

A Short Study of the Character of Abraham.

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IN a rather recent book on the foundations of modern society, the author maintains¹ that the wealthy Jew with political influence and Gentile connections is no true Israelite. The true Israelite by descent and disposition has, he says, for centuries been represented by a small, and ever decreasing, band, comprised, in the Middle Ages in the Spanish Jews, and in our own day almost entirely in a small colony of Jews in Salonika. These Jews he describes as pure in race, zealous in the worship of God, frugal in their habits, and absolutely upright in their commercial dealings, because they have no desire to grow rich. There seem to be grounds for thinking that it is these Israelites who have preserved or reflected the character of the founder of their race—the father of the true Israelites.

And an attempt to find in Abraham characteristics which are the root of a typical character is vindicated far otherwise by a more than august—a sublime authority. For it is evident that our Lord held that there was a type of true Israelitish character handed down from the fathers. He described Nathaniel as “an Israelite indeed,” because there was “no guile” in him; He called Zacchaeus “a son of Abraham,” because he showed magnanimity in disbursing his gains; He spoke of Abraham himself as possessed of a high degree of spiritual insight. “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day.”²

If one tries to analyze even one's earliest remembered impression of Abraham's character, one distinguishes an idea, in which the most prominent feature is dignity; another, a large generosity of mind tempered by austerity; a third, a simplicity and cleanness of heart which gave him the possibility of child-like intercourse with God.

¹ Houston Chamberlain, “Foundations of the Nineteenth Century.”

² John viii. 56.

Abraham's dignity was, no doubt, partly the result of his sense of vocation, partly of the guilelessness and generosity that sprang from his aloofness from material interests. His disinterestedness was shown, not only in his courtesy to Lot, but also in his friendly relations with his alien neighbours; for it was never desire for material gain that determined them. And, while there were two¹ instances in which his impulse to avoid hostility dragged him into an ignominious position, it was in each case the want of chivalry towards woman (that seems to have belonged to the "elements of the world") which deprived him of his dignity; and, otherwise, his courteous relations with² the people of the land were marked by a princely mien. And the terms of such alliances as he made with them were purely external; he would make³ no marriage alliances with them, because he believed that the promises were to his race—to the family that came out from Ur of the Chaldees.

But, at the same time, his largeness of mind was such that he was ready to learn from the people with whom his sojourn in Canaan brought him into contact. He must, evidently, have thought that it was, possibly, by their religious customs that God would teach him how to develop the religion that was to be the life of his race.

Circumcision, which was to be the seal of both race and religion, was an Egyptian, and a Phœnician, practice, but never a Babylonish one.⁴

The breadth, the openness and, withal, the firmness of his mind are even more striking in connection with his attitude towards the question of⁵ *the sacrifice of the child*. The custom of human sacrifice had, it would appear from monumental evidence, fallen into abeyance⁶ in Babylonia by the third millennium, B.C. For the life of the first-born son was substituted

¹ Gen. xii., xx.

² Gen. xiv. 22-24; xxi. 25; xxiii.

³ Gen. xxiv. 3.

⁴ Gen. xvii. See Driver, "Westminster Commentary" on Genesis XVII. (note at end).

⁵ Gen. xxii.

⁶ See Supplementary Note.

that of an ox or sheep. God's call to Abraham to come out of the comparative materialism of that civilization involved him in a course which was to a great extent governed by ascetic principle. When he came into Canaan, which,¹ like all² the Mediterranean lands, was haunted till a much later date by the spectre of human sacrifice, it was natural that he should regard the sacrifice of the child as the apex of ascetic devotion to God. The foundation-stones of Canaanitish cities³ were laid over the immolated bodies of kings' sons; what would have been more natural than that Abraham should resolve that the great Palestinian nation that he was to found must be built up on the bleeding body of his son slain by his hand? But the greatness of his spiritual insight was shown by his final conclusion that this was contrary to the will of God—by the fact that, in the last resort, he could hear the voice of God speaking in the dictates of his own judgment, and so dared to follow what appeared to be the path of self-pleasing, if judged by external standards of devotion. This seems to the present writer to be the highest development of Abraham's religious insight.

