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The Enduring Faith

by James McBride

'Something borrowed, something blue, something old, something new'. Is that how you see Christianity? Bits of Old Testament Judaism. Some new teachings from Jesus. Certainly much borrowed (from pagan sources) and possibly a few 'blue' bits. So it may come as a surprise that the Christian faith as taught by Jesus Christ is the oldest faith on the planet.

Resurrect Adam today and his eyes would pop at what is presented as the way he was taught by the LORD in Eden. Show him what Jesus taught, however, and Adam would feel quite at home.

Mankind worships a pantheon of 'gods' from the God of the Judaeo-Christian Bible, the Islamic god, the many gods of the Hindu religion. Each god has its own belief system, its own festivals and practices and worship days, its own ethical standards—which identify each 'god'. You could sum up the totality of the world's religions as *confusion!*

Ancient Greece is notorious for its many gods: Zeus, Hades, Poseidon, Artemis, Aphrodite for example. But the apostle Paul, a voice of reason, told some in Athens: *'...God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwells not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he gives to all life, and breath, and all things'* (Acts 17:24-25). That is, there's one omnipotent self-sustaining Creator who alone gives and sustains all that's living, and who is sovereign.

That is the Bible account which is a coherent narrative from before the universe began through to 'the end of time'. The other major faiths have their own concepts and their own unique plan for mankind's salvation—which, presumably, satisfies their intellect.

The Way of Jehovah

The 'book of beginnings'—Genesis—records the origin of man's present plight. Created by the one and only Deity, perfect man walked and talked with Him in perfect harmony, and willingly subject to His guidance. As a rational thinking being he was divinely endowed with

freedom to choose—and was perfectly equipped to make sensible life choices.

Readers of Genesis will learn 'what comes next': wrong choices leading to death for all his progeny. After sixteen centuries wickedness became universal—even the animal kingdom had become irredeemably corrupted. The Creator had to intervene, saving the one remaining righteous family: *'...[God] spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly'* (II Peter 2:5).

Around 1900BC God selected one man to further His plan, a man willing to walk in God's unchanging way—Abraham: *'...I have known him, so that whatever he may command his sons and his house after him, even they may keep the way of Jehovah, to do righteousness and justice'* (Genesis 18:19).

The awesome message of the reason for the great flood and the confusion of language (*ch 11*) resonated with mankind worldwide and down the centuries.

That 'way' was the pattern followed by the faithful from the beginning as exemplified by Abel, by Enoch, by Noah and by Abraham—and a host of other godly men and women (Hebrews 11).

What that entailed was explained to Abraham's grandson Isaac as the reason his descendants would gain global influence: *'...because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws'* (Genesis 26:5). This is four centuries before these same laws were enshrined in Israel's governing Constitution administered by Moses.

A contemporary of Abraham in Canaan, King Abimelech, also expresses an understanding of these laws (*ch 20*). Another two generations and we find Joseph adhering to these same laws (*ch 39:9*).

Neither did *sacrifice* originate with the Law of Moses but was a universal concept since the beginning, as was the

The Enduring Faith

distinction between 'clean' and 'unclean' animals (Genesis 7:2) and the prohibition of murder *etc* (ch 9:6). We learn (Genesis 4:1-5) that Adam's sons brought offerings, and that God alone has the authority to say how and when we maintain our relationship with Him.

The concept of *religious assemblies*—though often distorted from the original—was universal right from man's beginning, and '*...in the end of days [an appointed time], it happened that Cain brought an offering to Jehovah*' (v.3). All ancient civilizations observed annual harvest festivals.

Moses, we note, went to Pharaoh requesting permission to observe one of God's festivals—before they were defined in Israel's worship: '*...Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness*' (Exodus 5:1).

Indeed we find that God's festivals ('Heb. *moed*, *appointed times*) are rooted in the very structure of creation: '*...God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons [Heb. mo'ed], and for days, and years*' (Genesis 1:14).

The father-in-law of Moses was '*the priest of Midian*' (a son of Abraham) who administered these same divine precepts. Rulers (*eg* Abimelech) in those days understood their responsibility before God to rule in accord these divinely revealed precepts though not all did so!).

Already in Abraham's day, however, corruption of the one true faith had begun to fester: '*...the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full*' (Genesis 15:16). Four generations later they had sunk into depravity and were expelled from the land of promise.

Birth of a Nation

The people of Israel exiting Egypt were not a disorganized rabble. During their captivity they maintained their tribal identities—the twelve tribes, the offspring of Jacob, and lived under a strict patriarchal structure with the oversight of elders. Familial ties and traditions were virtually unbreakable.

Even when under the heel of the Egyptians, they retained a knowledge of the promises to Abraham and to their obligations to follow that same way. The ancestral faith motivated many—even when pressured by Pharaoh—their midwives, for example, '*...feared God*' and disobeyed the Pharaoh (Exodus 1:17-21).

The rite of *circumcision* had been given to Abraham as a token of their covenant relationship with JHVH. It persisted throughout the centuries in Egypt and served to maintain their grasp on the religious practice of Abraham. The writer notes: '*...all the people that came out [of Egypt] were circumcised*' (Joshua 5:5) - evidence that the light of the true faith burned, however dimly, while they were under the Egyptian yoke.

Faith Abandoned

Israel occupied the Land, maintaining the ancestral faith: '*...Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that overlived Joshua, and which had known all the works of the LORD, that he had done for Israel*' (Joshua 24:31). It didn't last.

Over the ensuing centuries their loyalty to the LORD fluctuates widely, and in the eight century the northern tribes were deported from the Land, followed a century later by the tribe of Judah, as predicted: '*... it shall be, if you do at all forget the LORD your God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish. As the nations which the LORD destroys before your face, so shall you perish; because you would not be obedient unto the voice of the LORD your God*' (Deuteronomy 8:19-20). A remnant only remained loyal to the true faith of Abel and Abraham.

Judah learned her lesson, returning faithful after seven decades in captivity. (Israel didn't—and are still 'out there' among the nations.) To protect their heritage, however, the Jews added rules and regulations atop the Law of Moses which blinded their leadership and their religious teachers to the presence of the Messiah (Jesus) in their midst.

He was rejected and the torch of that same true faith passed to the followers of Jesus, the church of God which he, to this day, continues to build (Matthew 16:18).

Jesus foresaw the powerful forces that would seek to destroy this 'temple', noting that '*...narrow is the gate, and constricted is the way that leads away into life, and few are the ones finding it*' (Matthew 7:14).

Despite the corruption of the faith and the substitution of the pre-Christian observances and doctrines that have obscured the original true faith that torch has shone down the centuries, and the same original faith is observed to this day in numerous groups of believers worldwide.

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