

THE TRIVENI SANGAM
(of Jews, Christians & Muslims)
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Some years back in March 1979 during the presidency of Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) an international summit of three heads of states was held in USA. The summit known as Camp David was attended by three great men of history. They signed the “Treaty of Peace Between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the State of Israel.”

A number of outstanding factors made Camp David a unique summit. One unique factor of the summit was the religion of the three participants. President Jimmy Carter of USA a devout Christian was the host. The two other participants were President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, a devout Muslim and Prime Minister Menachim Begin of Israel a devout Jew.

These three men, as all Christians, Muslims and Jews, believed in Monotheism and claimed Abraham as their common father in the faith. God had promised Abraham that he would be “the ancestor of many nations.” (Gen. 17, 4)

Muslims, the Descendent of Ishmael

Patriarch Abraham had two sons. The first son born to Abraham was Ishmael from an Egyptian slave-girl Hagar. Sarah, Abraham’s wife gave her slave Hagar to Abraham as his concubine because she had not borne him any children. (Gen. 16, 1-15)

The Bible says that as a sign of Abraham’s covenant with God, Abraham circumcised his son Ishmael and all males in his household the slaves and Abraham himself. (Gen. 17, 23-27).

But God had promised Abraham a child by Sarah. That promise was fulfilled when Sarah gave birth to Isaac. God said to Abraham, “I promise that I will give you as many descendants as there are stars in the sky or grains of sand along the seashore.” (Gen. 22, 17)

But after the birth of Isaac to Sarah, Ishmael and his mother Hagar were expelled from Abraham’s house. Ishmael survived the expulsion and lived as a desert nomad and a skillful archer.

The Bible mentions that “Abraham’s sons Ishmael and Isaac buried him in Machpelah Cave, in the field east of Mamre.” (Gen. 25, 9). Ishmael is the ancestor of a number of Arabian tribes. (Gen. 25, 12-18). The Muslims believe that they are the descendants of Ishmael. So they trace their ancestry to Abraham as the Father of their faith through Ishmael. For the Muslims according to Koran Abraham is the highest example of the purest Islamic faith and a model for all believers through Ishmael.

Islam as religion began in the 7th century with Mohammed (c.A.D. 570-632) as the last prophet of Allah in the traditions of Abraham, Moses and Jesus; and Koran as the revealed Holy Book of the all Muslims.

Koran contains many things found in the Holy Bible and the Jewish Scripture, which is the Old Testament of the Bible.

Mohammed's name is mentioned in Koran only a few times. But, the Mother of Jesus, Mary's name is mentioned in Quran many more times, in fact, more times than Mary's name appears in the New Testament of the Bible! So in Koran we find many things common in Bible and in the Jewish Scriptures.

Jews as a People and Nation

Like the Muslims the Jewish people too trace their ancestry to Patriarch Abraham through his son Isaac. Isaac had two sons by Rebekah: Esau and Jacob. The later came a little after his twin brother Esau appeared. So Jacob is called the younger brother. Through craftiness and deceitfulness, Jacob bargained and got the right of his elder brother. Then, thanks to his mother's special love and partiality, Jacob also got his father Isaac's special blessing.

Ancestor Jacob had also two special spiritual experiences at Bethel and Peniel. At Bethel Jacob had a dream of "a stairway reaching from earth to heaven, with angels going up and coming down on it. And there was the lord standing beside him I am the lord, the God of Abraham and Isaac," he said, 'I will give to you and to your descendants this land on which you are lying. They will be as numerous as the specks of dust on the earth. They will extend their territory in all directions, and through you and your descendants I will bless all the nations" (Gen. 28,12-14).

At Peniel Jacob wrestled with a man who gave Jacob a new name Israel. Here is the whole story from Genesis "Then a man came and wrestled with him until just before daybreak. When the man saw that he was not winning the struggle, he struck Jacob on the hip, and it was thrown out of joint. The man said, 'Let me go; daylight is coming.'

Then, Jacob asked the Man and got his blessings.

"Jacob said, 'I have seen God face to face, and I am still alive', so he named the place Peniel. The sun rose as Jacob was leaving Peniel" (Gen. 32, 24-31).

Then, God asked Jacob to go to Bethel. When Jacob return to Bethel from Mesopotamia, "God appeared to him again and blessed him. God said to him 'Your name is Jacob, but from now on it will be Israel.' So God named him Israel. And God said to him, 'I am almighty God. Have many children. Nations will be descended from you, and you will be the ancestor of kings. I will give you the land which I gave to Abraham and to Isaac, and I will also give it to your descendants after you.' Then God left him" (Gen.35, 10-13).

"Jacob had twelve sons. The sons of Leah were Reuben (Jacob's eldest son), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. The sons of Rachel were Joseph and Benjamin. The sons of Rachel's slave Bilhah were Dan and Naphtali. The sons of Leah's slave Zilpah were Gad and Asher. These sons were born in Mesopotamia. (Gen 35, 22-26).