Abraham's faculty of intercourse with the unseen is variously represented. In the history⁴ of the announcement of the birth of Isaac we seem to be in touch with folklore, and the character of Abraham's spiritual insight is the simple, fundamental belief that with God nothing is impossible.

In the passage which narrates⁵ the confirming of the Covenant, he seems to be represented as possessing the psychic power of foreseeing events which was regarded in the East as a direct method by which the divine Mind came into contact with the human. In Babylonia, especially, augury was⁶ associated with both star-gazing and with divination from the entrails of slain animals. If, as seems possible on superficial reading of the

¹ 2 Kings, etc.

² "Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion." J. C. Lawson.

³ "Recent Discoveries at Gezer." Palestine Exploration Fund publications.

⁴ Gen. xviii.

⁵ Gen. xv.

⁶ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Babylonia—Religion."

narrative, the slaughter of the heifer, goat, ram, turtle-dove, and pigeon was for purposes of augury, as well as of Covenant, then the horror which fell on Abraham before the vision of the smoking furnace would be equivalent to the sense of gloom and horror that precedes the vision of those possessed of second sight in the present day. But to us psychic powers are not identical with spiritual perception, and if we contrast the climax of that psychic experience—the vision of the external history of Abraham's descendants—with the climax of that inward experience of which it is only said that, "God said to him, Take now thy son, thine only son"—and again, "The angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, Lay not thine hand upon the lad"; we shall be almost bound to conclude that it was this experience that marked the profundity and the reach of Abraham's spiritual insight.

Light is, perhaps, thrown on the spiritual process involved in this experience by the story¹ of Abraham's intercession for Lot and the men of Sodom. In this narrative the pure conception of the power of all intercessory prayer is, perhaps, mixed in the mind of the narrator with the primitive belief in a special power attributed to the mediation of the tribal priest with the tribal god. But Abraham's actual prayer is characterized by his tenderness of heart and his unspoken belief that God could not be less tenderly disposed than he is.

His final conclusion that God did not demand the death of the child is in harmony with the spirit of his prayer for Lot. Something within his soul must have told him that it was as a living sacrifice that God asked for the person of the child; and so Abraham strode from the ascetic to the sacramental principle of life, and took the first step in the progress towards the knowledge of a God who calls men to His service, not that they may bring Him a drink-offering of blood, but in order that He may share His life with them. Thus he anticipated dimly the day of Christ, the day of the full revelation of the tender mercy of God.

¹ Gen. xviii.

“Then said JESUS unto them, I will ask you one thing : Is it lawful on the sabbath days to do good, or to do evil ? To save life, or to destroy it?”¹

NOTE I.—THE CALL OF ABRAHAM.

The question of the literal fact of the exodus of Abraham from Ur or from Haran has been left untouched, because it makes little difference to the argument whether he came actually from Babylonia or from a Babylonian sphere of influence and culture in Canaan.

NOTE 2.—HUMAN SACRIFICE IN BABYLONIA.

Sayce (*Religions of Ancient Egypt and Babylonia, The Ritual of the Temple*) considers that there is evidence, from a bilingual inscription on a very early monument, of the practice of the sacrifice of the first-born son in Babylonia, under, perhaps, the first Semitic Empire. But from later votive inscriptions (those dating presumably from *circa* 3,000 B.C. onwards) he infers that by that time any general custom of the sort had been discontinued, an ox or sheep being substituted for the child. The writer of the article, *Religion of Babylonia* in Hasting's "Dictionary of the Bible," confirms this opinion ; and such a discontinuance of human sacrifice would have been countenanced by the belief of the Babylonians in the ethical qualities of some of their principal gods—Shamash being invested with justice, Marduk with mercy and forgiveness. Robertson Smith, on the other hand, points out ("Religion of the Semites," etc.) that 2 Kings xvii. 31 is evidence of a much later observance of the custom by Babylonians. But it is there represented as practised by Babylonian colonists in Samaria, where (*vide* v. 17) the custom was already observed by Canaanites and Israelites.

¹ Luke vi. 9.

