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ABRAHAM'S OFFERING OF ISAAC.

GENESIS xxii. 1-19.

THIS passage of sacred history, as it is generally understood, presents some difficulties which Commentators have sought to remove with only partial success. It is certainly strange, and unlike anything recorded in the Bible, that God should be represented as directing his servant to do that which is elsewhere described as an "abomination to the Lord" (Deut. xii. 31); and that, after commanding something to be done, He should order it not to be done. It is quite clear that Abraham concluded that he was to slay his child; but there is no clear proof that this was ever required of him, or that the historian intended this to be understood. Not unfrequently much labour and ingenuity have been expended in seeking to account for supposed facts, without a proper previous inquiry respecting their reality; and in not a few instances the interpretation of Scripture has suffered in the same way. Our first question should be: Was Abraham commanded to kill his son?

The words of the historian in recording the Divine direction are these: "Take now thy son, thy only son, Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah, and offer him there for an offering, upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of" (Gen. xxii. 2: *וְהֵעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה*). The common Version reads: "offer him there for a *burnt-offering*"; and thus the manner of the offering is limited, and the destruction of life is commanded. But there is nothing in the Original respecting slaying and burning. There were terms to denote such actions, and these were employed when slaying and burning were to be expressed; but they are not used here. The *noun* is derived from the *verb*, and both are *general* terms, not defining the way in which the offering was to be made.¹ The verb denotes to

¹ Gesenius gives these interpretations of the verb and noun: *עָלָה*,

rise, or to *raise*, and it is used for every kind of *going up*, or *bringing up*, whether material or mental. The *raising up* of an offering upon the altar is one of the many various applications of the word. The *verb* was always used with the primary general signification; and, when applied to offerings, it was never restricted to one kind. When the *noun* was first used, it must have taken the meaning of the *verb*; for, though its connotation might afterwards change, at first the meaning of the *noun* would necessarily agree with that of the *verb* from which it was derived. In after ages the noun was specially applied to some *burnt offerings*; but certainly this was not the primary signification, and its use in the Levitical law, whatever it may be, would not prove its meaning in the time of Abraham. As the *verb* was never restricted to one kind of offering, both verb and noun would be naturally and properly used with the primary general signification, even if a restricted use were common to the *noun* in ritual regulations. When combined in one expression, the noun would surely have the same meaning as the verb preceding it.

The name *olah* was applied to some burnt offerings; but this does not shew that *burning* ever became a part of the meaning of the name, and certainly is no evidence of its primary use. The name was not given to all burnt offerings, but only to those of which the *whole*, excepting the skin, was placed upon the altar (Lev. i. 9, 12). In other sacrifices only the fat was burnt on the altar (Lev. iii. 16), the bodies of sin and trespass offerings being burnt in another place (Lev. iv. 12). But the whole of the *olah* was placed ascendit. Hiph. ascendere fecit. Spec. altari imposuit. אֹלַח, quod altari imponitur, in altari offertur,—ascensus, gradus. The same name was given to *offerings going up* to the altar (Gen. viii. 20; Lev. i. 3), and to *steps going up* to the temple (1 Kings x. 5; Ezek. xl. 26). Some have conjectured that the *olah* was so named because the smoke *ascended*. But (1) this was no peculiarity. (2) The name is given to the whole offering, and not to the part which became smoke. (3) The offering is described as *raised* to the altar, and not as *rising from* the altar to the sky; the same action belonging to both verb and noun.

on the altar, and therefore the general name was specially given to it. The addition of the noun to the verb is quite natural, without any change of signification. When we speak of *giving* something for a *gift*, or of *lending* it for a *loan*, or of *pledging* it for a *pledge*, the repetition is only for emphasis. In Hebrew a cognate noun is often put after the verb, to strengthen the expression, and not in any way to limit it (*Gesenius Heb. Gram.*, sec. 135). A similar duplication appears in the statements at the close of the narrative: "Blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thy seed" (ver. 17). "Offer him for an offering" is a stronger expression than simply "Offer him," but it contains no specification. The name *olah* would be the more proper in an intensive form of expression, because it was commonly given to what was, not in part but wholly, offered. Its *completeness* would distinguish one kind of offering from others, as well as its *combustion*; and more so, for many other offerings were burnt on the altar, and the smoke of wood was always ascending from it (Lev. vi. 13). According to the special use of the name *olah* for a whole offering, the direction to Abraham would be to offer his son completely, not to slay and burn him.¹

