

THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

“To see is to live”, says Vinet. All our mental processes may be construed in terms of inward sight. In three significant passages the New Testament characterizes the faith of Abraham as *vision*—the vision of the unseen.

“The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran” (Acts vii. 2).

“He looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Hebrews xi. 10).

“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad” (John viii. 56).

I

When Abraham first appears on the page of history he is a citizen of the world. A century or two earlier Ur of the Chaldees had been the metropolis of an empire which held dominion over “the four quarters of the world”. Although it had by this time fallen from the height of its greatness, it was still one of the most illustrious of the cities of mankind. Its streets were alive with representatives of almost every nation under heaven: Hittites, Armenians, Amorites, Arabians, Cretans, Aegeans, Aramaeans, Phoenicians, dwellers in Egypt, in Libya, and in Spain jostled one another in its markets and squares; it is thought that even from the shores of the Baltic and from the Cornish coast traders visited this throbbing home of enterprise.

Before Abraham “dwelt in tents with Isaac and Jacob” he appears to have lived in this city. The clan of Terah belonged undoubtedly to a pastoral tribe, but as the Egyptian flock-master to this day returns from his far-reaching pastures to his palace in Cairo, so we may suppose that Terah, the nomad sheikh, was also an honoured citizen of Ur. Alfred Jeremias suggests that the name Abram, “the divine father is exalted”, was a priestly designation. The divine father in this case would be Sin, the deity who was worshipped in Ur as supreme; Abram being his priest. The vast temple, which in its ruins still towers above the plain, was the seat and centre of religious life in Ur in the days

of Abraham. Fragments of its ritual have come down to us. As, for example :

“ In heaven who is supreme ? Thou alone art supreme !
 On earth who is supreme ? Thou alone art supreme !
 As for thee, thy word is proclaimed in heaven, and the angels bow down their
 faces . . .
 O Lord, in heaven is thy lordship, on earth is thy dominion.”

Above the petty lordships of the Chaldean mythology towered the shadowy throne of the Supreme Being. It is important also to notice that the Babylonian liturgies disclose a profound sense of sin, a persistent longing for pardon, and the recognition of a way of access to the divine favour by sacrifice. Here is a fragment of a stately hymn to Ishtar :

“ My heart has taken wing, and has flown away like a bird ;
 Night and day I mourn like a dove.
 I am made desolate, and I weep bitterly ;
 With grief and woe my spirit is distressed. . . .
 Unto thee therefore do I pray, dissolve my ban !
 Dissolve my sin, my iniquity, my transgression, and my offence !
 Forgive my transgression, accept my supplication !
 Secure my deliverance, and let me be loved and carefully tended !
 Guide my footsteps in the light ! ”

Uttering confessions and prayers like these, Abraham might descry through the broken lights of an earlier revelation the gleam of a purer faith.

According to Stephen the revelation which was vouchsafed to the father of the faithful was the manifestation of “ the God of the glory ”. To the Hebrew mind the glory of God was symbolized by the Shekhina, the lustrous cloud which, like an altar-fire, glowed above the encrimsoned mercy-seat. This expression “ the God of the glory ” seems to show forth Jehovah in the grace of His redemption.

Knowing what we do know of the religious life of Abraham and his contemporaries, we shall not be surprised that the unrest of faith should lay hold on him, or that into that unrest the voice of God should penetrate. His acknowledgment of a supreme deity high above the pantheon of gods and goddesses, his confession of personal sinfulness, his hope of cleansing in the blood of sacrifice, would all prepare him to receive the divine call, to go forth from his country, and from his kindred, and from his father’s house, into a land not seen as yet. Abraham was not

disobedient to the heavenly vision: he passed out from the worship of idols to a life of spiritual aspiration. He walked through the City of the World, untouched by its pageants, unattracted by its vanities. The strepitant music of the passing hour failed to charm him, for the melody of an eternal song thrilled in his heart. He was alone, yet not alone; there was ever at his side One unseen but dear; his companion was the Living God.

