

aid and benefit of all readers of the Bible ; much, too, that might be far more important even than an entire copy of the Gospel according to the Hebrews.

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*THE CONVERSION OF SARAH.*

GENESIS XVIII. 1-15 ; HEBREWS XI. 11.

ABRAHAM is so great a personage, his figure bulks so large and towers so high in our imagination, that his wife is well-nigh lost in the shadow he casts ; and we make little effort to conceive what manner of woman she was, or to enter into her spiritual experience, even if we give her credit for spiritual experiences distinctly her own. And yet Sarah deserves, and will repay, an attentive regard. She was no unworthy mate of one of the greatest of men. If not a perfect woman, she was nevertheless "a woman nobly planned, to warn, to comfort," yes, and "to command." Her very name means "Princess;" and the omen of her name, of the change in it, was abundantly verified. She proved herself to be of a right royal strain, not simply by her splendid personal beauty, nor simply by the air of native authority with which she ruled her household ; but also by her magnanimity, her fidelity, and by the faith in virtue of which St. Peter calls her "the mother of all believers." She had her faults, no doubt, the defects of her qualities. She was jealous, exacting, imperious—as other women and princesses are said to have been. And if we reckon it among her virtues—and this fact is much insisted on in the Sacred Record—that she could laugh—laugh

heartily, laugh ironically, laugh enjoyingly—we must reckon it among her faults that she could not bear to be laughed at, but cruelly resented Hagar's smiling triumph over her babe, and Ishmael's boyish malice in making fun of Isaac.

Sarah has still another claim on our respectful and admiring regard, although it is a claim which, so far as I know, has not been recognized. She was a poetess; she is the very *first poetess* of whom we have any record: and one, if not two, of her simple primitive songs—I shall quote them presently—are preserved for us in the pages of Holy Writ.

But her great claim on us, as the Writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews points out, is her *faith*. And this faith is the more remarkable because it was preceded by a confirmed scepticism, a scepticism which she did not scruple to cast into satirical forms. It is to this faith, or, rather, to her conversion from a mocking but rueful scepticism to a hearty confidence in God and the word of God, that we must mainly direct our thoughts.

The story of Sarah's Conversion is told at some length, and with a charming and picturesque simplicity, in the first fifteen verses of Genesis xviii. In these Verses the sacred historian sets before us the oak-grove of Mamre. Abraham's tent stands under the shadow of a venerable and magnificent tree, known throughout the East as "*the tree*," or "*the oak*" of Mamre. The time is burning noon, when all travellers rest, and those who keep their tents seek repose. Abraham has gone, as the Arabs go to this day, to the shaded entrance of the tent, *i.e.*, into the open but sheltered space beyond the falling curtains which screen off the interior, to get the cooler air, to rest, perhaps to sleep.

Sarah remains, as the Bedaween women still remain, in the privacy of the inner tent, behind the falling curtains. Three travellers approach, one of whom is marked out by the splendour of his appearance, or his air of authority and the deference of his companions, as the chief. With the ready courtesy of Eastern habit and ancient times, Abraham runs to meet them, bows before them to the very ground; and, addressing the Chief, says, "O Adonai! if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant." Then, courteously including the suite of his Guest in his invitation, he adds, "Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash from your feet the dust of travel, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts: after that ye shall pass on; for therefore are ye come unto your servant." That is to say, he overflows with hospitality, and offers eagerly what travellers most needed in the heat of the day—rest, shade, water, food. Obviously Abraham had been much impressed with the noble mien of the distinguished Personage who led the group, or he would never have saluted him as *Adonai*, a title only given to the very highest whether in heaven or on earth—a name adopted even by the Most High Himself. And his impression would be deepened and confirmed by the quiet dignity with which the great Unknown accepts his hospitality: "So do as thou hast said."

Abraham hurries into the tent, profoundly impressed by the noble bearing of his chief Guest, but not suspecting as yet that he is entertaining angels, and even the Lord of angels. He bids Sarah make a bushel of the finest flour into cakes, selects a calf tender and

good from the herd, gives it to a servant to be dressed, orders other servants to bring sour milk and fresh, curds and clotted cream; and soon has a royal feast spread before his visitors under the shade of the great oak. They eat; and he himself, although a wealthy and aged man, stands and waits upon them, his courteous and profuse hospitality indicating how deeply he desires to do them honour.

When the feast is over, they settle down for a talk with their host, and Sarah, whom custom and etiquette confine to the tent, draws as close to them as she may, stands behind, and I daresay peeps through, the falling curtain of the tent, and listens to their talk; and laughs within herself as she hears the strange words of the Divine Stranger: "At the time appointed, this time next year, lo, Sarah thy wife shall bear a son."