It thus appears that a general statement was first made of the required service, as a general statement was made of the appointed place. When Abraham was told to go to the land of Moriah, he was not told to which of the mountains

¹ The Septuagint has, ἀνένεγκε αὐτὸν ἐκεῖ εἰς ὀλοκάπτωσιν. This term shows the *completeness* of the offering as well as ὀλοκάπτωμα; but only the latter would describe it also as a *burnt offering* (Lev. xvi. 24; Ps. li. 21). Both ἀναφέρω and ἀναφορά are put for the two Hebrew words, Schleusner Lex. The name עֹלָה is the proper name for *burnt offerings*, and by its addition to $\text{עָרַב$ the mode of offering by fire is declared, the name alone not shewing this (Exod. xxix. 18; Lev. i. 9, 13, 17; v. 7; viii. 21; xxiii. 18, 37). The common *olah* was killed, skinned, cut in pieces, and then burnt on the altar; but none of these things belonged to the meaning of the name, and none formed any part of the direction given to Abraham. The meaning of a name does not contain all that is to be found in the object. A triangle has three sides as well as angles, but the name does not refer to the sides.

he should go ; and so when told to offer his child, he was not told how he should offer him. As he had to wait for further instruction respecting the place, so he should have waited for further instruction respecting the manner of the appointed offering. The command, to offer his son for an offering, was not a direction to *kill* him, or in any way to hurt him ; but simply to surrender him to God. Abraham would have fully obeyed this command, if he had taken his child to the appointed place and had said : “ Lo, we are here, shew me what to do with him, or remove him to another land ; do to him whatever pleaseth Thee ; he is wholly and for ever Thine.”

But instead of waiting, as he should have done, for further instruction, he hastily supposed that he was to offer his child in the same way in which he would offer a sheep or any other animal. This might be a natural inference, but it was only an *inference* ; and it was neither right nor reasonable. The great difference between animals and human beings should have taught him that what was proper with the former was not therefore proper with the latter. The custom of the heathen around him could be no pattern for his imitation. *They* sacrificed their children as they sacrificed animals ; but he was separated from idolatrous nations. that he might not share their evil practices. His error may be in part accounted for by the haste with which he acted. He was right in setting out at once for the country to which he was sent, but wrong in making at once preparation for a mode of sacrifice which had not been prescribed. He was told to take his son, but not to take wood and fire and a knife to slay his son, nor to build any altar. As he had to wait for further directions respecting the place appointed, he should have waited for further direction respecting the mode of offering. The offering was to be made in a distant place, that it might be with reflection and deliberation, and also according to any further instruction. But Abraham

did not wait for this. He hastily assumed that his son was to be a burnt offering; and this unreasonable supposition, when once formed, was fixed and strengthened by his immediately acting upon it, and possibly also by its contrariety to natural affection. We are exhorted to offer ourselves and children to God; but, because we are not accustomed to animal sacrifices, no one ever thinks for a moment that *killing* is enjoined. The conclusion of Abraham could not be justified by the fact that he was accustomed to animal sacrifices; and that it was not right the subsequent prohibition clearly shews.

It is not strange that on this occasion, as at other times, his true faith in God should be combined with human weakness and wrong. He was assured of safety under the Divine protection, but more than once he was guilty of culpable falsehood to avoid a supposed danger; and in relating this the historian leaves the censure to be supplied by the reader (Gen. xii. 13; xx. 13). The promise of God to him respected Isaac (Gen. xxi. 12); and he believed that the life taken would be soon restored (Gen. xxii. 5; Heb. xi. 19). It is therefore scarcely possible that the purpose of killing Isaac should arise in his mind, from a desire to have a more full consciousness of his own faith in God. And if this were its cause, his conduct would have been a sinful compliance with temptation, a temptation like that of our Lord when told by the devil to cast Himself down from the temple. It would have been no exercise of faith in God; certainly not of such faith as was worthy of the highest possible commendation and reward. It has been said that the Divine purpose of the whole transaction was, to discountenance the cruel and impious custom of offering human burnt sacrifices. But surely, if the first command were to kill and burn Isaac, this would rather shew that such sacrifices were sometimes right; while the subsequent prohibition of this particular sacrifice would not shew that they were universally wrong.