In the clan-migration led by Terah there was possibly a measure of religious feeling—the family of Bethuel, we know, though not wholly of one mind with Abraham, had preserved a purer faith than that of the neighbouring tribes (Gen. xxiv. 3, 4)—but it was probably overshadowed by political expediency. The situation in Babylonia was difficult. Elam had recently invaded the Plain of the Rivers, and was holding it under military control. There were frequent uprisings and much slaughter. The seventh year before the accession of Hammurabi, who is thought to have been the Amraphel of Genesis xiv. 1, was styled in the Babylonian Calendar “the year in which the people of Ur were slain with the sword”. But the pilgrim journey of Abraham was solely in the interest of faith and righteousness.

If Aram Naharaim were the ancestral home of Terah, as Scripture seems to indicate, we may easily understand how, contrary to his first intention (Gen. xi. 31), he stayed his march at Haran. Haran, “the road”, was an important commercial centre: it stood on the caravan track between Babylon and Damascus, and the trade route from Nineveh ran into the main line of traffic just at this point. It was a centre of active and eager life. And there Abraham preached the Gospel which the God of the glory had delivered to him in Ur. He remained in Haran perhaps for many years, and gained proselytes to the new faith. It is in this sense that the words, “the souls that they had gotten in Haran”, are understood by the Jewish commentators. Abraham was the prophet of a new faith; he had a holy ambition to bring in the reign of God.

Abraham and Sarah, together with Lot and those tribesmen who had embraced the new faith, with their flocks and herds, would in all likelihood descend the right bank of the Belikh, and cross the Euphrates at Tiphseh, known in classic story as Thapsacus, the ford towards which the caravan lines converged. To this day, at this spot there is a camel ford. Tiphseh was

the northern limit of Solomon's dominions (1 Kings iv. 24), and was included in the covenant promise assured to Abraham: "Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates" (Gen. xv. 18). He crossed the river, and his first footstep fell upon the land of his inheritance.

The crossing would be an arduous proceeding. Dr. Kitto computes that the livestock of Abraham and Lot would equal the possessions of Job, who owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she asses. As in Job's case also there would be "a very great household", forming an encampment of at least a hundred tents. The renown of this heroic venture of faith may have revived the memory of a similar act by Eber, the remote ancestor of the tribe—the name Eber seems to indicate one who had come "from the other side" of the River. However that may be, Abraham was from this time known as "the Hebrew", *the man who had crossed*—as one who had made the great decision, and was willing thenceforth to be a sojourner in an alien land, a pilgrim of eternity.

When Julius Cæsar was about to cross the Rubicon, he exclaimed *Alea jacta est*, the die is cast. It was the most fateful act in his adventurous life, perhaps the most important event in the history of Rome. But the crossing of the Euphrates by Abraham, when he renounced his country, his kindred, and his father's house, and fared forth towards an unknown land, was still more significant. It marked the most momentous episode in the history of redemption prior to the advent of our Lord.

In like manner, when we, the redeemed of the Lord, yield ourselves without reserve to the holy will of our God, we shall have registered the most solemn and enduring decision which it is in the power of man to make: we have denied ourselves, we have ceased to be our own; we belong to Christ.

II

Abraham went forth as the prophet of a new faith to establish the reign of God on earth: "He looked for the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

His first place of stay in the Holy Land was Sichem, or Shechem, between Ebal and Gerizim. The land was already in

possession of the Canaanites, a people resourceful and strong. He came to "the place" of Shechem, that is, the sacred place of worship (cf. Gen. xxviii. 16; Deut. xii. 2, 3; 1 Sam. vii. 16 cf. LXX; Jer. vii. 12, etc.). The communal altar was raised under the oak of Moreh, "the terebinth of soothsaying". Abraham did what preachers are often tempted to do: he tried to graft the new faith on the old. This was the mode in which the medieval Romanist missionaries made conquests: they reared their calvaries on the dolmens and menhirs of paganism. Moslem propagandists proceed upon this method at the present time. But such is not God's way of working, and the well-meant but mistaken effort towards conciliation came to naught. The true faith will not admit of any compromise with error. God visited him a third time, leading him out from that unhallowed alliance into a pure mode of worship (Gen. xii. 6, 7). As a result of this fresh revelation Abraham ceased to offer sacrifice and preach at "the place of Shechem". He purchased a piece of ground a mile and a half to the east of the city, and there raised a testimony to the God of the covenant: "Abraham builded there an altar unto the Lord who appeared unto him." This action had a parallel nearly two thousand years after, when St. Paul went out from the synagogue, and "separated the brethren".

