, which also means *unity*, a relational term, not merely a single unit. In this context, the Trinity is a picture of relational oneness within the character of God. Jesus taught His followers to call God "Father" to help them understand God's love personally. Stated differently, **the concept of the Trinity was never a theology or doctrine about three gods, but a tangible way of experiencing God's love, intimacy and communing with the Living God of the Bible.**

⁴ Secular progressive values have deep origins in the Christian worldview, as explained in Timothy Keller's book, *Making Sense of God*, (Viking, 2016), esp. chapter 9, "The Problem of Morals." Tom Holland's tour de force, *Dominion*, also offers a massively erudite and eloquent view of how secular morality emerged from Judeo-Christian history and values.

The Holy Spirit

At the Last Supper before His crucifixion, Jesus said “if you have seen Me you’ve seen the Father.” He added that when He returned to heaven He would ask the Father to send an “Advocate” (or “Helper”), a term He used for the Holy Spirit. In New Testament Greek, “spirit” is *pneuma*, literally “to blow air,” (from which we get such words as pneumatic).⁵ Holy Spirit is God’s essence being exerted to fill our souls with a sense of God’s presence. More simply, Holy Spirit is how God connects tangibly with humanity. John 4:24 says: **“God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”**

In other words Christ’s disciples *experience* the One True God in three distinctive ways: 1) as a perfect “Father,” the indivisible yet relatable Source of life; 2) as Jesus, the perfect Son [*Logos*, “expression,” or offspring] of Father God; and 3) as Holy Spirit, aka the “breath,” or “presence,” of God.

One writer has summarized that the Sonship of Jesus is a testimony to God’s love, which is “so intense that God was not content only to bless his creation from outside of it.... [Instead,] **by becoming part of the created order, by taking on a full and a complete human nature, God sanctified humanity from within....**”⁶

In order to emphasize the Trinity is not three separate gods, some Arabic Christians to this day close their prayers with “In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, **One God!**”

Understanding God’s Love

The Bible verse immediately following the Jewish She’ma is “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). It’s understood as a commandment and is found often in the Torah. One authoritative Jewish commentary explains: “Love and fear are the foundations of the Jew’s relationship with God, the pillars upon which his observance rests.”⁷ This can be summarized as loving God for God’s faithfulness toward Jews, and obeying God out of awe and fear in order not to lose God’s blessings.

The Quran has numerous verses about Allah’s love for humanity,⁸ but closer examination reveals Allah’s love differs in important ways from God’s love depicted in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. In the Koran, God’s love for humanity is mentioned 20 times and are conditional statements of love.⁹

The daily metronome of Islam is found in the opening verses of the Quran recited five times a day. It’s known as *The Opening*, and the first verse is called the *Bismillah* (“in the Name of Allah”), repeated at the beginning of all 113 chapters of the Quran:

“In the Name of Allah—the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful. All praise is for Allah—Lord of all worlds, the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful, Master of the Day of Judgment. You alone we

⁵ In Hebrew, “spirit” is *ruach*, which also means “wind,” moving air,” or “breath.”

⁶ John Gilchrist, “The Love of God in the Qur’an and the Bible,” at: <https://www.answering-islam.org/intro/comparison.html>

⁷ *Stone Chumash* commentary to Deuteronomy 11:1, ArtScroll Series, 11th edition.

⁸ See, for example, [Quranic Verses About Allah's Love | 100 Signs Allah loves you](https://www.answering-islam.org/quran/themes/love.htm).

⁹ See <https://www.answering-islam.org/quran/themes/love.htm>

worship and You alone we ask for help. Guide us along the Straight Path, the Path of those You have blessed—not those You are displeased with, or those who are astray.” *Surah Al Fatiha, verses 1-7 (Dr. Mustafa Khattab, The Clear Quran)*

These words have beauty and layers of meaning in Arabic. They connect Allah's compassion, mercy and judgment. Another Quranic verse expands: **“Those who do right make provision for themselves—that He [Allah] may reward those who have believed and done righteous deeds out of His bounty”** (Surah 30:44-45, *Sahih International*). Allah's benevolence is postulated as a reward for doing righteous deeds. By loving Allah, Muslims make “provision for themselves.” But it's not about a mutual experience of love between Allah and humanity.

