

Before Abraham Was, I Am!

John 8:48-59

When people desire to be belligerent in the use of words they often make themselves look ridiculous. The hostile crowd posed this question to Jesus of Nazareth, *Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?*

For the unbelieving Jews the first accusation alone would have been thought devastating. Are you not a Samaritan? The Samaritans were half breeds. It was customary in the ancient world to disrupt the cultures of subjugated nations by displacement of peoples. Many Jews had experienced this. Daniel and his friends were taken away to a foreign land to undergo the process of indoctrination in the ways of Babylon. Others found themselves removed from their home land, and often enslaved. A very powerful nation would bring into the land of Israel people who had been subjugated in faraway places.

So it was that the Samaritan race appeared, the hybridization of Jews dwelling in the land with pagans from other locales. And the Jews who remained came to resent their strange neighbors. The Samaritans tried, at least in some measure, to adopt the religion of the Jews, but did so imperfectly, and were regarded as heretics of the first order. The Jews could never let them forget that they were not pure in faith, or racial identity. They treated them like the mixed raced people I once knew in Plaquemines Parish south of New Orleans. Children in the schools taunted the mixed raced children with these words, "*You ain't white; you ain't black; you ain't nothin'!*"

But they were not satisfied to castigate the Lord with a racial accusation. They added to this the charge that he was demon possessed. They really meant to insult him!

The Lord answered them in a straightforward manner. *I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me.* The Lord went on to teach them that he was seeking to bring glory, not to himself, but to the Father, and that to hear and obey his word would bring eternal life. The believer would never see death. Now this is quite true. Those who have faith in Christ may die physically but their life is kept by the power of God and that life is not cut off but continues for all eternity.

"Now we have caught him in an illogical statement," they thought. There is no one greater than Abraham and he died. This Jesus is teaching nonsense.

But of course he was not. They asked him, *Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?*

Jesus did not give way to them. He told them that Abraham *rejoiced* to see his day. By this the Lord meant that the promises made to Abraham that, through his "seed" all the peoples of the earth would be blessed, would come to fulfillment in the life and ministry of our Lord. Abraham would rejoice to see the realization of the long hope for blessings of God on all of Abraham's heirs. The apostle Paul tells us that to be in Christ is to be the *offspring of Abraham and heirs according to the promise.*

All of this has come to pass because Christ has come and died in the place of his people. And all of this has come to pass because Christ is who he is, and therefore was able to do what he claimed he had come to do.

The astounding statement of the Lord reveals all of this. Jesus said to them, *Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.*

It was not just the claim to have lived before Abraham that angered the crowd. It was the statement of the Lord that identified him with the Father in a particular way. Christ had earlier said to them, When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *he*. That is how most translations give it in order to have a smooth English rendering. But literally, the Lord said, you will know that I am. The pronoun has been supplied. God had revealed himself to Moses as the great I AM. *I am that I am*, he told him. And the sacred name of God, Yahweh, or Jehovah, is a form of the same. Jesus was in fact saying that when you see me in death on the cross you will see the truth of my person. He was claiming to one with the God of Abraham. He was claiming to be the Lord from heaven who alone was able to die in the place of sinners. Their response was to pick up stones to stone him.

by Joe Nesom