Sarah laughs at the promise, and well might laugh at it. For Abraham had received this promise of a son and heir as much as four and twenty years ago; and nothing had come of it. Even Abraham himself had fallen on his face and laughed (Gen. xvii. 17) when the promise was first made to him that a son should be born to him in his old age, although he instantly accepted the promise, and cast himself upon it, and shewed that he believed it by his prayer, "O that *Ishmael* might live before thee!" for had he not felt that *Ishmael* was to be displaced, disinherited, by the newly promised child, there would have been no need to ask God to provide for him: he was already provided for.

But though a promise had been made to Abraham again and again, nothing had yet been said to Sarah herself. It was not inevitable, therefore, that she per-

sonally should be the mother of the promised "seed;" or, rather, she may not have thought that it was. And when many years had passed, and no son was born to her, she seems to have concluded that she was not to have the happiness of giving Abraham an heir. She had consented to, she had proposed, the Hagar expedient, and had shewn her magnanimity by hoping that by some other, since not by herself, the desire of Abraham might be fulfilled. But, now, the promise long since made to Abraham is made to her; and she overhears her husband's distinguished Guest predicting that, within a year, *she* shall be the joyful mother of the promised child. Ishmael, then, was not to be the heir of the promise. But she—how could she, now long past bearing, hope that so great a happiness was to be vouchsafed to her? Abraham still hoped, indeed, and would now be more full of hope than ever; but the dear good man was a little credulous, a little apt to dream and to take his dreams for realities. "It is the old story," she thinks within herself; "the old incredible story, with a still more incredible addition to it, and nothing will ever come of it!" And so, safe in the shelter of the tent, she laughs her poor, sceptical, rueful laugh, wishing the good news could be true indeed, but quite sure that such a wonder could never be.

But her scepticism is rudely shaken before her wistful laugh is well over. For He who had *promised* a wonder *performs* a wonder, and a wonder that fills her with amazement and awe. She is behind the curtains. She has only laughed, as we are expressly told, "within herself," uttering no sound. The Guest sits with his back to her; for the tent, in which she stood, was "behind" him (Verse 10). And yet He knows what

she is doing ; He hears her soundless inward laugh : He is aware of the flash of sceptical amusement—half sigh, half smile—which has passed through her soul, and quietly asks : “ Wherefore did Sarah laugh ? ” *i.e.*, “ Why do you doubt ? Is anything, even this hard wonderful thing, too hard and wonderful for the Lord ? ”

Sarah is ashamed—ashamed both to have her secret read and published thus, and to have been detected in an act of discourtesy to Abraham’s Guest. She covers her confusion with a fib, an equivocation, crying from behind the curtain, “ I did *not* laugh ; ” and, flattering herself, I daresay, that as she did not laugh *out*, she could not fairly be said to have laughed at all—a kind of equivocation of which many are guilty to this day, and in which, indeed, many profess to see no guilt. But she is “ *afraid* ” nevertheless. She trembles with astonishment and awe at being so inwardly known, and known by One who cannot so much as see her. She begins to suspect that He must be more than man ; for has He not shewn a more than mortal power ? With a strange blending of fear and hope she begins to apprehend that the Lord, who has so often spoken to Abraham, is now speaking to her ; that it is *his* word she has doubted to whom nothing is impossible. He who knows the present so strangely, may He not also know the future ? He who has just told her what she was doing in the darkness of the closed tent, may He not be able to foretell things to come, things hidden from her in the darkness of the years to be ? As she ponders these questions, *faith* springs up in her heart. She accepts the word, the promise, which she had distrusted until it came to her personally, as the word of

God. She judges Him faithful who had sent her that word of promise. She ventures herself on it, incredible as it seemed. She commits herself to it, believing that it will be fulfilled, and looking for its fulfilment with joyful and confident expectation.

“*By faith* Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because *she judged him faithful who had promised.*”

This was the Conversion of Sarah ; her conversion from doubt to assurance, from sceptical incredulous amazement at a Word which seemed too good to be true, into a firm, simple, self-verifying trust that it was true and must come to pass.

And, verily, her faith had its reward. At the appointed time, when the year had run its course, “the Lord visited Sarah, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken ;” and “Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age.”

Now even the most prosaic of women is apt to grow romantic and poetic as she embraces her firstborn ; apt to see in him a beauty and a promise hidden from other eyes, apt to augur for him, or at the lowest to hope for him, the greatest things and the best. Nothing is too good for him, no destiny, no access of fortune ; no happiness, no honour too high and rare. As the fountain of maternal love is unsealed, her heart breaks forth into singing, even though she cannot beat its song into articulate and musical words. Sarah was happier than most mothers in that she had the poetic faculty as well as the poetic vision. Like Mary, like Elizabeth, like Hannah—each of whom sang a psalm when her baby was born—Sarah had her song, her psalm, welling up

in her heart and taking shape on her lips (Genesis xxi. 7). It is very simple, very brief, very antique; but, in the Original, it is in the regular and approved form of Hebrew lyrical poetry, and deals in the most direct straightforward way with the facts on which her joy, as wife and mother, was based.