Only two verses in the Quran refer to Allah directly as the “Loving One” (*Al-Wadud*), Surahs 11:90 and 85:14. That led the great Islamic mystic and theologian, Al Ghazali (1058-1111 CE), to conclude this divine title is “lesser” than the expression “Allah is Merciful.” The latter emphasizes Allah's absolute sovereignty and is repeated more than 200 times in the Quran. Al Ghazali put it bluntly: Allah **“remains above the feeling of love.”**¹⁰

Jesus' View of Love

When asked to name the greatest commandment, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, mentioned earlier, thereby affirming the Torah commandment to love God with all our being. (See Matthew 22:37). Jesus later expanded on this by telling his disciples to love one another *as Jesus loved them*—i.e., sacrificially—adding “By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). In place of a transactional understanding of love, giving love to get something in return, Jesus characterized divine love as unconditional, compassionate, generous and self-sacrificial.

He dedicated His entire life on earth to declaring God loves the world so much that human sins and errors can be entirely forgiven. His teaching was too radical for people to comprehend at first. It was only after the resurrection that the meaning of His sacrifice began to become more understandable, and even then it took time to comprehend.

Among the last letters written in the New Testament are found these powerful words: **“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”** And:

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love. We love because He [God] first loved us.” 1 John 4:8, 18

These passages explain that the love Jesus revealed comes from the essence of who God is. Whoever is preoccupied with fear does not really know God and has room to grow spiritually. God supplies divine love by grace, not requiring any effort or payment other than a willingness to receive it. Perfect love is accessible when a person trusts God and God's great love for them.

Forgiveness

In Islam there's no assurance of divine forgiveness before or after death. Islam calls forgiveness “an exercise of courageous will and resolution in the conduct of affairs” (Surah 42:43). Without

¹⁰ From Al Ghazzali's work on the names of Allah, *Al-Maqsad Al-Asna*, p.91

assurance of your own forgiveness it takes courage and resolve to forgive others, and also to face death, Quranically speaking.

Even Muhammad was unsure of his fate at death. He said: "By Allah, although I am the Messenger of Allah, **I know not what will happen to me [i.e., at death], just like you.**"¹¹ Abu Bakr, the revered father-in-law and senior companion of Muhammad, said the same thing: "I do not know what my God will do to me." The prospect of forgiveness after death depends on Allah judging a Muslim based on their actions in life. At best, the believer can only die in fear with hope of God's mercy, for "the punishment of your Lord is ever feared" (Surah 17:57).

In Judaism, according to the covenant God made with Moses there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood. (See Leviticus 17:11, and Hebrews 9:22.) The Law of Moses made provision for forgiveness of sins once a year on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) by sacrificing animals, whose blood covered Israel's sins. However, the New Testament says "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins," otherwise the high priest would not have had to enter the Holy Place every year to offer sacrifices. (See Hebrews 10:3-10.) King David, who himself offered many animal sacrifices, nonetheless intoned in the psalms:

For You [God] do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; You take no pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. Psalm 51:16-17

Having a broken and contrite heart is the essence behind forgiving others, so important to God that Jesus made forgiving others a fundamental requirement for following Him. He taught during His famous Sermon on the Mount: "**If you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins**" (Matthew 6:). Why? Because unforgiveness is a sign of a hardened heart. Luke quotes Jesus also at the Sermon on the Mount adding: "**Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven**" (Luke 6:37).

The Apostle Paul elaborated: "**There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For in Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set you free from the law of sin and death**" (Romans 8:1-2). He's talking about a different kind of transaction, not merely forgiving others to earn forgiveness for oneself. It's about forgiving in order to be *set free from slavery to sin and death*.

Other religions advocate forgiving others, which identifies forgiveness as an archetypal psychological principle. Hinduism refers to forgiveness as "one supreme peace...that subdues (all) in this world" (*The Mahabharata*). Buddhism identifies forgiveness as an expression of detachment from the illusions of life that lead to suffering. But the primary goal of Buddhism is detachment from the causes of suffering, not forgiveness for its own sake.

The forgiveness Jesus offers is different because it is not a form of detachment or submission to God's sovereignty. It's a re-connection to the essence of God grounded in the Living Word of God incarnate as Jesus. Among the final words of Jesus in the Bible is: "**Behold, I make all things new.**" Seen in this light, divine forgiveness is not about making a personal confession in order to

¹¹ *Hadith* ("saying") of Muhammad, from *The Authentic of Bukhari*, vol.9, book 87, no. 145. When referring to Muhammad, Muslims often say "peace be upon him" ("PBUH" in writing), as a way of praying for Allah's continued mercy upon their prophet.

attract God's forgiveness, but a restoration of innocence, of the original design of humanity prior to the fall from Paradise.

Jesus' teachings about love and forgiveness were so radical and so entwined with His divine nature that the English scholar C.S. Lewis once wrote:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher.... Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.... You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." From *Mere Christianity*

Finally, for your consideration in closing this chapter, ponder these unique words spoken by Jesus to His followers:

The Father judges no one, but has assigned all judgment to the Son... Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life" (John 5:22-24).

10-1-25