

Marvin R. Wilson
Our Father Abraham, 2nd Edition

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JOHN E. PHELAN, JR.

jphelan@northpark.edu

North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL 60625

Modern Evangelicalism arose after the Second World War. It was, in part, an attempt by Evangelical intellectuals to differentiate themselves from early 20th century fundamentalists. Unlike the fundamentalists, they would not cut themselves off from wider American cultural and intellectual currents. However, they did criticize them. They sought to found respectable universities and accredited seminaries. It was hoped that Evangelicals would not attend or teach only in fundamentalist Bible schools. They wanted their books to be published by major publishers and discussed at the relevant academic assemblies. In short, modern Evangelicals sought to be culturally relevant, not relegated to a cultural backwater.

Like all American Christians, Evangelicals needed to confront the emergence of the state of Israel. For Evangelicals who were students of biblical prophecy this meant debating the eschatological significance of this new state. Many greeted the foundation of Israel with enthusiasm, just as many fundamentalists had greeted the Balfour Declaration in 1917. But for most rank-and-file Evangelicals Jews were an abstraction. They imagined modern Jews in robes and sandals living in the land of the Bible. Or they were linked with the ancient Scribes and Pharisees from the time of Jesus. If Jews were known at all they were objects of curiosity and / or evangelization. This was, in part, because Evangelicals were largely where Jews were not: the South, the upper Midwest, and suburban California. Even in a city like Chicago where Jews and Evangelicals co-existed in significant numbers, their interactions were infrequent and superficial.

For these, and other reasons, Evangelicals were late to engage in Jewish / Christian dialogue. The Roman Catholic Church had thrown open the doors for dialogue and change with *Nostra Aetate* in 1965. Mainline Christians had been engaging with Jews with greater seriousness in the wake of the *Shoah*. In the late 1970s a group of Evangelical and Jewish scholars, clergy, and leaders finally began to meet, share papers, and debate. Four volumes of the proceedings were published. The very first article in the first volume, *Evangelicals and Jews in Conversation* (1978), was by Marvin Wilson, entitled “An Evangelical Perspective on Judaism.” Wilson also edited this and subsequent volumes along with Marc H. Tannenbaum

and A. James Rudin. Marvin Wilson was there at the beginning and, as is evident from this most recent work, still very much part of the dialogue.

Our Father Abraham was first published in 1989 in the wake of these early conversations. It proved immensely popular, going through some 30 printings. It is written for Evangelicals by a self-described middle-of-the-road Evangelical and not surprisingly reflects Evangelical concerns. Wilson taught for decades at Gordon College, an Evangelical college near Boston, introducing generations of students to Jews and Judaism. The chapters clearly reflect the questions and concerns of Wilson's students and the thousands of Evangelical seminarians and pastors he addressed. They also reflect decades of interactions and discussions with Jewish academics, rabbis, and lay people. Wilson's primary purpose is to make clear to Christians the debt they owe to Jews and Judaism. He argues that when Christians neglect or ignore this Jewish heritage it is not only bad for the Jews, it is bad for the church!

The second edition is substantially unchanged from the first. There is a new preface, an updated bibliography, and two important new chapters at the end of the book. Wilson begins grounding the Jewish heritage of Christianity in the New Testament, arguing against the kind of hard supersessionism that cuts the cord between Israel and the church. In the second section he considers the history of the church and the Jews, paying particular attention to the earliest centuries of conflict and separation. He considers in part three the Hebrew Scriptures and "the contour of Hebrew thought" (138). Section four contains a series of studies on aspects of contemporary Jewish life and thought in conversation with Christian practices: marriage and family; Passover and the Last Supper; Jews, Christians, and the Land of Israel; and the high value of learning in Judaism. In the fifth section he considers the importance of dialogue and how it might be done. The final section contains the two new chapters. The first is an impassioned plea for Christians to keep the study of the *Shoah* alive and to contemplate how Christian theology has been challenged by that unspeakable tragedy. The second is an important personal reflection on the beginnings of Wilson's own interest in Jewish / Christian dialogue and its initial developments within the wider Evangelical community.

The book is clearly written for students and pastors and is highly suitable for small group discussions. Each chapter ends with lists of discussion questions no doubt culled from Wilson's extensive teaching experience. At one point he remarks on realizing early in his teaching career that he could not answer his students' simplest questions about modern Judaism. He could lecture extensively on ancient Israelite religion, Israel's prophets, and its wisdom tradition. But he admits he knew little about Second Temple Judaism and almost nothing about rabbinic Judaism. In this he was not alone. I have long shared his concern for the ignorance of many Christians of modern Jews and Judaism. Like Wilson, it seems to me that most Christians know a bit about the Jews of the "Old Testament" and the time of Jesus, though even there what they know is limited. After that they know nothing about Jews and Judaism until the *Shoah* and the foundation of the State of Israel. Herein

lies the enduring importance of this book. The students arriving at Evangelical colleges and seminaries still need to be confronted with the importance of Jewish life and thought and introduced to the possibility of dialogue.

For the most part the book holds up quite well. Scholarship marches on and some of the discussion of Paul, for example, could be updated, but this, it seems to me, would only strengthen Wilson's argument. Some Jews may wonder if Wilson leans too heavily on more traditional forms of Judaism to the neglect of more liberal forms. However, the book remains an important resource for Evangelicals and a powerful testimony to the beauty and grace of one man's experience of learning to love another tradition.