After a time Abraham left Shechem—probably for the same reason which impelled our Lord to leave Capernaum, because the inhabitants would not hear him, nor receive his word. He journeyed southward to Bethel, where he encamped, and having built an altar, he called upon the name of the Lord. Luther translated this clause, "Preached the Name of the Lord". In this Luther was preceded by the earliest Jewish exegetes. It was to this "place" of Bethel that Jacob came on his way to Padanaram (Gen. xxviii. 11). He reconsecrated it, and it was sacred in Israel until Jeroboam the son of Nebat set up there the golden calf of idolatry.

"And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the South." His flight into Egypt was an interlude. He returned to Bethel, and there he saw the face of God.

Again he removed his tent, and came and dwelt by the terebinths of Mamre which are in Hebron, and there he built an altar unto the Lord. In Hebron he found a mixed population, Amorite and Hittite. He allied himself with the Amorites;

they and he alike were sojourners in a land that was not theirs, for the sons of Heth were the owners of the soil. The Amorite chiefs were confederate with him, but they do not appear to have received his doctrine, and he becomes increasingly sensible of his loneliness. Lot has forsaken him, having loved this present world; the neighbouring clans scarcely veil their hostility to this stranger in the midst; in his own encampment there is dispeace; and he is personally conscious of failure—more than once he has proved himself unworthy of his high calling. He is still looking for the city; the reign of God is not yet manifest on earth. But he descries it in the distance, and stretches out his hands in greeting towards the home of his soul (Heb. xi. 13).

Abraham journeying still southward came to Beersheba. There, in accordance with the usage of the time, he planted a tamarisk tree, to show that the spot was sacred (in his planting of the grove the altar is presupposed), and called on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God. *El Olam* may either be “the God of eternity” or “the God of the whole earth”. Perhaps both conceptions were united in Abraham’s thought of Jehovah under this name. His God was the eternal, the changeless, the unbeginning, the endless; but He was also the God of all mankind, the preserver and redeemer of all those who, of every race, in every age, turn to Him in penitence and faith. Now, we may believe, the preaching of the aged prophet took a wider range. He had learned that the foundations of the City of God were laid before the first creative word was spoken, that its walls of salvation were raised and its gates of praise uplifted through all the courses of time, that it was destined to be the mother-city of mankind, to endure through unending ages.

A city, as Abraham viewed it, was virtually synonymous with the state. Like Athens or Rome in later times it was the beating heart of the body politic—the manhood, the wealth, and the splendour of a wide territory were concentrated in the seat of empire. It was the Commonwealth of God that he hoped to found.

The first of the cities of earth was one that originated in the trespass of Cain. It may have been a mere stockaded fort, built partly for security, partly to serve as a lair for aggression. From this germ the “fenced cities” of the ancient world were developed, so that they became the nuclei of the military monarchies which rose and fell all along the ages. These in turn

attained their most splendid example in Babylon the Great, with its century of brazen gates and broad encircling walls patrolled by war chariots, a city crimsoned with blood. Lord Macaulay has depicted this city of Cain in terms of Babylon on the Euphrates.

“ Cain hath built the palace of his pride.
 Such palace ne'er shall be again
 Among the dwindling race of men.
 From all its threescore gates the light
 Of gold and steel afar was thrown ;
 Two hundred cubits rose in height
 The outer wall of polished stone.
 On the top was ample space
 For a gallant chariot race ;
 Near either parapet a bed
 Of the richest mould was spread,
 Where amidst flowers of every scent and hue
 Rich orange trees, and palms, and giant cedars grew.”

Not many years after, another city had its origin in worship : in the days of Enos the children of the covenant assembled themselves under the shadow of the sword before the gates of Paradise. This city of the soul found its temporal realization in the earthly Zion which mirrored the heavenly Jerusalem, the City of the Great King. The Psalmist beheld it afar off : “ His foundation is in the holy mountains . . . glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God.” Isaiah taught this song to the inhabitants of Judah : “ We have a strong city ; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks.” Ezekiel saw “ a very high mountain whereon was as it were the frame of a city on the south ” : this was the dwelling-place of the God of Israel. And St. John the divine, the seer whose eyes were open, gazed in rapture on “ the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband ”. This is the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker—whose architect and artificer—is God.