*Who would have said unto Abraham,  
Sarah gives baby the breast?  
For I have borne him a son in his old age!*

The wonderful word was a true word; but even yet it seems almost incredible to her although it has been fulfilled, and she holds her infant in her arms and marks the grave joy on Abraham's face. "Who would have thought it? who *could* have believed it? O rare wonder! O exquisite and unlooked-for joy!" This is all her song.

And now what shall the boy be called? He shall be called *Isaac*, says Sarah; Isaac, which means *Laughter*. The name was chosen partly, no doubt, because, like every mother, Sarah thought that everybody would be glad, everybody would laugh, to see her boy—thus sharing and enhancing her mirth. Partly, too, no doubt, the name was chosen in order to commemorate the laugh of hearty and joyous faith with which Abraham had greeted the promise of his birth years ago, and the rueful ironical laugh of mere wonder and doubt with which Sarah herself had greeted it only a twelvemonth before it was fulfilled. But mainly, no doubt, this name was conferred on the child of the promise to indicate the immense and sacred joy which the fulfilment of the promise carried to the hearts of Abraham and his wife. For as Sarah ponders what his name shall be, and hits upon the name of Isaac, a



new psalm of joy and triumph bubbles up to her lips, and she sings (Genesis xxi. 6) :

*God hath made me to laugh,  
So that all who hear will laugh with me.*

Memory and prediction are both in the Name; both the past and the future are present in it: while it records Abraham's faith and Sarah's lack of faith, it also foretells the joy that would come to the whole world through the Child whom God had given to them and yet claimed for his own.

Sarah, then, was converted by her faith in a Divine Word which it was very hard for her to believe, and on which she had to adventure herself before it could be verified. And is not that the history of all the conversions through which we pass? When we are first converted, first raised out of the natural life into the life that is spiritual, it is by our faithful and personal reception of the glad tidings of great joy, tidings which seem too good to be true. We are told that God loves us and wants us to love Him; that to prove his love and win ours He has taken flesh and dwelt among us, making an atonement for our sins, dying that we might live, living that we might live more abundantly, throwing open a heavenly kingdom in which we may dwell, and a path of righteousness in which we may walk, and offering us the aid of his Spirit to help our manifold infirmities. And when we first really *hear* that message, and understand that it is delivered to *us*, is it not very hard for us to believe it, to accept it, to adventure ourselves on it, and commit ourselves to it? Do we not share Sarah's scepticism, and say, "What, the good great God love *me*! What,

I, so infirm of will, so tainted with guilt, so averse to many forms of goodness, to whom it is so easy to go wrong and so hard to do right—I to be quickened to an immortal life, a steadfast love and pursuit of all things good, a growing hatred of all things evil—O, it cannot be!” Yes, to us, as to Sarah, the news seems too good to be true. And so God has to shew us that He knows what we are, and what we are doing, and whither we are tending, before we can believe that we shall ever become what we ought to be, what He promises that we shall be. He convinces us that He does love us as we are, and despite our weakness and our sins: and from the love He shews us now, we begin to argue to the still greater love which as yet we cannot see, and by which our redemption is to be accomplished; and we say: “If He loves me as I am, what cannot He do for me? what may He not make of me?” And thus, by the revelation of his love, we are borne on and up to a saving trust in his love, and venture to believe that He will yet make us what we long to be, and give us all that we need to possess.

*Every* word that God speaks to us is a hard word, a word hard for us to believe; and that because his thoughts are so much higher than our thoughts, and his ways so much kinder than our ways. The very greatness of his thoughts, of his compassion, of his love and the purpose of his love for us, render them incredible to us. We cannot believe for joy and wonder, even if there be no other hindrance in the way. Whether He assure us that it is nobler and happier to walk after the spirit than after the flesh, to live for truth, justice, kindness, goodness than for gain and ease and pleasure, and that He therefore means

to draw us up into that higher happier life ; or whether He assure us that we are put on earth for a little space, and hardened by its discipline that we may learn to bear the beams of an unclouded Love, and that *that* is why we are called to endure hardness here : whatever his word, his promise to us may be, it is so much larger and better than we deserve, or had looked for, that it is very hard for us to grasp it, to fling ourselves upon it with an unhesitating faith, to wait for its fulfilment with a glad and unwavering hope. The whole secret of the difficulty lies in this—that He is *so* good, so much better than we take Him to be, and so bent on securing the very best things for us.

Our best way out of the difficulty is Sarah's way ; viz., to look away from the word of the moment, the promise of the moment, to Him who has spoken the word, and who stands behind it, and to ask ourselves whether or not we *account Him faithful who has promised*. If we feel that He is true ; if we cannot so much as conceive of Him as going back from his word ; if we are sure that He must always be more and better than his word, why should we doubt, why hesitate to commit ourselves to any word that He has spoken ? It is often our wisdom to argue from his character to his promises. If we can trust *Him*, we need not distrust his word. And as we go on our way, leaning on his word, that word will be more and more fully verified ; every new verification of it will increase and confirm our faith ; faith will unseal the fountains of love ; and love will well forth in songs of praise.                   S. COX.