Abraham was unquestionably right in the purpose of yielding up his child to God, in whatever way the sacrifice might be required of him ; but he was wrong in not waiting for further instruction respecting the mode as well as the place of offering. He was right in immediately obeying the command which he received ; but not right in seeking to anticipate future directions, by preparing for a burnt sacrifice which had not been ordered. That the mountain would be shewn him was promised ; and the silence respecting any altar might suggest that none would be needed. He was right in trusting that God would restore the life of his child, if the taking away of life were required ; but it was not expressly commanded, and should not have been supposed. His mistake was shewn to him before it could be hurtful in act ; and it is declared to us by the historian, who relates that he was prevented from fulfilling his mistaken purpose. An angel told him that killing his child was not the will of God. It never was the will of God that he should slay his son. This was never commanded. The Scripture states that Abraham did offer up Isaac, and not that he intended to do so (Gen. xxii. 12 ; Heb. xi. 17 ; James ii. 21). He did all that he was required to do ; and therefore his faith and obedience are commended. He was commended for what he did, and not for what he was prevented from doing. In a way not required he shewed his readiness to do whatever might be required of him. His willingness to put his child to death proved clearly his faith in God, as fully as any other way in which he might have been directed to complete his appointed offering. Therefore nothing more was now required of him. Seeing a ram in a thicket not far off, he took this and sacrificed it in the way in which he had intended to sacrifice his son. This offering was accepted, for it was a symbol of his entire surrender of everything to the Divine will ; it was the expression of a full faith in the unchangeable truth and righteousness and

love of God. Certainly the Giver of life has a perfect right to take it as He pleases ; and if Abraham had been directed by God to kill his child, it would have been right for him to obey : but the general evil character of such actions would still remain. No wise parent or governor will, for the sake of discipline, command that to be done which he does not wish to be done. The natural result of such discipline would be to shew that what was commanded was not in itself right, and might not after all be really required. But the commands of God are not arbitrary requirements ; they shew to us what is right and good. "*The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.*"

The lesson of trustful submission to the Divine will, which has always been received from this narrative, remains unimpaired by the interpretation here suggested. Nay, it is more clearly seen ; and there are other lessons which the common interpretation conceals. The gradual indication of the path of duty, which this history shews, agrees with the ordinary method of Divine instruction ; and the mistake of Abraham is like the mistakes commonly made when men needlessly seek to determine beforehand the exact course they will take, or the loss they will have to bear. Very many, because quite sure that it was their duty to yield themselves to God, have wrongly thought they were required to do this in some particular way. Very many, because right dispositions should be cherished and right ends pursued, have thought certain words and certain actions were required, when there was no sufficient evidence of their fitness and propriety. Very many, like Abraham, have fancied they were called to sacrifices which were never required of them, and could never be profitable to men or pleasing to God. But the high commendation of Abraham's faith, notwithstanding the great error associated with it, shews that the principle of moral conduct is alone of supreme importance. The Lord saw the faith

of Abraham, with the danger into which he had fallen, and accepted that which was right, delivering from that which was wrong. If we are hasty in judgment, unwilling to wait for further information and instruction, we shall probably blunder, and have to suffer in consequence. But when the heart is really upright, and there is a humble dependence on God, with a sincere desire to know and do his will, mistakes will be corrected before their worst consequences come, and the help needed will be supplied at the proper time. The Divine approval is not withheld because of human imperfection; even faults and failures will be made ultimately to contribute to our own highest welfare and to that of others.

The grammatical difficulties which may still remain should not prevail against the interpretation proposed, unless they exceed the moral difficulties which attend the common interpretation. On the one side there is the improbability of God's directing Abraham to imitate the wicked practice of the heathen, and then recalling this command because there was a willingness to obey. On the other side there is the improbability of the supposition for which we contend, that a noun retained its radical and generic signification, and did not conform to a limited and later usage. When the case is thus stated, most minds will deem the former improbability to be much greater, and decide accordingly, that Abraham was mistaken in thinking that God commanded him to kill his son, when it was only said, "Offer him for an offering." That Abraham was right in all he thought and did is not stated or implied in the sacred history, nor in any Scripture reference to it; but the contrary appears, when the meaning of words is duly investigated and considered.¹

JOHN H. GODWIN.

¹ Some Jewish rabbis of high authority have maintained that the Divine direction to Abraham was never in any way to take the life of Isaac. Solomon Jarchi, in the twelfth century, wrote a commentary on the Pentateuch,