The twelve Israelite tribes are named after the twelve sons of Jacob. The tribal family of Jacob is called by 'Sons of Jacob' and 'Sons of Israel!'. Israel began as tribal confederation with a covenant with Yahweh as the only God and Israel as the specially chosen people of Yahweh. So the Israelites are called also the people of the covenant and the chosen people. The name Israel appears frequently in the Bible. It is used alone or it appears in phrases like 'Sons of Israel', 'house of Israel,' and 'Kingdom of Israel.'

After the times of Patriarchs, the sons of Israel were led first by prophets and judges like Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Samuel. The house of Israel is a loose tribal organization. The people were united by the worship of Yahweh.

Then, influenced by their neighbours the Israelites asked their leaders for a king. Monarchy was introduced among the people of Israel with Saul as their first king followed by king David. David's reign started first over Judah in the South and then extended to north to cover the whole nation of Israel.

The life and achievement of King David impressed the people of Israel that in later years when they were in trouble, they longed for another king like David from the family of David. King Solomon succeeded David.

When Israelites were conquered and exiled by foreign rulers, the Israelites longed for a king, a descendent from David. Many of the exiled Jews came back to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. Then, the Israelites were conquered again by foreigners like the Romans. But the religious life of the Israelites continued around the temple at Jerusalem. The Jewish people looked forward to the promised Messiah, the anointed one of God, a descendant of King David.

The word 'Jew' designates a member of the tribe of Judah. Later the word Jew meant a habitant of the Persian province of Judah, which consisted of Jerusalem and its surrounding area.

At the time of Jesus, Jews were the people who worshipped Yahweh, the one God and they looked eagerly forward to the redeemer, a descendant of King David who would deliver them from the foreign rulers, the Romans.

In the Gospels 'Israel' is used for the Jewish people and also for the their religion. Later in 1948 when the Jewish people got freedom from the England they called their country Israel as a political society. The Jewish people proudly Patriarch Abraham as their Father in Faith.

Jesus Christ and Christianity

Jesus came into our world as the promised Messiah, the anointed one of God, the descendant of King David. He preached the kingdom of God for about three years and died on the Cross.

In the heart of Jesus' preaching is the message of God's love for humankind. St. John's Gospel tells us Jesus' mission in Jesus' own words: "For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its Saviour" (John 3, 16-17).

A prayer of the Catholic Church beautifully articulates the sum and substance of the Christian faith.

“Father, we acknowledge your greatness: all your actions show your wisdom and love. You formed man in your own likeness and set him over the whole world to serve you, his creator, and to rule over all creatures.

“Even when he disobeyed you and lost your friendship you did not abandon him to the power of death, but helped all men to seek and find you. Again and again you offered a covenant to man, and through the prophets taught him to hope for salvation.

“Father, you so loved the world that in the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Saviour. He was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary, a man like us in all things but sin.

“To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation, to prisoners, freedom, and to those in sorrow, joy. In fulfillment of your will he gave himself up to death; but by rising from the dead, he destroyed death and restored life.

“And that we might live no longer for ourselves but for him, he sent the Holy Spirit from you, Father, as his first gift to those who believe, to complete his work on earth and bring us the fullness of grace.” (Eucharistic Prayer 4)

Most Jewish people did not accept Jesus in his time but saw him as a sinner who claimed equality with God, who made himself one with God. But many Jewish people accepted Jesus as the promised and anointed one of God. Many other peoples and nations too joined the Jewish followers of Jesus or accepted Jesus as their Saviour and Redeemer independent of Jewish people. They are all called Christians, the followers of Jesus.

The Christians accept the Jewish Scripture, as part of their Bible, called Old Testament. The Old Testament is seen as God’s dealing with people and as a preparation for the coming of Christ. The second part of the Bible, the New Testament, deals with the life and message of Jesus and the life and teachings of the first Christians.

Like the Muslims and Jews, the Christians too accept Abraham as their Father in Faith and worship one God.

The Triveni Sangam

Apart from monotheism and Abraham as common father of faith, there are also other common factors among the Jews, Christians and Muslims. The followers of all three religions worship in community on fixed days and times. There have been mystics in all three religions whose vision and teaching go beyond the boundaries of their religion.

The monotheist believers also find common things in the sacred scriptures. If something is not absolutely clear in the Scripture of one religion, then going into the scripture of another may help the understanding.

In fact, I think, it was the great thinker, Augustine of Hippo who said that in the Old Testament (Jewish Scripture) the New Testament lay hidden and in the New Testament the Old Testament stands revealed.

The Jews, Muslims and Christians find their oneness in the acceptance of one God. So all the three religions are called monotheist and All three religions also accept Abraham as their common Father in Faith.

Like the three Indian rivers – Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati – meet at Triveni Sangam, the three religious of Jews, Muslims and Christians, worshipping one God, find their meeting point in Patriarch Abraham, the Father of all the three faiths.

When the followers of all the three religions believing in one God, recognize themselves as the children of one God and brothers and sisters of one another, then, there will be peace and true faith in the world.