The reign of God is based on righteousness : “ Justice and judgment are the habitation of Thy throne.” The city of God, therefore, is founded upon truth ; but as truth is revealed to men “ in Jesus ” (Eph. iv. 21), it is established on the Rock of Ages—eternal in its beginnings, unending in its duration. It is built on the foundation of apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner-stone.

Of this city the Divine Architect has drawn the plan ; and, as the Master Builder, He is Himself on the walls, labouring with His servants, laying upon the one foundation (Eph. ii. 20) tier upon tier of precious stones banded with silver and gold, while the august fabric grows, until at last the work shall be complete, and the topstone be brought forth with shoutings, and cries of Grace, grace, unto it.

From the days of Abraham until now men have been journeying on the pathway that leads to the City of God. When the Vandals were thundering at the gates of Hippo, Augustine, with dying eyes, gazed upon the home of the soul. The flight of "the doves of Iona" covered broad Europe, and reached to the walls of Constantinople. *O æterna gens Moravio-rum*, exclaimed Count Zinzendorf, as he thought of the tireless journeyings of the missionaries from Herrnhut, envoys of the King of kings. David Livingstone was lured northward into darkest Africa by the smoke of "a thousand Christless villages". Coleridge Pattison gave his life for "the millions of Melanesia scattered over a thousand isles". And to-day the Word of God, in a thousand different languages, in the hands of myriads of the children of faith, is penetrating the darkest recesses of heathenism. Centuries ago, as the Crusaders pressed towards the city of their solemnities, their watchword was "Thither". Tens of thousands fell by the way, but the armies of the Cross marched on. At last, as the pilgrim hosts encamped on the mountains that encircle Jerusalem, and saw at their feet the city of God, they knelt on the brow of the hill, melted into tears, and reached out hands of desire towards Zion, beloved and longed for.

By faith we, too, may stand upon the hills of God, and behold the towers and battlements of the eternal city. And as we linger and gaze, we may hear the voices of those who have entered its shining streets, raised in salutation to us who follow them, saying, "Ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel."

III

Abraham in his quest for the City of God had at length realized that it must descend from heaven, and that it would be revealed in the advent of the Promised One. "Your father Abraham", said our Saviour to the Jews, "rejoiced exceedingly that he was to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad." When may we suppose that he had this vision of the Christ? The offering up of Isaac was the supreme act of his allegiance, the climax of his consecration. The Jewish doctors say that whenever prayer is offered on earth God remembers "the binding of Isaac", and the present Chief Rabbi asserts that "few chapters of the Bible have had a more potent and a more lasting influence on the lives and souls of men than the 'Akedah'"—that is, Genesis xxii. "Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah Jireh: as it is said to this day, 'in the mount of the Lord He shall be seen.'" The Jews referred this saying to the temple and its worship, through which the God of the covenant revealed Himself to Israel; but our Lord read into the words a deeper meaning. On Moriah Abraham saw the day of Christ, and rejoiced in the rapturous vision. It is as if the Father had desired to make known to some one of the sons of men His heart of suffering love. It was hard for Isaac to offer up his life in the springtime of his days; it was harder for Abraham to strike the blow. If our Lord died in a sorrow which none may name, how shall we speak of the pain of God, when He turned away His face from the Son of His love, when He was pleased to bruise Him, to put Him to grief?

There are at least two New Testament allusions to this memorable incident—that of St. Paul: "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" and that of the Lord Jesus: "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

The City is founded on the love of God, that love which has been openly shown forth in the sacrifice of Christ. By the dying of the Son of God our sins are remitted, the tyranny of the prince of evil has been broken, and we have entrance into the Holiest as into our Father's house. Because of this the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Ghost.

St. Augustine reminds us that it is the love of God in us, reaching on to the denial of self, which is building upon earth the heavenly city. This city shall be perfected in the "day" of Christ. That day is hastening on, the morning star is trembling above the hills, the swift dawn is enkindling the sky. "We see not yet all things put under Him, but we see Jesus, crowned with glory and honour." "He which testifieth these things saith, Surely, I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

"His name for ever shall endure,
 Last like the sun it shall :
 Men shall be blessed in Him, and blessed
 All nations shall Him call.

Now blessed be the Lord our God,
 The God of Israel,
 For He alone doth wondrous works,
 In glory that excel.

And blessed be His glorious name
 To all eternity.
 The whole earth let His glory fill.
 Amen, so let it be."

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